

Dudley Flood Center for Educational Equity and Opportunity

Building Civic Literacy Issue Brief

From Knowledge to Power: Closing the Civic Literacy Gap

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INTRODUCTION

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Originally a call to action for a new republic, Thomas Jefferson's words on the importance of an "enlightened citizenry" carry a message that is still critical today. Civic literacy is fundamental to a thriving democracy in which every person has the knowledge, skills, and disposition required for active, informed participation in public life. Despite North Carolina's constitution guaranteeing a system of free public schools "wherein equal opportunities shall be provided for all students," the structure of the state's educational systems – the way schools are funded, teacher pay, access to safe learning environments – does not equitably provide all students with the tools necessary to be traditionally and civically literate.[1]

> *"An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic. Self-government is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight. It is therefore imperative that the nation see to it that a suitable education be provided for all its citizens."*
> -Thomas Jefferson-

Inequities in traditional and civic literacy are linked closely to race, geography, and socioeconomic status, creating a cycle in which historically marginalized students are not able to build capacities essential to achieving justice for themselves and their communities. A movement towards the constitutional promise of equal opportunities for all students requires governments, schools, and communities to address the gaps in civic literacy through systemic change, as well as intentional and experiential civic learning.

What Does Civic Literacy Look Like?

Traditional literacy enables individuals to read, write, and comprehend text; civic literacy equips individuals to participate in and shape their communities. Traditional literacy is a prerequisite for building true civic literacy, which encompasses three interdependent dimensions:

- **Civic knowledge**: Understanding structures of government, constitutional principles, historical movements, and individual rights;
- **Civic skills**: Analyzing policy information critically, evaluating the credibility of information, and navigating public decision-making processes;
- **Civic disposition**: Fostering a sense of community responsibility, agency, and a commitment to public equity.[2]

Equal Access to Knowledge and Power: Building Civic Literacy

Just as civic literacy is critical for democratic participation, equitable access to democratic participation is vital to sustaining civic literacy.[3] However, many groups in the United States' history have had to build civic literacy through their exclusion from its access. Following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, Southern state governments implemented literacy tests, poll taxes, and disenfranchisement tactics to exclude Black and low-income communities from civic life.[4] State laws systematically excluded Black citizens from voter rolls, directly barring them from jury service and consequently the opportunity of civic participation in the court system.[5] North Carolina's constitution was amended in 1900, giving registrars subjective discretion to require Black voters to "read and write any section of the Constitution in English" to the registrar's satisfaction.[6] In this case, "literacy" was not used to foster a sense of agency, but as a legal mechanism for exclusion. Research shows that civic knowledge yields increased civic engagement, and civic engagement correlates with higher levels of trust in democracy.[7] While civic knowledge is a factor of civic literacy, equal access to the power that influences democracy is just as important as it helps build civic disposition.

Freedom to participate in civic processes, while necessary for building civic literacy, is not by itself sufficient – states must provide students with the foundation necessary for civic engagement. In 1997, the North Carolina Supreme Court's *Leandro I* ruling established that the state constitution guarantees every child the right to a "sound basic education."

The court explicitly defined a "sound basic education" as one that provides students with "sufficient ability to read, write, and speak the English language," and "sufficient fundamental knowledge of geography, history, and basic economic and political systems to enable the student to make informed choices with regard to issues that affect the student personally or affect the student's community, state, and nation."[8] The Leandro ruling makes evident the court's belief that civic literacy in its true form – the combination of knowledge, skills, and disposition – is fundamental to a "sound basic education" that all North Carolinians are entitled to.

> *"I for one believe that if you give people a thorough understanding of what confronts them and the basic causes that produce it, they'll create their own program, and when the people create a program, you get action."*
> -Malcolm X-

Addressing the Civic Empowerment Gap

Civic literacy is an equity issue. Only 22 percent of eight-grade students reached NAEP proficiency on the civics assessment in 2022.[9] Students of color, low-income students, and students from immigrant backgrounds often demonstrate lower levels of civic knowledge, skills, and participation.[10] This inequity, in part, can be attributed to inadequate funding between school districts. North Carolina's current school funding system, in which more than 87 percent of students attend districts funded below adequate levels, creates opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect low-income students, students with disabilities, and students of color.[11,12] North Carolina's eight-grade scores from 2023 show that a part of this opportunity gap includes an unequal burden of low literacy rates – Black, indigenous, Hispanic, and low-income students are the least likely to be reading at grade level.[13] Consequently, research shows that the well-documented opportunity gap in education is masking a "civic empowerment gap" in which students in low-income communities are often denied access to high-quality civic opportunities like classroom discussion on current events, policy debates, media literacy analysis, and project-based community advocacy.[14]

The traditional and civic literacy gap has been shown to forecast unequal real-world civic participation that erodes democratic representation.[15] Traditional literacy is the baseline for navigating modern life. Literacy is essential for navigating healthcare systems, opening doors for employment, higher education, and financial security, and allowing individuals to advocate for themselves.

> *"Freedom is not a state; it is an act. Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society."*
> -John Lewis-

At its core, literacy allows individuals to understand their rights. Civic literacy enables individuals to exercise and defend these rights. In practice, civic literacy goes beyond simply understanding how a bill becomes law, memorizing historical facts, or even voting. Civic literacy is a vehicle through which communities organize, advocate, and collaborate for systemic change and justice.[16] When civic literacy is taught equitably, historically marginalized communities gain the tools to create justice for themselves and their communities in a more efficient way.

Closing the civic literacy gap requires collaboration between the government, schools, and community organizations.

Government Interventions

For students to receive the baseline traditional and civic literacy skills equitably, stakeholders must push for local, state, and federal policies that strengthen professional development for teachers and fund schools adequately and equitably, while also securing funding specifically for civic education.[17,18,19] States can also encourage student civic engagement by establishing "civic seal" diploma recognition programs.[20]

School-Based Interventions

Schools that have the resources to build active civic engagement among students that goes beyond standard curriculum requirements should do so. Examples include:

- Analyzing current events and their impacts on communities through structured discussions;
- Sharing community service engagement opportunities like youth voter poll workers programs and youth advisory boards;
- Implementing a Student Government Association;
- Incorporating media literacy into classroom instruction;
- Establishing extracurricular activities like mock court, debate society, journalism club;
- Creating simulations of democratic processes (i.e., voting, creating and passing bills);
- Hosting roundtables with local decision makers around issues that impact students.

School-based interventions are highly dependent on the availability of adequate funding and resources, and therefore should be implemented in tandem with government interventions to address equity issues.

Community-Based Interventions

Perhaps one of the most important yet difficult aspects of civic literacy is building trust in a way that transcends the classroom and creates a lifelong commitment to civic engagement. Community organizations can help build civic literacy by creating intentional partnerships and opportunities for people to learn about and participate in civic systems.[21] Examples include:

- Developing youth internships, fellowships, and community oral history projects;[22]
- Providing clear, multi-lingual resources detailing policies and their impacts on public life, and sources for accurate information;
- Hosting letter-writing campaigns, group voting gatherings, and town hall style discussions with local decision makers;
- Organizing "citizen assemblies" and allowing them to have some decision-making power;[23]
- Partnering with local news outlets or journalism programs to host media literacy workshops that teach people how to evaluate sources, and spot AI-generated content and disinformation.

NEXT STEPS FOR NORTH CAROLINA

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Stakeholders across North Carolina must continue to demand that the state fulfill its constitutional obligation to provide "a sound basic education" for every student. Meeting this obligation requires sustained investments in strengthening and diversifying the educator workforce by addressing the systemic challenges contributing to low recruitment and high attrition. It also requires equitable school funding formulas that ensure every student, regardless of race, income, ZIP code, or disability status, has access to the resources, instruction, and opportunities necessary to develop strong foundational and civic literacy skills, including students in rural communities. Ultimately, North Carolina must recognize that civic literacy is not an educational luxury, but a democratic necessity. Championing civic literacy requires more than preparing students to understand democracy; it requires investing in their ability to participate in it, shape it, and hold it accountable.

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