



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Project Citizen Research Program (PCRP) evaluated the effectiveness of the Center for Civic Education’s Project Citizen teacher professional development and curriculum over the course of three academic years from 2020-23. Teachers attended a summer institute and follow-up professional development sessions throughout the academic year and instructed the Project Citizen curriculum. Middle and high school students work as a class to research and develop proposals for solving a policy problem in their school or community which they present to stakeholders. The research was conducted by the Civic Education Research Lab at Georgetown University. The PCRP was funded by a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Key Study Findings

CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

Project Citizen teachers’ knowledge of American government, democracy, and the public policy process increased significantly in each program year.

Project Citizen students’ civic knowledge improved significantly in all three cohorts.

- Middle school students’ civic knowledge increased by 44% in Year 1, 76% in Year 2, and 66% in Year 3.
- High school students’ civic knowledge increased by 27% in Year 1, 56% in Year 2, and 32% in Year 3.
- Knowledge growth was significantly greater for Project Citizen students than for students who took a traditional civics, social studies, American government, or American history class.

CIVIC DISPOSITIONS

Civic dispositions are the public and private traits, attitudes, and ingrained “habits of the heart” that are consistent with the common good and are central to the functioning of a healthy democracy.

Project Citizen teachers placed significantly more emphasis on civic dispositions in their classes after participating in the professional development program.

Project Citizen students embraced the virtues of good democratic citizens.

- Secondary school students became more inclined to keep informed about government and politics and pay attention to issues in their community.
- Secondary school students had a stronger commitment to vote in elections if given the opportunity.
- Students, like the general public, had low levels of trust in government and the news media. High school students’ trust in government and media increased after the program.
- High school students became more interested in pursuing a career in government service and possibly running for office one day.
- Project Citizen students’ civic dispositions improved more than those of the control group.

CIVIC SKILLS

Civic skills are a range of proficiencies required for democratic engagement. They encompass behaviors beneficial to the development of personal agency that promotes civic engagement.

Project Citizen teachers were much more likely to emphasize civic skills during their classes.

- The number of teachers who focused a great deal on civic skills increased from 40% to 73% in Year 1, from 57% to 71% in Year 2, and from 22% to 47% in Year 3.
- Teachers’ integration of activities that convey civic skills into their lessons increased by 156% in Year 1, 136% in Year 2, and 99% in Year 3.

Project Citizen prepared students to participate in their communities and public life.

- Secondary school students had a better understanding of policy issues facing the country.
- Students felt that they could help organize people to solve a problem in their community.
- Students could find the official or branch of government responsible for working on community problems.
- The findings were strongest for high school students.
- Project Citizens students’ civic skills improved significantly more than those of students in the control group.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement is voluntary involvement in community affairs that is put forth in the public interest. It is active participation that involves community service that is collaborative and works toward addressing areas of local, national, and global concern.

Project Citizen teachers became more confident in their ability to get students to engage in their community.

- The percentage of teachers who felt they were greatly effective in encouraging students to become involved in their community increased from 51% to 70% in Year 1, from 55% to 71% in Year 2, and from 47% to 54% in Year 3.

Project Citizen students felt better prepared to engage in political and public life after the program.

- The percentage of high school students who were very likely to turn out in elections increased from 69% to 72% in Year 1, from 63% to 69% in Year 2, and from 66% to 76% in Year 3.
- The percentage of high schoolers who were ready to engage in public life increased by 7% in Year 1, 10% in Year 2, and 6% in Year 3.
- The findings were strongest for high school students.
- The findings were more apparent for Project Citizen students than for those who took a traditional civics class.

CIVICS-RELATED SEL COMPETENCIES

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which people develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes conducive to achieving personal and collective goals, maintaining positive relationships, and making meaningful societal connections. Integrating SEL and civic learning can give students the opportunity to become caring and engaged community members.

Teachers felt more capable of promoting students' self-care and self-management, developing students' relationship skills, promoting respectful classroom discourse, and encouraging students' civic engagement after participating in Project Citizen.

- 77% of teachers felt that Project Citizen contributed to their students' acquisition of SEL competencies.

Project Citizen students gained civics-related SEL skills.

- Middle and high school students achieved significant gains in their problem solving abilities and civic expression skills.
- The gains in civics-related SEL skills were notably smaller for the control group students.

STEM IN THE CIVICS CLASSROOM

The U.S. Department of education has advocated for the integration of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education across the curriculum, stating that “the complexities of today’s world require all people to be equipped with a new set of core knowledge and skills to solve difficult problems, gather and evaluate evidence, and make sense of information they receive from varied print, and increasingly, digital media.”

Project Citizen teachers were more inclined to have their students use STEM skills in their classes after the professional development program.

- 40% of Project Citizen teachers indicated that they were very prepared to incorporate STEM into the civics curriculum after participating in PCRCP compared to 3% pre-program.
- The percentage of Project Citizen teachers indicating that their students had used STEM skills in their classes doubled from 25% pre-program to 50% post-program.
- The percentage of Project Citizen teachers whose students conducted surveys increased from 51% to 88%. Control group teachers’ use of surveys was limited and did not increase.
- Project Citizen teachers were more likely to have their students use technology to engage in the community after their professional development program. This trend was not evident for control group teachers.

Secondary school students who participated in Project Citizen applied STEM skills when conducting research for their projects.

- Project Citizen students were better able to understand how they can use STEM skills to address problems in their community.
- Middle and high school students were able to make a stronger connection between STEM and their civics classes after participating in Project Citizen.
- The effects were not apparent for control group students.

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