

# **Report of the Connecticut General Assembly's Civic Education, Civic Engagement, and Media Literacy Task Force**

## **PURPOSE**

The Civic Education, Civic Engagement, and Media Literacy Task Force was established by PA 23-150, Sec. 6 to evaluate the effectiveness of existing civics and media literacy instruction in Connecticut schools. Additionally, the Task Force sought to identify needs and gaps in these areas to enhance students' preparedness as informed and engaged citizens. Input was gathered from experts representing a range of organizations and disciplines to inform this report.

Discussions during Task Force meetings all emphasized the absolute necessity of enhancing civic education in Connecticut. The lack of knowledge about government and its functions and the absence of civility in political discussions are acute problems at the state and national levels. According to the Council of Chief State School Officers' *The Marginalization of Social Studies*, "Preparation for civic life was the primary purpose for establishing public schools in the United States." Deeper civic understanding is necessary for both Connecticut's students and adults.

However, as the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy stated in its 2024 *When and Why Did America Stop Teaching Civics?* Report, "The time devoted to civic education in American public schools began to significantly decline in the 1960s. Civic education has not for many decades been prioritized by federal or state government; time devoted to civics has also declined due to unintended consequences of other educational focuses."

Determining the reliability of sources, especially those that can be found online, is another critical problem facing students, educators, and other adults. Many students and citizens base their "knowledge" of government and political leaders on resources that may have no factual basis.

The Task Force firmly believes that urgent steps must be taken to address these issues. Some Task Force members have expressed concern that the existence of civil society is at risk. For years, state and national leaders have stated that civic education, civic engagement, and media/information literacy are critical factors in enabling people to understand and participate in American democracy. The national CivxNow coalition states that “The best way to strengthen our democracy is to teach it.”

This report is organized by the three topics the Task Force was charged with studying: civic education, civic engagement, and media/information literacy. Each section includes a summary of the Task Force’s findings and recommendations for k-12 students/educators and adult audiences. A conclusion, summary of key recommendations, and additional resources section are on the final pages of this report.

## MEMBERSHIP

### **Co-Chairs**

- Kevin Brown, Representative, 56<sup>th</sup> General Assembly District & CREC Social Studies Teacher
- Stephen Armstrong, CT State Department of Education

### **Members**

- Angela Parkinson, Social Studies Teacher, Bacon Academy
- Kenneth Lesser, Mayor, Town of Wethersfield, CT
- Theodore Hollander, Author & Founder, Step Forward America
- Allison Villanueva, Former Superintendent, Watertown Public Schools
- Anthony Perugini, Member, Cheshire Board of Education
- Bianca Shinn, Educator & Non-profit Leader
- Edward Brown, Managing Director, Hartford Communities That Care, Inc. & Director, Greater Hartford Youth Leadership Academy
- Aynsley Diamond, Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, CT State Colleges & Universities

- Jonathan Weiner, Co-Chair Civics Education Committee, CT Bar Association
- Allison Chandler, Program Manager for Education & Outreach, CT Judicial Branch
- Amy Lin Meyerson, Co-Chair, CT Hate Crimes Advisory Council
- Andrew Feinstein, Feinstein Education Law Group, LLC
- Jason Mancini, Executive Director, CT Humanities
- Sally Whipple, Executive Director, CT Democracy Center at Connecticut's Old State House
- Melvette Hill, Executive Director, CT Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity

### **Administrative Staff**

- Jazaira Perez-Acevedo, Education Committee Clerk
- Rosalie Filippone, Former Education Committee Clerk

## **CIVIC EDUCATION**

### **CIVIC EDUCATION FINDINGS: K-12 STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS**

The Task Force identified the following key findings:

- Civic education is varied across Connecticut's K-12 schools. The Connecticut State Department of Education offers State Social Studies Standards and K-8 Model Social Studies Curricula but districts are not required to adopt them.
- Many districts do not include civic education at the elementary school level, but anecdotal evidence indicates that educators do want to teach civics. Civic education is offered at varied grade levels in high school and sometimes middle school.
- Several factors have caused a decrease in social studies and civics instruction in younger grades. Through no fault of their own, many elementary educators are not trained in teaching social studies, and testing and literacy-related considerations limit instruction time, especially in the early elementary grades. Some Connecticut elementary students receive 20 minutes of social studies each week.

Middle school educators sometimes report that entering 6th graders have not had any social studies before 6th grade.

- Students at the high school level are required to take a one-semester, half-credit civics/government course.
- High school students are required to take civics, United States history, world history, and other electives, creating “jammed” schedules for students. Which classes Connecticut students take and when they take them are matters of “local control”.
- Evidence shows that civics/social studies classrooms are ideal for earnest discussions about important topics in civics and history. However, perceived political pressures leave some educators fearful of teaching controversial issues; a number of district leaders practice “self-censorship” in their classrooms.
- Educators utilize a wide variety of materials when teaching civics. There is no central repository of civic education resources, teaching materials, or best practices.
- Studies show it is critical that all civics curricula are relevant and accessible to all students, regardless of their background or ability.
- Civics must include a study of both the past and the present; students must understand their civic responsibilities in a contemporary context.
- The C3 Social Studies Framework and Connecticut’s Social Studies Standards state that the final stage of any inquiry activity is for students to “take informed action” with the knowledge that they have acquired. Some adults fear that “taking informed action” is an overtly political act; the claim has been made that “action civics” forces students to be involved in their community, even if they don’t want to be. Evidence shows that the majority of “taking informed action activities” have nothing to do with politics at all: many concern school or local community concerns.
- A number of school districts have experienced cases of hate speech and anti-Semitism in the last several years. Many school districts have taken vigorous steps to combat these incidents.

## **CIVIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS: K-12 STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS**

The Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- Civic education should be introduced and reinforced at all grade levels, particularly in elementary grades. The national C3 (College, Career and Civic Life) Social Studies Framework and Connecticut's Social Studies Standards and K-8 Model Social Studies Curricula include civics content and inquiry skills for all levels of instruction; these standards should be the basis of civics instruction in all grades.
- The Connecticut State Department of Education, the Office of the Secretary of the State, and the Connecticut Democracy Center in residence at Connecticut's Old State House should expand its Red, White & Blue Schools "Civics Resources" webpage to make it the central repository for civic education resources.
- School districts should consider adding an extra semester in civics for all high school students. This would provide opportunity for more robust discussions and deeper student engagement in communities.
- The Connecticut State Department of Education should provide educator workshops on leading classroom discussions on difficult issues, and encourage other civic organizations to do the same.
- The Connecticut Hate Crimes Advisory Council's resources should be made available to school districts.
- Educator training programs in Connecticut can support these recommendations by incorporating the content and skills necessary to prepare students to be engaged citizens into their courses.

## **CIVIC EDUCATION FINDINGS: ADULTS**

The Task Force identified the following key findings:

- Task Force members did not know of many civic education programs for adults other than citizenship classes, periodic civics lecture and panel programs produced by nonprofits and agencies, and the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity's Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). The Task Force sees a need for more adult civic education that helps adults understand how government works and their roles as citizens.
- The Connecticut Bar Association's Education Committee has identified adult civic education as a focus of upcoming programming.

## **CIVIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS: ADULTS**

The Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- Expand and elevate existing programs like the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity's Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI).
- The Connecticut Bar Association's Education Committee should continue to prioritize adult civic education in future programming.
- Connecticut's civics organizations should explore opportunities to provide adult civic education for their audiences.
- The Connecticut State Department of Education's Adult Education Programs should renew their focus on civic education.

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

### **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS: K-12 STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS**

The Task Force identified the following key findings:

- The C3 Social Studies Framework and Connecticut's Social Studies Standards state that the final stage of inquiry activities is for students to "take informed action" with the knowledge that they have acquired. The majority of "taking informed action activities" pertain to school or local community concerns.
- According to Connecticut's 2016 Civic Health Index: "In response to age-based gaps in civic participation, groups statewide have introduced initiatives to improve youth civic health."
- There is a need to enhance the level of lifelong civic engagement for k-12 students in Connecticut. Civic engagement can be as creating classroom rules, holding a mock election, collaborating with other students, discussions at dinner, volunteering, attending town meetings, writing letters to elected officials, and many other nonpolitical actions that build community and civic skills.

### **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: K-12 STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS**

The Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- K-12 civics instruction across the state should encourage students to interact with and create change in their local communities (classroom, school, neighborhood, town, or state). Educators should utilize the C3 Framework and Connecticut's Social Studies Standards to guide their work with inquiry. It is an educator's responsibility to give students the skills to be civically engaged; it is up to students to decide where and how that engagement takes place.
- The Task Force supports the creation of a Connecticut State Seal of Civic Education and Engagement, now being considered by the General Assembly. This optional Seal would recognize students who demonstrate proficiency in civics. If the legislation passes, students and schools should be encouraged to participate in the Seal program.

- Many organizations offer programs to enhance student engagement but not all educators are not aware of them. The Connecticut Democracy Center and other partners should create a listing of programs that foster civic engagement that can be widely distributed.
- Students and schools should be encouraged to participate in programs such as:
  - Red, White and Blue Schools, a partnership between the Connecticut State Department of Education, the Office of the Secretary of the State, and the Connecticut Democracy Center in residence at Connecticut's Old State House.
  - The Connecticut Democracy Center's Kid Governor®, Connecticut History Day, We The People: The Citizen and the Constitution, and Debate Tournament.
  - The Judicial Branch's Civics Academy.
  - The Connecticut Bar Association's Mock Trial and Law Day.
  - The World Affairs Council's Model United Nations.
  - The YMCA's Youth and Government.
- There should be more opportunities for students to intern for local and state government officials, and high school programs like the Judicial Branch's Court Aide Program should be promoted.
- Opportunities for Connecticut and Connecticut students to be engaged in mandatory service programs should be explored and, if appropriate, should be promoted.



## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS: ADULTS**

The Task Force identified the following key findings:

- There is a need to enhance the level of lifelong civic engagement for adults in Connecticut. Civic engagement can be as simple as talking to neighbors, discussions at dinner, philanthropy, voting, volunteering, attending town meetings, writing letters to elected officials, and many other nonpolitical actions that build community and civic skills.
- There are few existing programs that foster civic engagement and involvement among adults. Many adults have forgotten their civic education, may have recently moved to Connecticut, or realized at a later age that they want to be civically engaged. There is a need to find and promote existing programs and identify programming gaps.
- There is no central repository for information and resources pertaining to adult civic engagement, other than the Office of the Secretary of the State's "The Power of Civics" webpage.
- The following findings are featured in Connecticut's 2016 Civic Health Index. There is no post-pandemic report to reflect civic health changes since 2016:
  - "By some indicators of civic health, Connecticut residents demonstrate significantly stronger levels of engagement than the national average; they participate at higher rates of volunteering, attending public meetings, charitable giving, talking with and trusting neighbors, voting in local elections, and having confidence in the media or public schools. However, compared to other states, Connecticut performed relatively poorly in other measures of engagement, including registering to vote, belonging to a school or community association, joining a church group or other religious group, and having confidence in corporations."
  - "Civic participation increases with age, according to measures in this Index. Generally, young adults demonstrate the lowest rates of engagement, which peak among older adults."

- “Civic data reflect the relative political disengagement of Connecticut youth. Young adults (18 to 24 years) were least likely to register to vote.”
- “Age-specific characteristics likely cause, in part, individual differences in community and political involvement. Most young adults are students or entry-level workers. These occupations, often coupled with busy schedules and small paychecks, may limit the time and money that many young adults can invest in the community, through engagement opportunities and group membership. Meanwhile, many older adults do not work at full-time jobs and tend to be more financially stable than other age groups. As a result, older people may have more resources to devote to community issues.”

## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: ADULTS**

The Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- Conduct a new civic health assessment as soon as possible, as a follow up to the 2016 Connecticut Civic Health Index. The accumulation of data for a new assessment would tell us much about civic life in our state. It would also help determine the efficacy of recommendations made in the 2016 Index and determine additional steps necessary to enhance Connecticut’s civic health.
- The Encounters program, which is part of the Democracy and Dialogues initiative at the University of Connecticut, should be expanded. This program supports community dialogues on critical issues and promotes civic engagement.
- Everyday Democracy and/or partner organizations should reintroduce the Civic Ambassadors program, which trains adults (and students) to become engaged in their local communities as Civic Ambassadors.
- The Office of the Secretary of the State should expand its “The Power of Civics” webpage to make it the central repository for adult civic engagement resources.
- Connecticut’s civics organizations should explore opportunities to provide adult civic engagement resources for their audiences.

## MEDIA/INFORMATION LITERACY

### **MEDIA/INFORMATION LITERACY FINDINGS: K-12 STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS**

The Task Force identified the following key findings:

- The need for media/information literacy instruction for students at all levels cannot be overstated. Students are often convinced that what they see on social media is true. However, there are limited sources to “balance out” what might be found on social media.
- Information literacy encompasses history and other disciplines. Knowledge in these spheres is an important foundation for media literacy that can provide the skills students need to discern fact from fiction and determine the reliability of sources.
- Educators are in need of professional development in media/information literacy and how to teach their students.

### **MEDIA/INFORMATION LITERACY RECOMMENDATIONS: K-12 STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS**

The Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- Schools should incorporate media/information literacy into K-12 curriculums to build critical media analysis skills among students.
- The Connecticut State Department of Education should continue developing a media literacy curriculum and offer related professional development for educators across disciplines and grade levels.
- All organizations doing professional development for educators should include media/information literacy in their presentations

## **MEDIA/INFORMATION LITERACY FINDINGS: ADULTS**

The Task Force identified the following key findings:

- Media literacy is an urgent need as adults are continuously exposed to a multitude of information sources and are often convinced that what they see on social media is true.
- Information literacy encompasses history and other disciplines. Knowledge in these spheres is an important foundation for media literacy that can provide the skills adults need to discern fact from fiction and determine the reliability of sources.

## **MEDIA/INFORMATION LITERACY RECOMMENDATIONS: ADULTS**

The Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- The Connecticut State Department of Education's Adult Education Programs should incorporate media/information literacy throughout its courses.
- Elevate existing resources like CT Humanities' "Fake News: Is It Real?" program.

## CONCLUSION

We are at a critical moment in the civic health of our state and nation. We hope this report will provide a roadmap for addressing the pressing civic education, civic engagement, and media/information literacy needs of this moment and ultimately foster a well-informed, participatory citizenry. By implementing the recommendations presented in this report, Connecticut can better prepare K-12 students, educators, and adults to navigate and contribute to an increasingly complex civic and media landscape.

American society is polarized today. The division is not just over values and philosophy; America is divided over underlying facts. Citizens are increasingly getting their information from YouTube, digital influencers, and podcasts with whom they agree. Algorithms steer many to more and more extreme sites. On these sites, false narratives and conspiracy theories abound.

Democracy is the process of collaborative self-government. It involves citizens with different world views coming together and attempting to find common ground. To do so, we need a common set of facts. Consensus building and compromise are not possible without some common basis of knowledge.

Civics education is, at its core, the preparation for participating in our democratic enterprise. As such, a critical part of civics education is encouraging students to develop the facility of discovering the differences between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, and truth and falsity. In 2025, civics education needs to stress the ability to be skeptical about what comes across the Internet and to learn what sources to credit. It involves learning how to listen to others, how to assess the veracity of claims, and how to respect the points of view of others.

Beyond being a source of polemic falsehoods, the Internet is also a source of atomization. Screen time robs time away from face to face contact with other individuals. Without such direct interpersonal contact, compromise and consensus building become very difficult. Another purpose of civics education needs to be a focus on guiding students on how to deal with issues or problems with which they disagree. Civics education needs to focus on the art of listening and communicating, and the fundamental knowledge of how to respect others and especially how to respect those that are different.

Clearly, elementary and secondary schools are the primary venues for teaching discernment and respect. The Commission recommends a new commitment to civics education, which should include a curriculum that encourages students to learn about government and also how to interact and influence that government. Civics education should empower students to “take informed action” at the local, state, and national levels.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Civic education should be introduced and reinforced at all grade levels, and opportunities for adult civic education should be explored.
- K-12 students should be encouraged to “take informed action” in their communities with the civic knowledge and skills they have acquired.
- The General Assembly should pass proposed legislation directing the Connecticut State Department of Education to create a Connecticut State Seal of Civic Education and Engagement.
- A new civic health assessment should be conducted as soon as possible, as a follow up to the 2016 Connecticut Civic Health Index.
- Online repositories/webpages should be created for Connecticut K-12 civic education resources (Red, White, & Blue Schools), information and resources pertaining to adult civic engagement (Office of the Secretary of the State), and student civic engagement programs (The Connecticut Democracy Center).

- The Connecticut State Department of Education should continue developing a media literacy curriculum, offer related educator professional development for educators across disciplines and grade levels, and incorporate media/information literacy throughout its Adult Education Programs.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### CONNECTICUT RESOURCES AND WEBSITES

- [2016 Connecticut Civic Health Index](#)
- [Elementary and Secondary Social Studies Standards](#) (2023)
- [Connecticut Council for the Social Studies civics resources](#)
- [K-8 Model Social Studies Curricula](#)
- [Red, White & Blue Schools program and civics resources](#)

### NATIONAL RESOURCES AND REPORTS

- 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment - The Nation's Report Card (2022)
  - [Results](#)
  - [Grade 8 results infographic](#)
- [Agreement Across the Aisle: Schools Should Prepare Students for the Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship](#) - University of Southern California (2025)
- [“Facing Partisan Conflict: How Social Studies Educators Can Lead Towards a Diverse Democracy”](#) - Joseph Kahne, John Rogers (2024)
- [Frustration in the Schools](#) - Kappan (2019)
- [iCivics/More Perfect poll](#) - Cygnal (2022)
- [“Many Don't Know Key Facts About U.S. Constitution, Annenberg Civics Study Finds”](#) - Annenberg Public Policy Center (2023)
- [“Social Studies Achievement Has Plummeted Nationally. Four Reasons This Trend Will Not Be Reversed Without Systemic Action”](#) - Julia H. Kaufman, Melissa Kay Diliberti, RAND Corporation (2023)
- [The Democracy Project report](#) - George W. Bush Institute, Freedom House, Penn Biden Center (2018)
- [The Marginalization of Social Studies](#) - Council of Chief State School Officers (2018)
- [The Missing Infrastructure for Elementary \(K-5\) Social Studies Instruction](#) - RAND Corporation (2023)
- [When and Why Did America Stop Teaching Civics?](#) - Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy (September 2024)