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## **Enhancing Civic Education and Engagement in High School Students**

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Enhancing Civic Education and Engagement in High School Students

by

Alanna Novacek

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Over the past few decades, with the increase of social media and students' use of technology, students have become more aware of their current political climate. And yet, there is a trend within state teaching standards that civics awareness has taken a back seat in favor of other courses. As a social studies educator, I find it important for high school students to be aware of their civic responsibilities not only as students but as they graduate and go beyond high school. In school, I try to find methods to help students relate more to the content being taught by creating connections to their own lives and overall community. I believe that student exposure to their local government, its programs, and how it affects their community is a beneficial way to help them deepen their understanding of civics and enhance their education. In my research journey, I hope to find scholarly articles that support my drive to create and bring awareness to civic education, student engagement, and why it is important to involve the community and local government into creating civic programs. Therefore, my research is based upon the essential question: *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement?*

By promoting community engagement with students inside and outside of the classroom, my goal is to help students develop meaningful connections to their education and community on the basics of civics education. In this chapter, I discuss my interest in connecting students' education to their community, how local government is involved, and how students' civic engagement can be supported. Over the past few years, Minnesota State social studies standards have been evolving, with interesting changes in

the civics curriculum, and how it is taught in classrooms. As an educator, I strive to help students by creating a field guide to help promote the content in the classroom and the community to benefit students' comprehension of the topic.

### **Finding Connections Between Students, the Community, and Civics**

A classic television show that I watched for the third time is “Parks and Recreation,” (Daniels et al., 2009-2015) a show centered around the lives of the parks and recreation government workers in Pawnee, Indiana. Leslie Knope, played by Amy Poehler, is the central character of the show, known for her commitment to enhancing the citizens of Pawnee. Halfway through the show, Knope becomes a member of the city council. Several times, conversations about individual rights, public spending, voting, and overall themes related to civics appear. Knope’s enthusiasm for her community and drive to connect with them made me question just how many people have a strong connection with their local government and politicians. I thought back to when I was a student in high school, and how I honestly had no awareness or strong ideas of what my city council did in my community. I hope that can be changed for other generations. Often, people tend to communicate and become involved in their local government as middle-aged citizens. But, what if students had more exposure to their city council at a younger age? Further, how can the local government support youth civics education and engagement?

Another reason that impacted my desire to research connections between civics and the community was my involvement in Girl Scouts. As a high school student in the early 2010s, I was actively involved in my local Girl Scouts troop. As a scout, I had the opportunity to involve myself in lots of community service activities and projects. I was

able to see how community service and fiscal spending of our program enhanced the scouting experience of myself and those involved through selling Girl Scout cookies and acting as a scouting mentor at camp. In Girl Scouts, I had the opportunity to experience on a smaller scale how decision-making and teamwork impacted my scouting life through these themes of citizenship and government. Additionally, as a young female, it was a heightened experience to be involved in an organization that strongly promoted civic participation and engagement both inside and outside of school and well beyond our high school years. As an adult, I now reflect on how my scouting experiences helped me to learn about civics and how it ties into local government. Voting, interest in city council forums, budgeting and fiscal spending, and awareness of my civic duties all tie back to these early experiences within scouting. While I did not fully interact with these concepts until I was in college and beyond, I had a decent understanding of them in high school.

### **Personal Experience**

As a student who graduated from high school in 2014, the Minnesota legislature had not required schools to test students on the concepts of civics. As a student, my educational experience stemmed from a middle-class, suburban school district. Since it was one of the most populated districts in the state and southern metro, I had access to several AP and social studies courses. Since it was a larger suburb, the city was able to afford and maintain these additional courses, especially a wide selection of AP courses—however, there was not a standard civics course. Therefore, I had a general understanding of civics and my role in society, but did not cement it to memory since it was just a basic subject in school for me. I just needed to meet the benchmarks and standards within the social studies curriculum, decided by my teacher's discretion. However, in 2016, the

Minnesota legislature passed a law requiring civics testing. Representative Dean Urdahl of District 18A in Minnesota was the author of the passed legislation and argued that “the intent of this exercise is to help establish a foundation for civics education. It is not the destination” (Teaching Civics, “Minnesota civics test” section). The test consisted of questions that are found on the United States Custom and Immigration Services Naturalization Test, and the passing score was 30/50 – however, students were not required to pass the exam for high school graduation. As an educator, I believe that there could have been so many benefits to educators and students to take this exam. Data research could have indicated students' understanding of civics, created empathy for those who are required to take the naturalization test, and studied the effects of a mandated social studies exam on students' academic performance. Unfortunately, only a few years later, in July 2023, they removed the mandated testing (MN Department of Education, 2023). The Department of Education (2023) stated that according to the Minnesota Statutes 2022, section 120B.02, subdivision 3, Minnesota does not require social studies testing, which included the civics test from the 2016 legislation. Since civics testing is not a requirement for high school students anymore, the ultimate goal of my capstone project is to create an engaging and educational learning opportunity for students to enhance their civic education and engagement in other methods.

### **Rationale**

Through research and the analysis of literature on this topic, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of how community government is involved in students' lives. I will search for literature that analyzes the impacts of local community and government work in students' social studies courses and how they can utilize this knowledge outside of the



classroom. I hope that the research and project itself will serve as a tool for high school students and their families to enhance their civics knowledge. As observed in the changes by the state of Minnesota and nearly half of all states in the United States, schools are not required to test student's knowledge on civic education. Therefore, it is important to understand how the decrease in testing and length of civic courses themselves will affect students' civic mastery and participation as students and onwards as adults. Overall, I hope this research will help me find sources that demonstrate how an increase in community and student engagement in civic education can be enhanced alongside local government interactions.

## **Conclusion**

My research question, *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement?*, is largely driven by my desire to create a social studies civics project for students and educators to utilize in high school. I hope that this project will help students to engage with their local community in rewarding and meaningful ways while benefiting their education. The primary educational method I have created for this project is a resource guide. The goal of this project is to help high school students connect with their local government and analyze how their personal civic responsibilities and duties as citizens are reflected in their own lives. As a former high school student who didn't have the opportunity to connect as much with my own local government as a youth, I hope to provide students with alternative, engaging methods to do so.

In Chapter 2, I analyze a variety of sources on students' civic engagement, education, and how they tie into service learning programs with local government. The literature on student civic engagement details their involvement in civics programs, if and

how they participate in their civic responsibilities, and how it ties into participation with their local community and government programs. Additionally, I review arguments by scholars if there's a necessary connection between student civic engagement and education outside of the classroom. Reviewing literature and conversations on civic education will encompass how civics is taught in the state of Minnesota, its importance and overall placement in the classroom, and why the concept of civics education has become more political in the classroom over the past few decades. Finally, I analyze a variety of sources and studies on how student civic engagement and their education is utilized in local government and community service-learning programs. This section examines student participation in these programs, the overall effects it has on their civic knowledge, and how relationships with their local community and government develops over the course of these programs.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the process of creating the research project, the intended audience and setting, and a detailed timeline and description of the project. The project, as previously stated, is a resource guide, but also includes a mock service learning project. I provide a detailed description of both of these components with the hope that future educators will be interested in weaving this project into their own social studies curriculum. Finally, in Chapter 4, I reflect on the capstone project itself, how the results of the resource guide can be utilized in social studies curriculum, and how it benefits high school students and their communities.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

To best answer the question, *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement?*, it is essential to study existing literature on related topics. First, within the research question itself, literature discussing the origins of civic education in the United States is analyzed. The purpose of civic education, its benefits, how it is taught in Minnesota, and what changes to its curriculum mean for students are further discussed in this section. Next, literature discussing civic engagement is analyzed. The concept of civic engagement, its purpose in education and civic development, who is involved, and the benefits of participating in it are discussed. Further, to connect the two concepts in relation to the research question, literature analyzing the method of service learning is discussed. This method of civic engagement and enhancement of civic education is key to understanding how students can participate in civic discourse in relation to their local government and community.

### Civic Education

In secondary education, civics is a social studies subject that is easily integrated across several curriculums in partnership with fellow educators. The discussion of civic education in relation to other subjects and its importance in secondary education will be analyzed in this section. Additionally, civics is a subject that can be taught and expressed through a variety of mediums—lectures, community and social service, and youth clubs. These can help students bridge the relationship between civic engagement and education by encouraging political thought and debate in the classroom (Journell & Buchanan, 2013, p. 68). This section analyzes differing viewpoints on how to teach civics and the

impact of how it is taught to high school students. This section will also discuss who makes up the community in the classroom— students, teachers, and parents— and how differing views of civics education impact its placement in the classroom and beyond.

### ***History of Civics Education in the United States***

To best understand how civics is taught in schools today, it is necessary to study the development of civics in history. Since the early founding of the United States, the concept of a civics education was at the forefront. Early founders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson argued about the importance of instructing citizens about their duties, rights and responsibilities in the form of education (Cooke Fairbanks, 2020). In the 1830s, Horace Mann’s Common School movement continued to enhance how civics education is taught in schools today. As cited in the Sutherland Institute by Cooke Fairbanks (2020), Mann advocated for the standard public education found today, and education that is “provided by and funded through the state, free from sectarian or religious control” while helping to socialize students into everyday citizens (Cooke Fairbanks, 2020, “Common school movement” section). Further, another education reformer, John Dewey, was an advocate of enhancing democratic values. Dewey’s work centered on creating a democratic school system that focused on “the interrelationship of our experiences with education, democracy and society” (Cooke Fairbanks, 2020, “Public education and societal reform” section). Early advocates and reformers of public education in the United States focused on integrating the democratic values of civics into education. Those goals are embedded into social studies curriculums today, and are at the front of civics education.

### ***Current Trends: Civics Education in the United States***

In the United States, analyzing what civics education looks like in the United States through research is essential to determine what changes need to be made to help students best learn and participate in the subject. In general, civics is a branch of the social studies curriculum found in K-12 education. The curriculum is largely integrated with academic subjects such as “political science and law” within American history, and, as discussed in this section, community engagement opportunities such as service learning (CivXNow, 2024, “What is civics” section). Civics education also focuses on enhancing students' awareness of their rights, responsibilities, and duties as an American citizen in the United States. It is important for schools to have a strong civics curriculum so that students are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in civic discourse after graduating high school (Shapiro & Brown, 2018).

In order for students to successfully engage in civic discourse in high school and beyond, it is essential for states to develop a strong civics curriculum throughout K-12 education. However, when analyzing civics education on a national level, it is surprising to see civics as a subject that so many states have determined to minimize their course requirements for. In the United States, civics courses are not required in 13 states, and only 7 require a full year of the subject (Murray & Collier, 2023). Additionally, as of 2023, only 21 states require students to pass a civics test in high school that is based on the United States Naturalization Civics Exam (Sparks, 2023). Although, even as of 2024, those numbers have changed.

Students who recently participated in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam, a voluntary exam that students and schools can participate in

across the nation, displayed surprising results related to civics education. NAEP (2022) summarized the results of the exam and stated that “ twenty-two percent of eighth-grade students performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level on the civics assessment” (The Nation’s report card, achievement-level results section). In response to the changes in civic curriculum over the past few years, action has been taken on a national level to address support to increase civic education in the United States. As recently as 2022, Congress has increased funds to support K-12 civics education to \$23 million (The Conference Board, 2023). This generous increase in funding at the national level is essential to enhance civic curriculum, especially in states that rely on this additional funding. Additionally, across the nation, states have taken action to increase the civic content offered to students. Shapiro (2018) discussed that teachers are provided with a more detailed civics curriculum, states have offered service learning opportunities as a part of high school graduation requirements, and access to AP Government and Politics courses has increased. Additionally, states such as Colorado and Idaho are good examples of how expanding civics curriculum and content over a variety of ages and years can benefit students’ civic knowledge. Colorado requires a full year of civics education, and participates in the Judicially Speaking program, while Idaho has integrated civics standards into every social studies course offered in K-12 (Shapiro, 2018). With the change in civic requirements and testing over the years, it is essential to study the literature about the effects of the changes in civic education on student success in the subject.

When reviewing literature related to the outcomes of civic education in the United States, it is important to analyze the benefits for students and what success looks like

after graduation. CivXNow (2023) discussed the research published by The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University related to four key benefits of students who receive a quality civic education. As stated in their vision about “What is Success?,” their research stated that students are “more likely to vote,” graduate from college, “four times more likely to volunteer,” and feel more confident in their public speaking skills and engage with their elected officials (CivXNow, 2023). The benefits shown in this research are essential to demonstrate to students that achievement in civics education can successfully help them to navigate civic discourse and engagement after graduation. These skills are necessary to participate as citizens in a democratic society and in future employment. Essentially, it helps to set up life skills after graduation for each student.

Research shows that a good, quality civics education can help students to participate in civic discourse after graduation. However, as seen in the changing shift of civics education, it is important to analyze literature about what this means for students, citizens, communities, and local governments. A national survey that analyzes adult civic mastery and knowledge is the Civics Knowledge Survey. In their research, several key statistics are of concern that determine whether students are fully equipped with the necessary knowledge to participate in civic discourse in a democratic society. One of the results of the survey is how many can name all three branches of government: 66% named all three, 10% named two, 7% named one, and 17% could not name any (The Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, 2024). Additionally, in the same report by The Annenberg Policy Center, “only 1 in 20 can name all five freedoms protected by the First Amendment,” with freedom of speech being the only

correct one that was recalled by surveyors (2024, lead opening section). The results of this survey demonstrate that there is not a strong understanding of civic knowledge in K-12 that is being translated and or preserved into adulthood. As found in state standards, much of the general civics knowledge relating to how students understand their government, civic rights and responsibilities, and how it affects their communities is taught in secondary education within history courses. Additionally, CivXNow (2023) argues that alongside a strong understanding of civics, people need to develop “skills for discussing and working together despite our disagreements; and a widespread commitment to preserving and improving our society and the rights and interests of all our people” (“What is at stake” section). The civic skills and knowledge discussed can help students to successfully navigate themselves in their employment, communities, and in society.

### ***Civics Education Conclusion***

A strong civics education can set up students for success to participate and engage in their democratic society. Support from parents, educators, and legislators can help enhance the curriculum on a national level to increase students’ civic knowledge. With a strong understanding of civics, students in high school can also participate in civic engagement and service learning programs outside of the classroom. The next section of the literature review will discuss how service learning programs, in relation to civic education and engagement, can help students to increase their civic discourse within their communities and with local government.



## **Civic Engagement**

To further enhance one's civic education in high school and beyond, students have the opportunity to expand their civic engagement. Civic engagement is defined as "the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others to help shape the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 236). Within this section, factors that intrinsically motivate students to participate in civic engagement are discussed. This includes how factors of one's identity, such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, and area of living affect their drive to become civically involved in their community. Additionally, this section looks at counter-arguments related to these themes on the inclusion of civic engagement in high school classrooms and their community.

As described above, Adler and Goggin's definition of civic engagement was chosen for this research project to demonstrate how it can connect to education and local community involvement. However, scholars often debate about what *is* civic engagement, since several factors may play into the term (Preus et al., 2016; Adler & Goggin, 2005). One belief of civic engagement includes the idea of Preus, Payne, Wick, and Glomski (2016), who described civic engagement as "relating to the responsibilities of citizens" (p. 67). A second belief of civic engagement is from Downs (2012) who believes it helps students enter "into the realm of social, political, or economic activity" (p. 345). While reviewing literature, one of the similar themes of civic engagement discussed was age. Overall, the idea of civic engagement is often discussed among young groups of people, often high school students or young adults (Adler & Goggin, 2016; Preus et al., 2016).

### ***Benefits of Civic Engagement***

One reason why students participate in civic engagement is to enhance their overall being in life. In Fong and To's (2022) study on student civic engagement in high school and how social support can affect their overall well-being, their research demonstrated a positive correlation between the two factors and suggested that civic engagement can "generate meaningfulness in life" (p. 166). Additionally, this sense of meaning described in their research was of purpose and value, which correlates to civic engagement through "advocating some common good" (pp. 167-168). This study demonstrates that student success in civic engagement is correlated to those who have strong social support or those who are a part of their community— such as their friends, family, and teachers. Additionally, the study shows how participation in civic engagement can drive students to advocate for their civic interests knowing that there is a positive outlook after completion.

Since civic engagement has the potential to enhance one's overall well-being in life, it is important to analyze other factors on why students choose to participate in it. In their research on youth civic engagement, Augsberger, Collins, Gecker, and Dougher (2018) researched a group of high school students who participated in youth councils to determine if they have the potential to influence social inequality among youth. Their research was based in the Northeast United States, focused primarily on one youth council, and interviewed a variety of students from multiple ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the research observed several of the youth council meetings, reviewed documents, and communicated with adult stakeholders (Augsberger et. al., 2018). In their research, they defined youth councils from the National League of Cities (NLC) as

“formal bodies made up of youth (typically ages 16-18) who advise high-level decision makers and elected officials” (Augsberger et al., 2018, pp. 189-190). Additionally, in their study, social inequality was described in themes related to “member representation, social networks, community engagement, and youth engagement in governmental decision making” (Augsberger et al., 2018, p. 187). Several of these concepts that the study described as being a factor of social inequality are largely connected to why students participate in service learning, which will be discussed in the next section. This study focused on how one’s identity, location, and involvement in civic engagement can affect these factors of social inequality.

As described above, their research concluded that the themes related to social inequality and civic engagement needed more attention, but not that it necessarily reduced or reinforced social inequality. One of the strongest themes from their research is the need for *all* students to be represented. As this research was done in a large urban area, students from a variety of socioeconomic, racial, and cultural backgrounds were represented (Augsberger et al., 2018). This is an important distinction of this research study because it may show why students are participating in local youth councils, their interest in local government, and how it may affect their lives in school and after.

Ehst and Caskey (2018) discussed in their article methods to increase civic engagement among marginalized students. Their purpose was to create a that enhanced their writing skills while promoting the value of civic participation, why their voice matters, and how to gain interest in the topic. Their study was conducted in a Midwestern high school with half Latinx students, with over half of the school's population that was eligible for free or reduced lunch (Ehst & Caskey, 2018, p. 38). As a high school that

displays a variety of cultures and students of socioeconomic status, Ehst and Caskey's study is an example of the importance of modifying curriculum to best support *all* students and including their voices in the classroom. To increase student civic engagement, the purpose of this unit was to help students increase their "understanding of writing as participation in democratic process" (Ehst & Caskey, 2018, p. 38). Ultimately, the students who participated in the unit received an expanded knowledge of civic discourse, how to elicit change, and the value of engagement (Ehst & Caskey, 2018, p. 42).

The articles discussed above demonstrate the importance of ensuring educational support for students to participate in civic engagement. When supported, whether through teachers' development of updated civics curriculum, community engagement, or support of local service learning such as youth councils, students can succeed in their own participation in civic engagement (Andes et. al., 2021). As noted in the demographics in the articles, the purpose of the research was to help increase civic engagement and awareness for students who live in urban communities from multiethnic backgrounds. Engagement is viewed as participating in local discourse, such as within their own community or local government, and discussing topics that are of concern to them (Ehst & Caskey, 2018). When students are actively participating in civic engagement within their own neighborhoods and communities, and their interests and concerns are reflective of their cultures, students who are supported by their local government and councils can feel empowered to participate in civic discourse and engage in change (Augsberger et al., 2018).

Additionally, a strong benefit of participating in civic engagement in schools is to increase their civic knowledge. Civic engagement is woven into civic education, such as through school clubs and social studies courses. Smith (2012) stated that when youth participate in civic engagement programs, it increases their civic knowledge, skills, and democratic values (p. 50). One method of increasing democratic values is through the act of service learning as a form of civic engagement. Often, the overall goals of service learning programs are reflective of the concepts Smith discussed above, which are found in social studies curriculums. Overall, with student participation in service learning programs, their participation in civic engagement helps them to increase their democratic participation and values in their community and personal lives (Henderson et. al., 2006; Tarman & Lilinc, 2023). The next section will go into more detail about how civic engagement and service learning are interwoven within schools and the communities of high school students.

### ***Counter Arguments of Civic Engagement***

Although there is much scholarly support for the inclusion of civic engagement in the classroom and community, there is criticism of its placement in these areas as well. As described in several arguments above, at its core, civic engagement for high school students is a way to actively participate in both community and political activity (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Downs, 2012). Critics of civic engagement argue if schools are the right place to promote student engagement in political activity (Downs, 2012; Andes et. al., 2021). Downs (2012) questions the concept about civic engagement by addressing the possibility if schools and the themes within engagement can remain non-partisan, and what the effect would be on a students civic engagement if they become partisan (p. 345).

To counter this, educators who help their students to participate in civic engagement need to guide students to engage in discourse in which they can understand their own and opposing viewpoints (Andes et. al., 291). Criticism of civic engagement is primarily its placement and how it is taught in schools, but if done successfully, will maintain several of those benefits promised by scholars.

### ***Civics Engagement Conclusion***

Understanding the concept of civic engagement is necessary when searching for methods to increase student civic discourse and knowledge in the subject. When students participate in civic engagement, they have the opportunity to practice civic skills both inside and outside of the classroom. Civic engagement provides students with a chance to participate in community and service learning programs related to problems that students want to see fixed. The next session discusses literature on themes related to civic engagement, education, and service learning programs.

### **Integration of Local Government in Civics Through Service Learning**

To better understand how a civics education can impact their life outside of school, students are encouraged to enhance and utilize their civic engagement in their own community. Student engagement in the community is created through connections with their local government, which may include city council, the mayor, school boards, and even staff at local schools. This section discusses the outcomes of student engagement with their local government and types of programs students can participate in. Many scholars describe students' civic engagement as service learning, and how its relation with local government impacts students' abilities to grow in their civic education (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Mittlefehldt, 1997; van Assendelft, 2008).

### ***Why Local Government in Service Learning***

Service learning can be done on the local, state, and national level, but what is the *benefit* of students working with their local government on these projects? On a simple level, it is the location. According to Tersigni (1989), “municipal government is by far the closest of the people” (p. 95). On a smaller scale, students have the ability to see and participate in their local government. Tersigni (1989) stated the benefits of participation in these activities help to raise awareness in civic participation and the government. Different types of service learning as described below demonstrate how involved the local government and community are in these activities. Participation in policy development, mock voting or council meetings, and city proposals helps students to connect their knowledge of the content they have learned in school and how their local community has a role in it. Additionally, through student participation in these activities, the decisions of the proposals and campaigns in municipal government may see the positive change that students wish to see (Bennett & Hays, 2023).

### ***Who is Involved***

In the article “What do we Mean by “Civic Engagement”?” by Adler and Goggin (2005), they described civic engagement as being interwoven with community service. To support their idea, Adler and Goggin discussed Diller’s beliefs of civic engagement as a form of responsibility for the general citizen, and believe that their individual or group actions will help their community (2005, p. 238). By analyzing their argument on how it relates to students in high school, it demonstrates that students have the opportunity to utilize their core civics knowledge and voluntarily participate in their local service learning projects to enhance their overall civic engagement. At its core, service learning

is an opportunity for students to connect volunteering to their civic responsibilities (van Assendelft, 2008).

Service learning programs are available for students to participate in to enhance their civic learning and engagement. In the community, members of people involved in service learning programs may include a variety of people in the community, such as the students, educators and support staff in schools, local businesses, and members of city government (Mittlefehldt, 1997). Together, students have the opportunity to work with a variety of people from different backgrounds, cultures, and opinions through their civic engagement. One of the benefits of students working directly with their local government is the ability to meet with people in official positions to “discuss their services, funding, policies.... answer questions” (Dann-Messier, 2007, p. 161).

### ***Types of Service Learning***

As described above, students require networking and support of their local community and government to effectively participate in service learning. Across the country, programs such as Engaging Youth for Positive Change (EYPC) in Illinois, What Kids Can Do, YouthNOISE, and Youth in Government (YIG) demonstrate support for creating youth engagement and civic participation (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Bennett, 2023). Students can also participate in programs such as the ones previously stated on a local scale, and through a variety of other resources. Service learning programs can also include activities such as mock or model elections, tours of city hall or even the capital, and government simulations (Dann-Messier, 2007; Tersigni, 1989; van Assendelft, 2008).

A benefit of student participation in these activities and programs is how it affects their civic development and engagement. Dann-Messier (2007) stated that these activities



can “help students expand their understanding of government or to promote the need for increased resources and services” (p. 162). Through participation in service learning that involves the local government, students can see how their actions and beliefs impact their community. For example, through presentation and discussions of proposals, ordinances, and their research on such topics, they have the ability to participate in creating change in their community and local governing body (Bennett & Kays, 2023).

A benefit of service learning for high school students is the increased participation of youth in civic engagement. Historically, an example of this is shown in youth voting trends. The Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE, provides information on the percentages of youth voter turnout in the midterm elections for the years 2014, 2018, and 2022. Across the nation, on average, 2022 had a high voter turnout at 23%, which is less than 2018’s at 28%, but higher than 2014 at 12% of youth voter turnout (CIRCLE, 2023). While there are several reasons for increased voter turnout over the past few decades, one of them being the voting age (CIRCLE, 2023), one of the main factors is increased youth participation in civic engagement. As noted in CIRCLE’s data on low voter turnout for youth, particularly ages 18-29, it is important for communities and states to find ways to increase student participation for future voter turnout. However, a correlation to the increase in civic participation as shown in CIRCLE’s data is that state and community efforts to develop service learning and youth participation in civic programs are expanding (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

In addition, Adler and Goggin’s (2005) article argued that the increased civic participation of youth is because “a considerable amount of effort has been invested in recent years in creating mechanisms and incentives to encourage and support this kind of

engagement among youth.” (p. 245). Several of those incentives were discussed above, however, those strong mechanisms described by Adler and Goggin also consist of civic learning programs. On a smaller scale, the state of Minnesota has demonstrated that increased participation in these programs has the potential to increase voter turnout and civic engagement.

### ***Outcomes of Service Learning***

As a social studies educator, one of my goals for student success is to help students bridge connections between the content they have learned in class and how they can utilize that knowledge outside of the classroom. One of the ways that educators can assess student participation in service learning is through reflections (van Assendelft, 2008). Reflections are not meant to grade the content per se but are a key component for service learning because they help educators and scholars to understand how the activity has personally impacted the students’ lives and their understanding of the content. The use of “discussion, journals, or final research papers” demonstrates both to educators and students that they have made “connections between their real-world experience of service learning and the theories taught in the classroom” (van Assendelft, 2008, p. 88).

When scholars analyze the outcomes of service learning, whether through the study of reflections or surveys, they look at how student interest and interactions with their local government and community have changed as a part of this project. In van Assendelft’s article ““City Council Meetings are Cool”: Increasing Student Civic Engagement Through Service Learning,” (2008) he discussed the effects of students who combined service learning and community service through their local government. The outcome of van Assendelft’s (2008) study indicated that service learning “broadened

student understanding of the complexity of education policymaking— the role of teachers, students, parents, elected officials, resources, and attitudes” (p. 91). The results of this study demonstrate that service learning developed with local government helps students to understand how their own education and school and/or district policies include the cooperation of their entire community and their families, not just the work of a few.

Working as a community helps students understand how they can accomplish their goals and create change within their community through teamwork, such as with their parents and educators (Bennett, 2023; Doherty et. al., 2009). Additionally, another benefit of van Assendelft’s (2008) study indicated that “service learning stimulated student interest in state and local politics” (p. 94). The increased participation and interest in local politics post-service learning programs is a shared outcome for several youth programs.

### ***Integration of Local Government in Civics Conclusion***

Service learning has the ability to enhance students’ civic education and engagement through a variety of mediums. The creation and participation in these types of projects help students to communicate and study topics of interest within their communities and give them the opportunity to pursue them. Most notably, interactions between local government and communities help students to bridge those connections. Service learning allows students to engage in democratic learning and participation in forms that may not be available to them outside of the classroom. Overall, it is a strong educational learning method that helps to promote the basis of civics education in social studies.

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

The concept of civics is an essential component of a student's engagement in a democratic society both in school and after graduation. It is important to analyze how one's civic education can influence their interests and abilities to participate in civic engagement both in and outside of the classroom. Student participation and support in academia is found in the form of family, community, and even their local government. The research discussed in the literature review is informative to create and discuss further methods to promote civic content both in the social studies curriculum and the community. This literature review was essential to analyze how different educational methods help students to increase their civic knowledge and participation in schools and their communities.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how the literature review influenced the chosen project method related to the research question, *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement?* The literature related to civics education, engagement, and how local government is interwoven with service learning programs helped me to pursue two different learning methods in this project. The next chapter discusses how the utilization of a resource guide helps to promote the sub-themes discussed in this chapter. Additionally, with the use of the resource guide, another educational resource to help students further their understanding of these subthemes is their participation and creation of a service learning project. This chapter discussed the benefits of this form of learning projects, and how it ties into their civics education and engagement with their community and local government. In the next chapter, I will go in-depth about the development of the

projects, how the literature supports it, and other educational theories and projects that support this method of learning for high school students in civics courses.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

As I was thinking about educational learning methods to enhance students' civic awareness and education, I began to think about what methods would have helped me as a student in high school. My research question, *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement?*, led me to formulate how an interactive resource guide and student-led project could be a strong method response to my question. In Chapter 2, I discussed how major concepts within civic engagement, civic education, and service learning are integral to enhancing a student's education. At its heart, this project is intended to do just that—an educational learning experience that includes students, their families, community, and local government. This chapter discusses the development of the resource guide, its intended setting and participants, measures of assessment, a timeline, and how other projects and scholars have supported the creation of this project.

#### Project Design

The development of this project was influenced by Wiggins and McTighe's (2011) "The Understanding by Design Guide," also known as UbD, and their educational learning concept of backwards planning. In UbD, the framework utilizes a set of tenets to help educators design curriculum. Two of the most valuable tenets Wiggins and McTighe describe that are key to this project are how students can "make meaning of learning via "big ideas" and to transfer learning," and how the basic facets of understanding serve as knowledge indicators (2011, pp. 3-4). With these tenets in mind, I began planning this project with my research question, essential questions, and the desirable student

outcomes. Then, using the three stages of UbD's backwards planning process—Identifying Desired Results, Determine Acceptable Evidence, and Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction Accordingly— I began to create a framework and outline of the project (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 9).

The resource guide, which will be used for a social studies civics course, can be described as an inquiry-based learning assignment for high school students. The guide consists of previous knowledge, such as facts, terms, and civics concepts, that students will use to enhance their understanding of and expand their ideas outside of the classroom. Additionally, the guide provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their understanding of the content and how it relates to social studies and their community. Each section of the resource guide will be completed in one week, which leads the project to be four weeks long. Additionally, the guide will include two state standards to demonstrate students' understanding of the social studies and/or civic benchmarks. The state standards to be met will each be described below in the timeline and in the project itself. In the state of Minnesota, students are required to take a .5 credit of a citizenship and government course of the 3.5 social studies credits required for high school graduation. (MN Department of Education, 2011). Additionally, this project allows students to learn and demonstrate their understanding of the associated citizenship and government sub-strands within social studies as noted in the 2011 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards Social Studies. Since this project was designed in 2024, it follows the current social studies standards that were enacted in 2011 and are being utilized in schools currently. However, this project is malleable and can be easily adapted to the updated state standards if needed.

After the completion of the resource guide, students will create a civic learning project to apply their inquiry-based learning skills and demonstrate their understanding of their civics knowledge. The civic learning project is designed to have students inquire about a public policy issue in which they would like to see changed or updated in their community. At the beginning of the resource guide, students will discuss several civic concepts that may be an idea to use in the civic learning project. The project is designed for students to display their understanding of the core concepts and knowledge of the material from the resource guide and ultimately if they have met the required state standards. The majority of this project is to be completed outside of the classroom as a small homework assignment. Therefore, it is essential that students receive the support and guidance necessary from their teachers at school and communication with family, peers, and their community to ensure students success and participation.

The development of the resource guide and civic learning project stems from curriculum development and methods of inquiry-based learning strategies. Larson (2017) discussed how inquiry, or student-directed investigation, provides students with beneficial learning opportunities and experiences that promote active learning, a chance to address and solve challenges and real-world problems, and how to fully comprehend the content being learned (p. 279). When students use inquiry skills in the curriculum, it demonstrates that they are actively seeking ways to research, discover, and ask questions. Additionally, Larson (2017) argued that the characteristics of service learning and experiential learning are variations of inquiry, which are at the foundation of this project. Service learning provides students with the opportunity to interact with their community



and through the experience of this project, and service learning helps students to bridge those connections outside of the classroom and into their community and homes.

The foundation of this project relies heavily on constructivism. In education, teachers use the theory of constructivism to support students' educational foundation of knowledge and build upon that to create more knowledge and concepts (National University, 2024). In social studies, students continually work on this theory as they progress through social studies courses and learning new facts, learning strategies, and real-world applications. In this project, the resource guide relies on students understanding basic terms and concepts related to civics and social studies. Throughout the guide and project, students will build upon their current civics knowledge and discover how to apply those to real world situations found within their community.

### **Setting & Participants**

The use of this project is intended for high school students who are enrolled in a course that includes civic curriculum. Examples of these courses include U.S. History, AP Government & Politics, Civics, or a general social studies course in any state. Educators who hope to incorporate this project should look at their states and districts course catalog on which course best fits. This project is applicable across a variety of demographic settings— in rural and urban schools, 9th-12th grade. Students will need access to the internet, which may be the only limitation if students do not have a school-issued laptop or iPad.

The success of this project is reliant on complete participation through students and their support system. I utilize the phrase support system on this project because it is what students will need to see through completion. The support system consists of the

social studies teacher, school faculty such as administration, counselors, and advisors, and a variety of members from the community such as the mayor, city council members, the school board, local businesses, and of course, family and friends. The social studies teacher will oversee the project and check in on the assessments as stated with the students over the course of the project. If requested for assistance, students can communicate with school administration, counselors, and/or advisors. These support members can support students by assisting them with student questions and completion of their projects. Participants who are members of the community– such as the mayor, city council members, the school board, and local businesses– are necessary to help students understand how their roles and responsibilities are reflected in their resource guides. I envision that these participants will be willing and eager to help students to enhance their civic learning, especially with the help of teacher support and communication. The teacher will need to reach out to these members before the beginning of the academic year to ensure their participation and awareness of the project. Additionally, it is important for students to have a strong recognition of who these members of the community are, and how they play a role in their local government. Finally, family and friends are the last branch of the support system to help students complete this project. Support is necessary at home for student reflection, in conversations about how the local government affects their own individual and family lives, and to oversee student participation in the project.

### **Timeline**

The creation of this project took place over several months. At the beginning of February through August 2024, several hours were spent analyzing research on the topics

of civic education, engagement, and service learning programs and how they impact students' overall social studies skills. This project is created to be completed within four weeks; however, it can be extended or shortened due to teacher discretion if the course is based on a semester or half a semester. Almost all work on this project will be done external from the classroom, such as in the home or community.

**Week 1.** Students will be introduced to the first resource guide at the beginning of the semester. Students will be tasked with completing page 1. In class, the teacher will go over the first few questions with students, but students will be tasked to complete the rest outside of the classroom. At the end of the academic week, the students will have answered the provided reflection questions at the end of the page.

**Week 2.** Students will be tasked with completing the second page of their resource guide. At the end of the academic week, the students will have answered the provided reflection questions at the end of the page. Students will submit their resource guide, and the teacher will look over student responses, and pass them back within the next academic day.

**Week 3.** Students will be tasked with completing the second resource guide. For this task, students will need to communicate with their parents or guardians to complete the assignment. At the end of the academic week, the students will have answered the provided reflection questions at the end of the page. Additionally, students will complete their brainstorming of their public policy issue to discuss for their project.

**Week 4.** Students will be tasked with completing the last page of their resource guide. Students will have one class day this week dedicated to working on their service learning project in class to have access to teacher and peer support. On the last day of the

school week, the class will have an in-class discussion to reflect on their service learning project and resource guides. Students should be split into groups of 4 and each present their project to each other. The teacher will walk around the classroom, do an informal assessment on their projects and participation, and ensure that students feel comfortable and safe to share and participate with their peers.

### **Assessment**

To assess the overall data of the project, the teacher will assess the students using a few methods. First, the teacher will assess student participation in the project by analyzing its thorough completion, a bi-weekly progress check, and by reading their responses to the reflection questions. Thorough completion of the project includes complete answers in the resource guides and completion of civic learning project. The bi-weekly progress check by the teacher will check for student's completion of their assigned pages, a chance to answer any lingering questions, provide academic support, and ensure that students' reflections and academic and social needs are being met. Additionally, if applicable to the school, this project is classified as a summative assessment or one that has a higher weight on a student's grade. The teacher should follow the assigned rubric to ensure that students have met Minnesota's state standards for social studies and civics as described.

It is essential for teachers to read their students' responses to their reflection questions at the progress check and at the end of the project to determine how this project has impacted students' understanding of civics and the themes of the research project. Since the responses to the reflection questions are of the students' individual thoughts and opinions, this is intended to be an informal assessment. When analyzing student

reflections, teachers should look for similar themes on how this project supports and increases their civic education, engagement, and relations with their local community and government.

### **Conclusion**

This project was designed for students to apply inquiry-based learning in their social studies classroom in a form that is engaging, insightful, and meaningful. The resource guides help students to engage with their peers, family, community, and local government, and challenge themselves and others through conversation. The method of learning through the resource guide is an educational tool that helps students enhance their civic education and engagement. This chapter discussed how the project can be incorporated into a district's social studies curriculum while creating connections between students and their communities. Chapter 4 discusses the assessment of the resource guide and project and how it impacts students' civic education.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Chapter Overview

Over the past three chapters, the purpose and creation of this project was to enhance student engagement in their high school civics education. The educational method that I chose and created for this project was a resource guide and an inquiry-based learning project to help students increase their civic engagement and knowledge outside of the classroom and into their community. Throughout the chapters, my research question, *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement?*, led me to research educational methods on how scholars and educators incorporate civics into students' education. In Chapter 1, I discussed how my personal civics education in high school played a factor as a current educator to increase civic engagement in the classroom. Additionally, I discussed how my personal experience in community relations piqued my interest in creating a project that helped students to create community connections and discover how civic concepts impact their lives. In Chapter 2, I sourced literature to help understand and create my project based on civic education, civic engagement, and the integration of local government in relation to civics. In Chapter 3, bridged the themes of the previous two chapters to discuss the rationale, audience, process, and timeline of my research project based on my research question. Now, in Chapter 4, I discuss key aspects of the capstone project, including a project overview, how the literature impacted the creation of the project, the overall reflection of the process and outcome of the project and its design, and how I hope educators will be able to utilize my work and research in the future.

## **Overview of Capstone Project**

In response to my research question above, I created a project in which the primary method to enhance civic engagement and education was through a resource guide and a student-led civic learning project. The purpose of my project is to help students understand how their family, community, and local government are interwoven with their understanding and participation in civics. I chose to create a resource guide as a tool that utilized inquiry-based learning skills while building upon their civics knowledge. Students use their inquiry skills in the resource guide to understand how different points of view impact public policy and perception within their community. Additionally, I wanted the resource guide to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their understanding of the content and how it relates to social studies and their community through insightful discussion prompts. After the completion of the resource guide, I wanted students to create a civic learning project to demonstrate their understanding of their civics knowledge. Within this project, I wanted students to inquire about a public policy issue that they would like to see changed or updated in their community. Through reflection of the resource guide, students will have the ability to share their thoughts with their peers and demonstrate their understanding and key takeaways of the curriculum.

## **Major Learnings of Capstone Process**

As an educator and researcher, I found myself experiencing a variety of emotions throughout the capstone process to create this project. Excitement, anxiety, stress, eagerness, and fatigue are some of the emotions that I faced every day for a variety of reasons while working on this project. However, while I was continuously researching

and typing, one emotion was always at the forefront– hope. As I worked on my initial drafts and capstone project outline, I was hopeful that this would be an activity that I could utilize within my own curriculum as an educator someday, or as an activity that my students would come to love and enjoy. I felt hopeful while creating this project that students would be able to learn so much about their own families and communities, and increase their civic education and interests both inside and outside of the classroom. Hope was a driving emotion that helped me to complete my capstone project, even when other emotions were felt.

After completing my capstone project, I feel hopeful that this research will be a positive contribution to civic educators who want to expand their social studies curriculums. This project provides educators with a different perspective on how to increase the interaction between students and their communities, and expand their education outside of the classroom. Additionally, this project is helpful to social studies educators because it demonstrates how students can better construct their knowledge of civics, utilize inquiry-based learning strategies, and successfully meet state standards in a fun and engaging way.

Another major learning moment that I experienced while creating this project was dancing the fine line between a curriculum-based project and a resource guide to be used as supplemental material. As I was creating the project, I referred back to my research question, *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement*, to ensure that the readers knew that the “methods” discussed are the resource guide and student presentations. I wanted to write additional information to ensure that educators understood the educational methods that I discussed in the resource guide. As I



progressed through the creative process of the resource guide, I decided to create an additional section in the capstone project document labeled “Teacher’s Context” to give clear details, daily descriptions, and outlines to better direct and assist other educators who use this project. The creation of this section helped me to understand that while this project is used within the social studies curriculum, I have clearly created it to be used as a supplemental material to work alongside existing content.

### **Connections to Literature**

As I hope that this capstone project will be a resource for educators and scholars in the future, there were key scholars and themes in the literature review that helped me tremendously while developing my project and research question that I hope others will continue to explore. Although I had a strong understanding of civics education and the purpose of civic engagement, I wanted to find existing research that thoroughly explored the importance of local government and how it's interwoven in the civics curriculum. I found that at the core of this relationship is the concept of service learning. The concept of service learning and its use by students and their local government was largely explored and discussed by Tersigni (1989), Adler and Goggin (2005), Dann-Messier (2007), and van Assendelft (2008). Adler and Goggin (2005) helped me to explore the different definitions of the topic of civic engagement and how it relates to service learning, helping me to bridge the importance of the two concepts. Dann-Messier (2007) provided me with an overview of how to connect civics education and curriculum to local government and public policy. Tersigni (1989) provided me with examples on how basic service learning projects can be easily implemented into a social studies curriculum and student community. And finally, van Assendelft (2008) prompted the idea of how to

incorporate themes of local government into the planning of my capstone project. This area of my literature review influenced my decision to create a resource guide and civic learning project, which is largely based on the concept of a service learning project.

### **Implications**

While creating this project and early on in my research, my goal was to build a strong connection between a student's community and their civic education. This project is to be incorporated into a social studies civics curriculum to help students enhance their civic and community engagement in a setting that is done primarily outside of the classroom. After students have completed the project, they can better understand how civic concepts and themes affect their lives, education, and the community around them. Students will be able to understand how themes such as demographics, income, and rural vs urban affect their knowledge of civic education on a smaller and more intimate level. By utilizing both the resource guide and completing the civics learning project, students can increase their inquiry and active learning skills.

### **Limitations**

While creating this project, I created it to ensure that it was as equitable as possible for all students and teachers to use, however, I understand that there are some limitations and forces beyond my control for the use of this project. First, a limitation of this project is that its intended course time is primarily outside of school hours. This project's hours consist of work being done at home and outside of the classroom. Depending on the school and/or district, some educator's philosophies do not involve assigning large quantities of homework, if at all, outside of the classroom. Students who

work jobs outside of school or lack the time to complete the assignment outside of school hours may find it difficult to complete.

Additionally, another limitation of this project is the assumption that all students have supportive and engaging relationships with their family members, specifically their parents or guardians. A large portion of this resource guide and project involves students communicating with their parents or guardians on a variety of civics-related topics that may influence their public policy issue or desire to complete this project. Therefore, it is important that educators are open to modifying or differentiating the material found in the project to best support their students' emotional and educational needs.

### **Future Research**

As intended, this capstone project is to be incorporated alongside a civics curriculum in a social studies course as a method to increase a student's civic engagement and education. However, as I was near completion of the final project, I began to think about and explore how I could expand this project even further, such as with its timeline and the content itself. This project consists of students formulating a discussion and possible response to a public policy issue that is found in their communities. However, the assignment does not require students to take action to this issue, only to discuss it. As found in research related to my topic, instead of stopping at research, students can continue onwards and take action, usually participating in a service learning project. Related projects and research based on my project include students taking action, communicating with government officials within their community, and actively searching for ways to help solve a variety of public policy issues. Often, service learning projects are a few months to a year that consist of planning, meetings, and project development.

Therefore, with an increased timeline, educators and/or researchers can use and modify this lesson to help students execute a service learning project based on the themes of this capstone project.

### **Use and Contributions of Project**

My project on educational methods to increase student civic engagement and education strongly contributes to the field of education because it provides educators with interactive, supplemental learning materials while enhancing their students' connections with the community. The product of this project includes the use of two state standards and a summative assessment project that teachers can utilize within their own curriculum. Further, this project contributes to the social studies profession because it enhances students' knowledge of civics and government in ways that are not found in a traditional textbook or classroom. Outside of the classroom, this project contributes to the field of education by creating relationships between students and their communities. These relationships help to strengthen students' knowledge of civics and provide them with real world examples to help apply their knowledge. As a social studies educator, I firmly believe that this project will help students reflect on the civic themes taught in the resource guide and utilize them well past high school.

As a social studies educator, I hope to share this project with fellow educators and share this to online forums. Additionally, I will make it a free resource for other educators to utilize. Since I developed a section of the capstone project to include the teacher's context, educators should feel readily confident and comfortable in utilizing this project within their own curriculum. Further, as social studies standards continue to change in the profession, this project is malleable and can adapt to fit current curriculum as needed.

Subjects within new standards, such as ethnic studies, could also use this project as a framework for similar themes found in other classes.

### **Chapter Summary**

My passion for education and social studies influenced me to pursue a capstone project based on my research question, *What are methods to enhance students' civic education and engagement?* This question opened up the realm for discussion on what civics education is and how it is taught in social studies today, the importance of civics engagement, and how it's found in our relationships between our communities and local government. After an extensive literature review, I chose an educational learning method where I wanted inquiry-based learning to be at the forefront of my capstone project. As a social studies teacher, I hope to use this project alongside my own curriculum while teaching civics or a related topic in the field. The creation and completion of this capstone project has provided me with the opportunity to reflect on my interest as a social studies teacher, researcher, and member of my community. My ability to create a project that students and teachers can utilize alongside their curriculum in meaningful and engaging ways is my wish as I complete this capstone project.

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