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A Virginia for All Virginians: Recommendations to Improve the Civic Health of the Commonwealth

A Report of the Virginia Civics Coalition, in partnership with
Virginia Civics and the Virginia Commission on Civic Education



WITH SUPPORT FROM



Table of Contents

Introduction	3	Ok Boomer (And Gen Xer and Millennial): Engage and Encourage Lifelong Learning	25
Acknowledgments	8		
Building Up with Support Structures	9		
Toolkits, Training, and Trust: Ways to Support, Equip, and Empower Educators	10	Stronger Together	27
Sustainable Resources: Creating a One-Stop Shop for Civic Education	12	Howdy, Partner: Coordination and Cooperation Opportunities in the Commonwealth	27
Teaching and Testing	14	Represent!: Student Engagement with Local and State Government	29
Subject or Object?: Integrating Civics Outside of Civics Class	15	Paying Attention to Tension	31
Horseshoes and Hand Grenades: Civic Education Without Civic Engagement Isn't Close Enough	18	Finding a Balance: Managing Tensions Between Local Autonomy and State Guidelines	32
Testing, Testing, 1-2-3: Desiring a Clear "Win" for Civic Education	21	Courageous Civics: Overcoming Political Division and Fear	34
The Adults in the Room	23	Sources	36
There's No Place Like Home: The Role of Parents and Other Caregivers in a Child's Civic Education	23	Advisory Group Members	37

Introduction

It is an historic time for civic education efforts in the United States. With growing political partisanship and less-than-civil discourse bespeckling the headlines—in everything from national elections to local school board meetings—civic education and engagement efforts are both a renewed priority for proponents and a new target for critics of how we teach our children.

Is there a “right” way to teach civics, or even agreement on a “good” way? What are teachers of civics trying to achieve? How do we measure success? And what is “civics” anyway? After all, if we’re placing the fate of our constitutional self-government in the hands of the success of civic education efforts, we should come to some kind of agreement on what we mean when we talk about civics, who we are trying to reach, the most effective teaching methods, and what we hope will happen when we engage in these efforts.

To explore these questions in the context of Virginia civic education, Virginia Civics and the Virginia Commission on Civic Education (VCCE), with support from iCivics and the



Carnegie Corporation of New York, set out on a “listening tour” with experts, practitioners, and consumers of civic education and engagement across the state. These conversations formed the basis of our Virginia Civics Coalition, a growing partnership dedicated to advancing effective civic education and engagement efforts through a shared commitment to nonpartisan, student-focused, comprehensive practices and policies.

Throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2021, we spoke with a broad range of Virginians involved in some aspect of civic education, including public and private school teachers, school administrators, higher education professionals, lawyers, museum educators, supporters of civic education, representatives from civic education organizations, local service and community groups, and others. Each group discussed what worked well in their civic education efforts, what had not worked well, their goals, and what resources they needed to continue and expand their efforts. This work was supplemented by a survey of public high school students' experiences with civic education, conducted by the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Commonwealth University, completed in September 2021.

Following these conversations, Virginia Civics and the VCCE convened an advisory group with representatives from each civic education sector, to craft policy and practice recommendations that represent the interests and experiences of all Virginians. The advisory group identified the following underlying principles and contextual realities to ensure maximum impact of the recommendations:

CIVICS IS EVERYWHERE

How Do We Engage in Civic Life Beyond Politics?

Any activity where community members engage in making their community better is an act of civics. Political engagement is civic engagement, but not all civic engagement is political. Part of our goal is to help the public understand that while political engagement is important, civic engagement, which is more than being a part of the political process, is also vitally important.

CIVICS IS EVERYONE

How Do We Engage Adults?

While much of the conversation in the focus groups centered on the education and engagement of students, all generations will benefit from civic education and encouragement to be more involved in their communities. Providing opportunities for adults to learn and engage is as important as it is for K-12 students. To that end, how do we create awareness and foster engagement in addition to the K-12 audience?

CHANGING MINDSET

How Do We Break the Nostalgia for Civic History that Never Existed?

We tend to put historical figures on a pedestal and long for the “golden age” of politics and civic life, which is limiting to current engagement. How do we normalize civic engagement and make it something that everyone does? Civic engagement is not about the great remembered acts of a few but of the consistent daily acts of the many. How do we instill this across the Commonwealth? How do we help people understand that meaningful civic impact is attainable?

“ **Civil rights mythology is also a major challenge when it comes to teaching civics. Students walk away believing civil disobedience is the only civic tool they have when the actual history also involves litigation, legislation, and long-term, local-level community organizing.**”

A VIRGINIA FOR ALL VIRGINIANS

How Do We Help to Build a Place Where Everyone Has a Voice?

In order for the recommendations to be meaningful in a state-wide context, they must share common language and articulate shared goals. Exactly how each recommendation can be applied, however, will ultimately be the decision of each individual community. The challenge is in creating enough clarity for alignment while allowing flexibility for contextual application across the different communities across Virginia. We also need to recognize that Virginians come from different backgrounds, life experiences, and levels of access to education and wealth. Recommendations should strive to reach all Virginians, regardless of situation.



BEING REALISTIC ABOUT CHANGE

How Do We Recognize When Something is a Tension to Manage and Not a Problem to Solve?

State guidance and local freedom are both important. The intent of this exercise is not to prioritize the interests of one over another, but to offer suggestions for both state and local entities to foster an atmosphere of strong civic engagement across the Commonwealth. Tensions like this can be healthy. Other problems or issues identified in the focus groups may just be too big for us to solve, so we should be realistic in setting policy goals where we can make a difference instead of charting an impossible course.

One major finding permeated every discussion: the kids are alright. When asked about what is going well in civic education, overwhelmingly people pointed to students' passion and readiness to engage in challenging conversations and issues. In a couple of conversations, this statement came up: The problem isn't the students; it's the adults. In conversations around students' passion and eagerness to engage, stakeholders noted two significant thoughts: 1) Students need and want to be taken seriously. If students feel they are not taken seriously or are being patronized,

they tend to disengage. 2) The goal of working with young people is to help them access the tools of civics and the opportunities to employ them. Stakeholders observed that students might not realize the many ways they have available to them to be civically engaged and positively shape their communities and the Commonwealth. In other words, students have the passion and desire to engage; how can they best be equipped?

“ Students aren’t waiting for adults to fix problems anymore. While true, students need some adult guidance; otherwise, their energy and activism can devolve into do-good anarchy.”

“I find it really encouraging that especially high school students hate being condescended to, being placated, or brushed off. They aren’t the leaders of the future; they are the leaders now.”



Our young adults are more aware of what is going on in the community and world. They pay attention and are thoughtful in how they feel one way or another about issues. Our challenge is that we want them to engage more with us. But as far as being civic-minded, they are way more aware than we were.”

In many ways, Virginia’s efforts in civic education are trending in the right direction. Virginia is one of only four states to have a civic education requirement in both middle and high school, and the Virginia Department of Education offers a civics seal for Excellence in Civic Education. The state has a permanent Commission on Civic Education. Virginia also requires testing for civic education (in the current Virginia Standards of Learning), and a recent bill passed by the Virginia General Assembly provides students with an excused absence for civic-related activities. But there is still a lot of work to do to continue the strong successes

in K-12 civic education, to provide adequate resources, and to expand our efforts into higher education and adult learning.

What follows are practical suggestions from each focus group and the advisory group, organized into five major thematic categories and eleven sub-categories. Each sub-category organizes policy and practice suggestions based on active participants—in other words, who is taking action and who are they hoping to reach? We hope that this format allows for maximum usability, in addition to providing a most comprehensive approach to civic education in the Commonwealth. We realize that there is no “one size fits all” approach to civic education, and not all recommendations will be practical for all realities. Additionally, in many cases, there is much more we can do, and the recommendations provided are there to spark conversation about additional action we can all take to improve civic life in Virginia.



I think we wait too long to take the young adult seriously when they start vocalizing how they feel. Sometimes it looks like we have to get in a dangerous situation before we listen.”

Acknowledgments

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We also would like to thank Chris Bennett and Armani Hall, and the rest of the team at The Spark Mill in Richmond, VA, for their masterful facilitation and ability to distill the most important themes and concepts from hours and hours of conversation and pages upon pages of transcription. Your skill in listening and understanding exemplifies everything powerful about civil discourse, and simply put, you brought out the best of people.

Olivia Mortensen of Mortensen Designs, our superbly talented graphic designer, made our vision of this report a reality and somehow was able to translate feelings into pixels.

Thank you for making our work come alive and for making so many words so much easier to read.

Finally, we extend our unending gratitude to the members of the Virginia Civics Coalition for giving so much of your time, talent, and passion to this project and to all of your work to advance civic education and engagement in Virginia. Ken Burns recently said that democracy only works when we believe it does, and you are the truest believers.





Building Up with Support Structures

In nearly every conversation, stakeholders described the challenges of educators, particularly in the K-12 space, of teaching civics in meaningful and formative ways. These challenges fell into two specific areas:

1. Do those teaching civics have the support of their administration and division when teaching about controversial issues? Teachers often feel ill-equipped or unwilling to engage in conversations around race, privilege, inequality, and power in their curriculum for fear of pushback from parents and the community. Educators desire clear guidelines for what is “fair” or what is “foul” in regard to pedagogies and assessments, and they are looking for a mix of clarity of guidance with the freedom to execute in their contexts.
2. Do teachers have access to resources and funds to pursue professional development to learn and share the best practices in civic education? The idea of a central clearinghouse for quality resources and opportunities emerged as a clear need for teachers.

TOOLKITS, TRAINING, & TRUST: WAYS TO SUPPORT, EQUIP & EMPOWER EDUCATORS

How can administrators, divisions, and others support educators when teaching about controversial issues?

"Controversy gets kids engaged, but it can be scary for teachers. It's a risk. Teachers are still willing to do it, but it takes a lot of energy and risk. Especially new teachers. We need to make it safer for teachers to take those risks."

What are the big concerns?

On curriculum:

"School Systems need to give guidance to teachers to figure out the standards for each subject area. Some teachers get in the comfort zone of the SOLs. [We need to teach] essential skills instead of essential knowledge."

"I get a lot of push back from teachers on my team saying, 'but we don't know what will be on the SOL, so how do we know what to cut?'"

On opportunities:

"I can go wherever I want—never been told no, but I have to pay for it. At this point, that is fine, but I think it's a tragedy that folks wanting to improve are kept from being able to do those

things based on economics. It's an access issue. I would love to see stipends, fellowships, etc."

"The opportunities for professional development are so many; I wish that it wasn't these organizations doing things in a vacuum. I love attending the workshops and field trips, and they are lovely.—all are volunteers doing these things. I wish it was more networked; how can these materials support each other?"

On support:

"I think this will need to start with a clear understanding of what the boundaries are on what they can teach. There isn't clarity right now, so they just don't."

"Teachers express worry about if they will be supported by the admin for teaching these programs. Will they have support from parents, and how do they engage with their parents?"

On college campuses:

"Some of our faculty aren't necessarily sure on how to engage and support students in civic engagement and politics. There is a feeling that they have to get everything correct or not to show any preference, so they just don't say anything at all."

TOOLKITS, TRAINING, AND TRUST: Ways to Support, Equip & Empower Educators

	State	Division/ School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Develop a system to track and maintain hours for the Virginia Civics Seal to make it easier for teachers to promote the program</p> <p>Make civic Education PD a requirement for certification and recertification of all teachers</p> <p>Provide dedicated funding for civic education professional development through a rolling grant program for individuals, school divisions, and nonprofits</p> <p>Provide focused support and funding for BIPOC educators</p>	<p>Give guidance to teachers to figure out the standards for each subject area to stress essential skills in addition to essential knowledge</p> <p>Provide clear policy statements around "Civics Engagement"</p>	<p>Open a dialogue with administrators about how to engage students in conversation about polarizing or controversial topics</p>	<p>More networking and partnerships to consolidate training opportunities into fewer, more substantive trainings rather than too many groups providing programs in a vacuum</p> <p>Provide meaningful PD for teachers on civics engagement, including exemplars, community partnership procurement, opportunities, and ideas for projects</p> <p>Provide ongoing professional training focused on Educating for American Democracy</p> <p>Work with school boards and school administration about civic education and engagement (they might not understand it) and make sure they commit to having teachers' backs</p>	<p>Parents should engage in civil conversation with teachers about goals and strategies for civic education and engagement to understand not only what students will learn, but also why and how</p>
College	<p>Provide civic education and engagement training opportunities for college and university faculty</p>	<p>Provide professional development opportunities for faculty to learn more about civics education to feel able/comfortable to teach</p> <p>Require Virginia Social Studies pre-service training focused on Educating for American Democracy</p>			
Adult	<p>Provide rolling grants for adults to enroll in civic leadership programs</p>	<p>Dedicate a portion of parent-teacher conferences to discussing civic education and engagement goals and strategies</p>	<p>Dedicate a portion of parent-teacher conferences to discussing civic education and engagement goals and strategies</p>	<p>Provide rolling grants for adults to enroll in civic leadership programs</p>	



SUSTAINABLE RESOURCES: CREATING A ONE-STOP SHOP FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

What resources are necessary for teachers to learn and share the best practices in civic education?

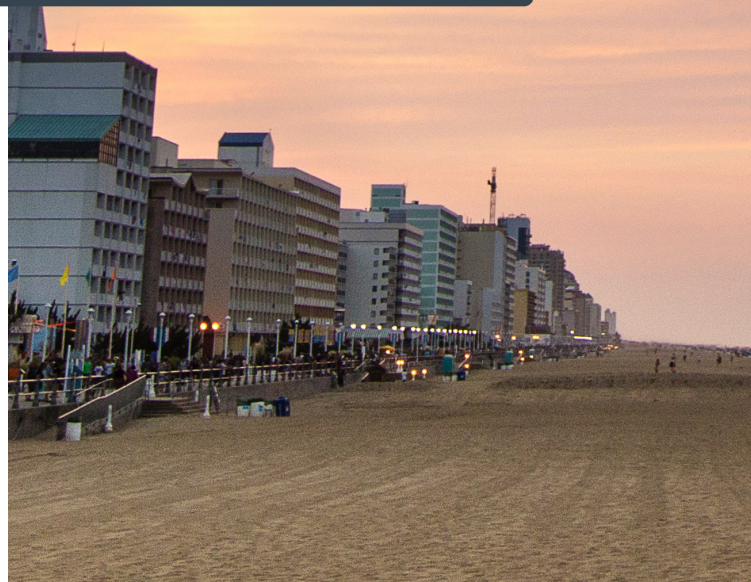
What are the big concerns?

"It would be nice if there was a central place where teachers could find a database of all types of professional development."

"A challenge is the sheer volume of civic education programs. It can be challenging for teachers to figure out what programs they can use that would apply to their curriculum. Is there funding? Do I need a training? Teachers don't have much time to start with."

SUSTAINABLE RESOURCES: Creating a One-Stop Shop for Civic Education

	State	Division/ School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Develop civic themed tasks/ rubrics to help support K12 educators integration of standards as part of a balanced assessment plan</p> <p>Develop central database of civic education resources for teachers</p>	<p>Work with VDOE and civic education organizations to communicate what resources are most needed to advance civic education and engagement efforts</p>	<p>Communicate with administrators and civic education professional development providers about your most pressing needs</p> <p>Develop or write down lesson plans that can augment a central database of resources</p>	<p>Reach out to current teachers to help make them aware of centralized resources, connect them with learning and training opportunities</p> <p>Work with civic educators to develop more tools for a central civic education database</p> <p>Once a central database is established, ensure consistent posting of new materials and opportunities</p>	
College	<p>Develop central database of civic education resources for faculty members</p>	<p>Work with VDOE and civic education organizations to communicate what resources are most needed to advance civic education and engagement efforts</p>	<p>Communicate with administrators and civic education professional development providers about your most pressing needs</p> <p>Develop or write down lesson plans that can augment a central database of resources</p>	<p>Reach out to faculty to see where the need exists for resources and training for faculty</p> <p>Once a central database is established, ensure consistent posting of new materials and opportunities</p>	
Adult	<p>Develop a website and database for public engagement in civics</p>			<p>Open a dialogue with the public to determine what types of opportunities are most needed and most desired</p> <p>Once a central database is established, ensure consistent posting of new materials and opportunities</p>	<p>Communicate with community groups and school divisions about what resources you need to be more informed and involved in the community</p>





Teaching & Testing

When it comes to what happens inside the classroom, coalition partners communicated concerns in three broad thematic areas:

1. Civics is not just for students interested in government or politics. We have to integrate the teaching of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions into other disciplines.
2. Knowing and doing are two very different things. In addition to teaching students the “what” of civic education, we must also teach them the “how,” and give them opportunities to flex their civic muscles.
3. We must develop ways to know whether or not we are making progress. Without clear measures of success, we may end up doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results.

SUBJECT OR OBJECT?: INTEGRATING CIVICS OUTSIDE OF CIVICS CLASS

How can we integrate civics outside of the civics classroom?

Because civics spreads across so many facets of life, stakeholders wondered how civics might be embedded into other subject areas. Additionally, since civics is required in both middle and high school, how can we build upon students' interests by incorporating other disciplines into the civics curriculum?

"Maybe something we can think about is an interdisciplinary approach. We can model projects where a government teacher can work with a science teacher or a math teacher? Combine technology, data, stats... with civic education. Show how they are intertwined. There are all kinds of political art, political songs, always have been. What an idea if we could show students how they are all connected."

"Civic engagement will thread to everything they do."

The Role of History in Civics

The subject of history is of central importance to civic education. History is more than dates and facts—it is the unfolding story of humans engaging in civic work to shape, form, and, ideally,

improve their communities. Sharing how evidence is gathered and analyzed to make arguments about the past prepares students for civic work in which they are asked why they think the way they do, instead of being told what to think.

"The way History is taught is important. These things aren't just things lined up on the timeline. Humanizing these people, sharing their flaws and failures, emphasizes that THEY can be the same change."

"We silo government off, which puts a burden on government class. U.S. History should be 75% political history. This is what sticks with kids and shows them how things build out that affect everything else they are learning."

"You need to be an informed citizen of history in order to be informed and effective in civic engagement."

"The biggest disservice to do to kids is to give them discrete facts and not explain how they are connected between issues and history of the issue."

"Education is helping them to become more fluid in the politics they want to make change in, and history is giving them more of an idea of the impact."

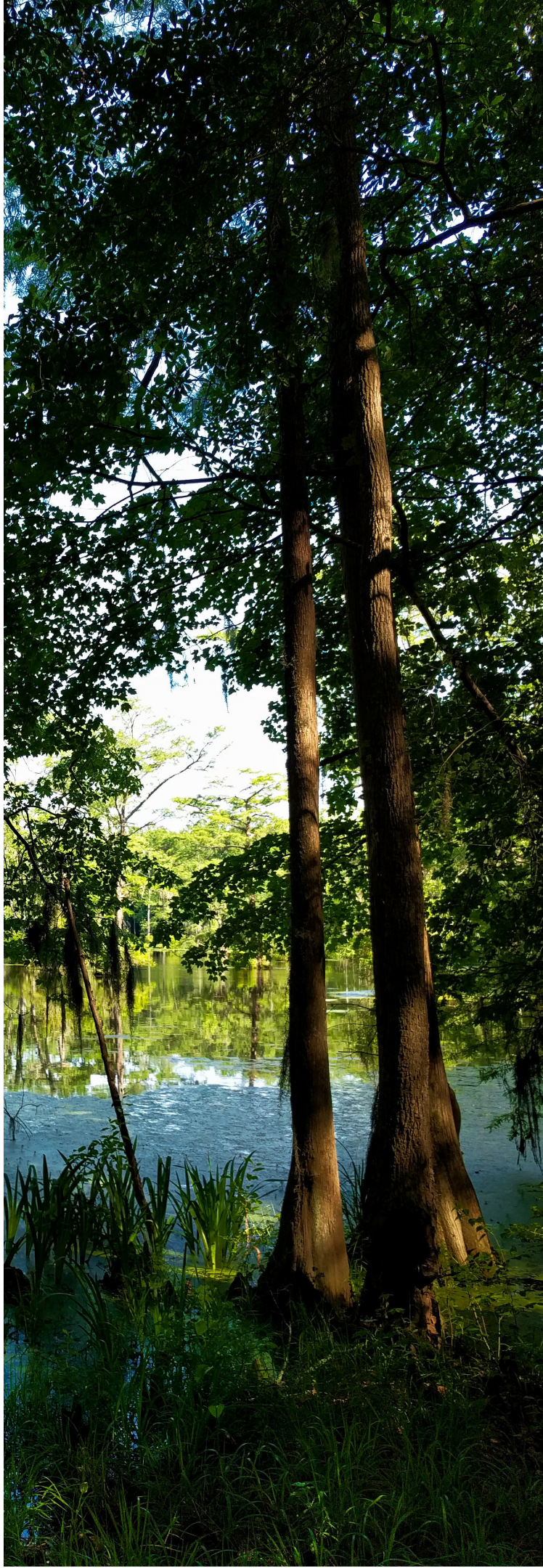
Civil Discourse and Compromise

Likewise, civic education must be deeply connected with teaching thoughtful discourse—the ability to determine bias in media, understand viewpoints different from their own, engage in civil discussion amid conflict, seek compromise, and not fall into zero-sum thinking.

“With the public I have seen a curiosity for these sorts of conversations. There is a leery curiosity, but they want to have a space to have these conversations that don’t just devolve into shouting matches.”

“There is more engagement with young people. We are getting more people to get involved and engage in the entire process. They don’t mind getting controversial. There is a lot of polarization, so teaching them the civil discourse aspect is important.”

“One of the things we do at my college is at the beginning of civic courses we teach students the benefits and the methods of collaborative learning. We need to give those kinds of skills in K-12 education.”



SUBJECT OR OBJECT?:

Integrating Civics Outside of Civics Class

	State	Division/School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Develop curricular materials to integrate civic education into all disciplines</p> <p>Require discourse education</p> <p>Ensure a uniform approach to media literacy through integration in state standards</p> <p>Provide PD opportunities on media literacy</p> <p>Provide PD opportunities in civic education for non-civics teachers</p>	<p>Provide trainings on discourse education</p> <p>Explore becoming an IB school or providing classes (like AP Capstone courses) that encourage critical thinking and civic learning in all subject areas</p> <p>Support and encourage field trips to historic sites and museums</p> <p>Provide in-service opportunities in civic education for non-civics teachers</p>	<p>Use local history to show students how they can take action and better engage with their communities, through projects like the Interactive Field Guide to Local History</p> <p>Incorporate collaborative learning opportunities for students</p> <p>Incorporate media literacy themes into curriculum</p>	<p>Incorporate civic education and engagement themes into field trip programs and interpretive materials</p> <p>Provide PD opportunities on media literacy</p> <p>Provide PD opportunities in civic education for non-civics teachers</p>	<p>Engage students in conversation about what's happening in the world</p> <p>Encourage and participate in excursions to museums and historic sites</p>
College	<p>Develop resources for integrating civic education and engagement into various degree programs</p> <p>Strengthen pre-service requirements to include civic education for all teachers-to-be</p>	<p>Provide trainings on discourse education</p> <p>Encourage or require faculty to incorporate civic education and engagement elements in their classes, regardless of discipline</p>	<p>Use local history to show college students how they can take action and better engage with their communities</p> <p>Faculty can seek ways to include civic components to all classes</p>	<p>Provide continuing education programs specifically for faculty members</p> <p>Expand educational offerings beyond K-12 to include higher-level programs for college students</p>	<p>Seek opportunities to engage your college student in conversation about what's happening on campus and how they can get involved</p>
Adult	<p>Provide space for adults to engage in civil discourse with strict rules and enforcement mechanisms if discussions devolve into shouting matches</p>	<p>Provide after-school workshops for parents on media literacy and engaging in civil discourse</p> <p>Host community meetings to introduce the public to Educating for American Democracy as it becomes more commonplace in schools</p>	<p>Engage parents in assignments focusing on civil discourse and engagement</p>	<p>Incorporate civic themes into interpretive programs and materials</p> <p>Offer general audience programs that also offer time and space for civil discourse</p> <p>Provide opportunities for legislators, city council members, and members of local school boards to educate on the urgency, importance, and need for civic engagement programs</p>	<p>Seek opportunities for continuing education in civic engagement and civil discourse in your community</p>



HORSESHOES AND HAND GRENADES: CIVIC EDUCATION WITHOUT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ISN'T CLOSE ENOUGH

Civic education should be much more than information transfer from teacher to student. Students must have the opportunity to meaningfully engage and practice skills that connect civics to their everyday lives. Students and teachers alike want civic education to be more experiential and less about tests; however, student actions indicate that they are more likely to participate in community engagement activities because of civic dispositions rather than school requirements.¹

What are the big concerns and what can we do?

"Teaching just the three branches of government, as a 17-year-old, I wouldn't feel like I'm involved in that process. I'm not going to feel like I matter in government. It needs to be something real."

"Civic duty is more than just voting; sometimes it's a cultural thing. People can engage civically in a cultural context. It's important to have an understanding of cultures and how they may express their civic duties."

"We need to prepare them how to think through situations, instead of just preparing to take a test."

"They are very motivated when they can see a tangible impact."

"Beyond K-12, it's about transparency and outreach. Getting them to understand that the role that they play in proposing legislation. If citizens are active, they can play a very big role in what happens in the General Assembly, but I don't think many of them realize it."

"For students in that age range, standing out is easier for some than others. There is pressure to 'go along to get along.' Changing their FB profile or adding a banner is a good first step. We need to go in and encourage them to go in deeper and help them target their interest to find something more productive. It's an entry point opportunity."

"We started with the year with teaching that government is structured by who is in the room—and it's important to understand who is not in the room. If you want to be part of change, you need to be in the room, I am inviting you into the room through these ways. It's extended a lot of our conversation around equity decisions. What was in the constitution? What was not? How does this impact your lives now?"

"I think students have spent their whole education career doing imaginary workshops in politics and civic policy."

One thing we do is have students actually write a policy proposal that they do present to legislative representatives. After the course, they have the option to continue to pursue, and we have had some that have become actual bills and a few that have become actual laws in Virginia. That gets college students really excited because it's not just some exercise."

"There is a level of learning that can't come through a textbook but has to come through the actual engagement. That being said, if students aren't educated on civics, there is a limit to how effective their engagement can be."



HORSESHOES AND HAND GRENADES:

Civic Education Without Civic Engagement isn't Close Enough

	State	Division/School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Develop regional or statewide youth summits</p> <p>Develop a civic leaders institute for students to participate in across the state</p> <p>Provide or increase funding for field trips</p> <p>Convene student activist groups from across the state that promote youth leadership and civic engagement; give them a platform for sharing their causes and concerns and the opportunity to reach local/state government representatives as well as community partners</p> <p>Currently the "50 hours of service" for the Civics Seal can be filled by activities that may or may not require students to be completely civically engaged; develop a system that ensures meaningful experiences, and provides for reflection and evaluation of the activities</p>	<p>Support teacher requests for hands-on learning opportunities</p> <p>Provide or increase funding for field trips</p> <p>Encourage students to embark on a civic engagement project their senior year</p> <p>Increase opportunities for student leadership through student councils and commissions whereby students have more of a decision-making role in school policies, procedures, discipline actions, and school safety</p>	<p>Provide more hands-on learning opportunities</p> <p>Require students to embark on a civic engagement project their senior year</p> <p>Develop a program that recognizes student leadership and community engagement</p>	<p>Create a youth council that parallels local community offices like Board of Supervisors, Town Council and School Board, allow them to engage in real votes in town/country affairs</p> <p>Develop opportunities year-round like the Civic Season</p>	<p>Serve as a chaperone on school-organized engagement trips</p> <p>Seek opportunities to engage youth in community activities</p>
College	<p>Develop a college leaders institute for students to participate in across the state</p>	<p>Increase opportunities for student leadership through student councils and commissions whereby students have more of a decision-making role in school policies, procedures, discipline actions, and school safety</p> <p>Require community engagement projects as a requirement of graduation</p>	<p>Introduce assignments that include writing policy proposals relevant to class material</p>	<p>Embrace college students as change-agents in the community</p> <p>Invite college students to take part in volunteer and service projects in the community</p>	<p>Encourage college-age students to get involved in campus activities and the community in which they are living and learning</p>
Adult	<p>Promote opportunities for more adults to attend meetings and get involved in state commissions</p>	<p>Engage parents in discussions of the types of civic engagement projects they would like to see their students undertake</p>	<p>Reach out to parents to be involved in class civic engagement projects</p>	<p>Promote opportunities for more adults to attend meetings and get involved in local decision-making</p>	<p>Attend local and statewide governance meetings</p> <p>Vote</p> <p>Run for office</p> <p>Contribute to civic causes</p> <p>Volunteer</p> <p>Get informed</p>

TESTING, TESTING, 1-2-3: DESIRING A CLEAR “WIN” FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

People like to win. In the absence of a clear idea of what winning looks like for everyone, people will make up their own standard for winning. In the arena of civic education, it's not clear what “winning” looks like. What is the common goal?

Moreover, there are major challenges in measuring success in civic education and engagement. How best can we evaluate student learning? And how can we measure civic engagement beyond the voting rate?

What are the big concerns?

“Our assessment model and grading practices seem to be the biggest barrier to realizing our vision for what civic education could be.”

“If we shift what our culminating activity is to assess for understanding of what civic life looks like—this can't be measured through factual testing. There should be multiple avenues for schools to participate in engagement.”

“Until there is clarity around what a project-based assessment is, it will be up to teachers to do on their own. We have to set the standard on a state level, so it can filter down.”

“In K-12, the state makes the curriculum, and the assessment piece is very muddled.”

“Civic education and civic engagement are not very suitable for standardized testing. So, students are often very uncomfortable to be given an open framework to learn. There isn't a ‘right’ answer, so that is a challenge for them as we even get started to begin teaching.”

“We look at how many people are engaging in voting, but we don't have any long-term or listed outcomes to gauge civic engagement from the people we work with. We are looking for more statewide long-term outcome data.”



TESTING, TESTING, 1-2-3:

Desiring a Clear “Win” for Civic Education

	State	Division/ School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Develop a comprehensive “roadmap” to successful civic education at all school levels</p> <p>Formalize project-based learning as assessment for civics and government classes</p> <p>Complete a comprehensive review of civic education requirements where they exist</p> <p>Develop a system for communicating system and policy updates to reach teachers beyond the Superintendent’s Memo</p> <p>Develop a civic learning plan for schools that goes beyond standardized testing to include a measurement of student engagement outside of school; provide grade-specific benchmarks and a system for measuring progress</p>	<p>Schools can incorporate vertical communications about what needs to be learned at every grade level</p> <p>Encourage or require a capstone project for seniors in lieu of summative exams</p> <p>Develop a system for communicating system and policy updates to reach all teachers</p> <p>Consider incorporating a state-devised civic learning plan and commit to working toward grade-level benchmarks and measuring progress</p>	<p>Incorporate project-based assessment into classroom instruction</p>	<p>Provide professional development opportunities to teachers focused on a state-directed “roadmap” to successful civic education</p> <p>Work closely with the VDOE, schools, and other PD providers to ensure that training opportunities are in pursuit of common goals</p>	<p>Assist students with civic engagement projects and consider these projects as important as other exams</p>
College	<p>Develop a comprehensive “roadmap” to successful civic education at the college level</p> <p>Develop a civic learning plan for colleges and universities that includes measurements of student engagement outside of school; provide benchmarks and a system for measuring progress</p>	<p>Consider incorporating a state-devised civic learning plan and commit to working toward benchmarks and measuring progress</p>	<p>Incorporate a state-devised civic learning plan and commit to working toward benchmarks and measuring progress</p> <p>Incorporate project-based assessment into classroom instruction</p>	<p>Provide professional development opportunities to faculty focused on a state-directed “roadmap” to successful civic education</p>	<p>Assist students with civic engagement projects and consider these projects as important as other exams</p>
Adult	<p>Identify metrics of civic engagement beyond voting and commit to regular assessment of these metrics</p>			<p>Communicate with state partners on desired metrics of civic participation (e.g., volunteerism, donations, etc.)</p>	<p>Take part in state-led efforts to gauge civic participation</p>

The Adults in the Room

Civic learning does not stop once a child graduates from high school or college. Adults play as big a role in civic education as students, and as adults, we must commit not only to improving the civic education of our children, but also to continuing to learn and be engaged.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND OTHER CAREGIVERS IN A CHILD'S CIVIC EDUCATION

There are important correlations between adult behaviors and adult interactions and youth civic development. Adult caregivers can be a huge asset to civic education or a barrier. Striking the balance is tricky. Too little adult involvement or support can result in missed learning opportunities. Too much adult oversight of civic education delegitimizes the authority of the teacher and can alienate and disempower students from engaging civically. The key to finding the appropriate balance is communication between educators, administrators, and parents.

What are the concerns?

"Principals don't want to deal with the paperwork and liability. [They don't want to] deal with parents who don't understand what's being taught."

"We had teachers who have tried to teach more complete civic education, and parents immediately went to the media."

"What's going on now is that teachers are just giving up on trying to push more engaging projects, and they are sick of the calls and threats and media harassment."

"Parents rarely ask the students what they are actually learning in the class; they just heard second-hand about what courses are about."

"What we've heard from teachers is that they need tools, permission to use the tools from the admin and parents, and they need parents to understand that what they are doing is presenting information while respecting everyone's point of view."

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME:

The Role of Parents and Other Caregivers in a Child's Civic Education

	State	Division/School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	Develop a robust social media presence appealing to students, parents, preservice educators, and community members on opportunities and strategies for civic engagement	<p>Develop a social media presence appealing to students and parents on the curriculum, and opportunities and strategies for civic engagement</p> <p>Host an information night for parents to review goals and strategies for civic learning</p> <p>Create a family learning opportunity, so parents and their children can learn together</p>	<p>Develop parent "primers" to explain civic learning goals and strategies</p> <p>Include a "Parents' Day" where parents can learn alongside their students</p>	Provide professional development programs for parents in partnership with local school systems	<p>Talk to your child about what they are learning</p> <p>Be supportive of what is being taught; instead of being fearful of what children are learning, engage in the process with them</p> <p>Trust your child's teacher and recognize the distinction between history and heresy</p>
College	Communicate civic learning priorities, goals, and strategies to parents through orientations, social media, newsletters, and email campaigns	Host an information session during Parents' Weekends to review goals and strategies for civic learning	Include a session during "Parents' Weekends" where parents can learn alongside their students	Provide civic learning opportunities during Parents' Weekends	<p>Talk to your child about what they are learning</p> <p>Be supportive of what is being taught; instead of being fearful of what children are learning, engage in the process with them</p>
Adult	Provide opportunities for legislators, city council members, and members of school boards to learn about the urgency, importance, and need for civic engagement programs	Host community meetings to introduce the public to Educating for American Democracy as it becomes more commonplace in schools		Provide civic learning opportunities for adults	If you have a concern, engage in civil discussions with teachers about the curriculum, and speak with other parents, especially those with whom you might disagree



OK BOOMER (AND GENXER AND MILLENNIAL): ENGAGE AND ENCOURAGE LIFELONG LEARNING

Adults over 18 are not a lost cause. While previous generations' formal education may have prioritized civic knowledge over civic engagement, adults at any stage of life can become better informed and more active citizens. The single biggest challenge to working with adults is the lack of a formalized education setting. Adult learning tends to be self-motivated, informal, and takes place at a variety of locations. It may also be necessary for adults to "un-learn" misinformation or re-examine long-held beliefs.

What are the concerns?

"Things have become polarized, that it feels like we've lost the sense of 'we.' There is healing and work to do on a society front."

"You won't be an effectively engaged community member if you are not educated about what you are working for and working towards."

"Our country looks worse when it's doing a lot of growing. There has been a lot of contention, but it has opened up discussion; things we don't like to or want to talk about, we are having open discussions about. Education is important to give young people the tools to have these discussions. It's on adults to show them how to do it. We need to be engaged."

OK BOOMER (AND GENXER AND MILLENNIAL): Engage and Encourage Lifelong Learning

	State	Division/ School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Provide continuing education opportunities for teachers and K-12 administrators</p> <p>Provide funding for additional PD for teachers and administrators</p>	<p>Seek opportunities for professional development</p> <p>Support teachers seeking professional development trainings and provide substitute teachers</p>	<p>Seek opportunities for professional development</p>	<p>Provide continuing education opportunities for parents and educators</p>	<p>Learn along with your child by helping with homework or going on field trips</p> <p>Take your child to museums and historic and cultural sites and learn with them</p>
College	<p>Provide continuing education opportunities for faculty and college administrators</p>	<p>Seek opportunities for professional development</p> <p>Support faculty seeking professional development and provide funding</p>	<p>Seek opportunities for professional development</p>	<p>Provide continuing education opportunities for parents and faculty members</p>	<p>Ask your college-age student what they are learning about; empower them by becoming their student</p>
Adult	<p>Provide lifelong learning opportunities online or in-person that engage adults in discussion about issues outside of a political context</p>	<p>Provide lifelong learning opportunities online or in-person that engage adults in discussion about historic and current events</p>		<p>Lean into the role of “convener,” and bring the relevant players into discussion with each other</p> <p>Ask the public about what topics they would like to see covered in exhibits or public events</p>	<p>Seek opportunities for your own continuing education</p>





Stronger Together

No individual or organization should operate in a vacuum, and it is entirely the point of civic education that we come together in pursuit of common goals and the common good. We can do this by fostering closer connections with state and local government, and by forming collaborative partnerships between public and private institutions, philanthropy organizations, community groups, and schools.

HOWDY, PARTNER: COORDINATION AND COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Virginia's students and teachers benefit from a number of organizations that provide high quality resources, training, expertise, venues, etc., often to an overwhelming extent. And while there is promise when one person or entity takes an action to better the community, there is power when many people come together to make change.

Organizations that operate in silos appear to be creating noise that it is difficult to rise above, but if these organizations work in partnership, they can create something harmonious to the benefit of all.

What are the concerns?

"We know teachers and schools can't provide every opportunity possible for students, which is where nonprofit organizations aim to help."

"There seems to be heavier emphasis on educating students on the direct service activities that public/nonprofit organizations do (volunteer days, internships, etc.) and not as much on how they impact communities on a systemic level."

"A 'home base' for resources... would also help eliminate the silo-style approach many organizations and systems take simply out of the necessity to keep operating"

HOWDY, PARTNER:

Coordination & Cooperation Opportunities in the Commonwealth

	State	Division/ School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Assess and understand civics organizations throughout the state (not affiliated with schools) to better understand the landscape</p> <p>Seek collaborative partnerships with organizations providing professional development to align state standards with continuing education programs</p> <p>Create a central database of opportunities that nonprofits offer for teachers</p>	<p>K-12 schools can partner with local community colleges to facilitate continuing civic engagement for students</p> <p>Share curriculum developed at the local level with other school divisions to both promote civic engagement and share the workload</p>	<p>Seek professional development opportunities from professional organizations that are partnering with each other</p> <p>Identify organizations that you can collaborate with on interdisciplinary curricula and lessons</p>	<p>Seek collaborative partnerships to benefit from each organization's unique perspective, rather than organizations reinventing the wheel with programming</p> <p>Foster a collaborative effort between the public/nonprofit sector and philanthropy to give students hands-on civic engagement opportunities beyond the service learning component</p>	<p>Take part in PTA and consider forming a PTA collaborative with other schools in your area</p>
College	<p>Support state universities who currently recognize/incentivize civic diploma seals</p> <p>Provide a central database of civic education and engagement resources geared toward higher education</p>	<p>Partner with local K-12 schools to facilitate civic engagement opportunities, which may inspire college-bound students to stay close to home</p>	<p>Partner with local nonprofits and community groups offering civic engagement opportunities for your students</p>	<p>Seek partnerships with local college campus engagement projects and service learning centers</p>	
Adult	<p>Seek collaborative partnerships with organizations providing lifelong learning opportunities for adults</p>	<p>Partner with community groups and college campuses to offer continuing education for parents</p>		<p>Partner with other organizations or museums to offer continuing education for the public</p> <p>Museums can connect with Virginia Association of Museums to create a rubric for the Civically Engaged Museum, and promote it widely across VA public history institutions</p>	<p>Seek volunteer opportunities where partnership opportunities exist</p>

REPRESENT!: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT

"All politics is local," so they say. Why, then, do our students demonstrate a good understanding of national elections and politics, while their grasp of state and local politics falls behind? Students themselves have reported that they would enjoy more guest lectures from government officials and more emphasis on state and local government.²

In a time when "politics" can be a dirty word, how can we communicate the good that can come from what happens closer to home, and how can we demonstrate the effects of state and local politics on our daily lives?

What are the concerns?

"Finding a way to humanize that everyday involvement in civics is just as important as the involvement as the Speaker or President. We have to make that connection that civic work and engagement isn't just for adults. We have to help them try to figure out, why does this matter and why should I care?"

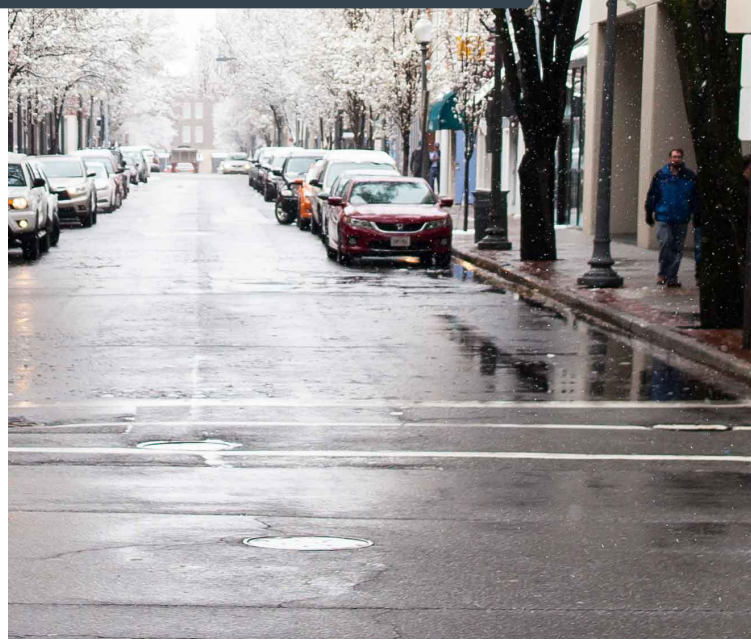
"One of the hurdles to soliciting civic engagement from adults in marginalized communities is the expectation of zero change when those with power/ability to change things are not present in the room."

Respondents' self-reported understanding of 15 different civics and government topics averaged from somewhere between "poor" and "fair" for campaign finance laws (the least understood topic), up to "good" for national elections (the most understood topic). The respondents' average reported understanding of state elections was about midway between "fair" and "good." Their reported understanding of local elections was closer to "fair."²

REPRESENT!:

Student Engagement with Local & State Government

	State	Division/ School	Classroom	Community	Home
K-12	<p>Encourage schools to interact with their local governments</p> <p>Create a program at the state level that integrates youth voice in state government</p> <p>Convene a student mock election for statewide elections</p>	<p>Find ways for your school to interact with their local governments</p> <p>Support teachers who bring in political speakers and develop a school policy for political speakers that is distributed to parents</p>	<p>Bring speakers to campus (even k-3) to discuss the government, what it does, why it participates, how elections work, what the mayor does, etc.</p> <p>Hold a class election</p>	<p>Create a program at the local level that integrates youth voice at local governance levels</p> <p>Encourage local government meetings by holding them in schools, or having town halls, or allowing localities to brainstorm ways to make local government officials more accessible</p>	<p>Bring your child with you to local government meetings</p>
College	<p>Create a program at the state level that integrates college-age voice in state government</p>	<p>Bring speakers to campus to discuss the government, what it does, why to participate, how elections work, what the mayor does, etc.</p> <p>Hold debates on campus</p> <p>Work with local and state government to set up student internships</p>	<p>Bring elected officials with relevant experience into your class</p>	<p>Hold local government meetings or debates on campus</p> <p>Partner with schools to help organize events in support of local government</p>	<p>Ask your student about ways they are involved in their local government, especially if they have moved away from home for school</p>
Adult	<p>Communicate locally about meeting times and locations; make them accessible to the public</p>	<p>Invite parents to take part when speakers are brought in</p> <p>Ask parents for ideas on speakers to bring in</p>	<p>Invite parents to join class field trips to local and state government sites</p> <p>Invite parents to class when speakers come in</p>	<p>Communicate locally about meeting times and locations; make them accessible to the public</p>	<p>Attend local government meetings</p> <p>Consider running for local or state office</p>





Paying Attention to Tension

The delegates to the Constitutional Convention all came to the table with different ideas about how the new nation should be governed. The debates at the Convention were difficult and often tense, but despite that tension—or perhaps because of it—the delegates were able to think through and work through some of the most challenging questions of how to structure a new constitutional self-government. And even though most of the Drafters found the document to be imperfect, and many people still do today, it has stood the test of time and endured as the Supreme Law of the Land for over 230 years.

Tension is difficult, and it is unpleasant, but it isn't always a

problem that we need to solve. Sometimes tension spurs more discussion, more thoughtful deliberation, creative compromise, and better solutions.

Two major tensions emerged in discussions of civic education in Virginia:

1. How do we manage the desire for local autonomy with the need for clear state guidelines?
2. How do we teach civic education in a political environment that becomes more and more partisan and divisive?



FINDING A BALANCE: MANAGING TENSIONS BETWEEN LOCAL AUTONOMY AND STATE GUIDELINES

In Coalition conversations, a tension emerged between the state giving localities—specifically school systems—autonomy, and the state handing down concrete guidelines and mandates. Not all communities are the same, and so local autonomy is important in civic education. At the same time, because there are minimal requirements around civic education in Virginia, the state needs to push clearer guidelines and requirements to localities. This is not an either/or proposition—both guidelines and autonomy are necessary. The challenge is creating a co-existence that benefits both.

What are the concerns?

“An issue with the state vs. local is that depending on the locality; there could be WILDLY different ideas of what the guidelines should be. People don’t remember that the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted because you had localities literally leaving students behind. Maybe they were people of color, or had a disability, or low-income. State and local governments were leaving these kids behind.”

“At the local level, there is concern about what is being imposed by the state, but on the other hand that if it doesn’t come from the state, it doesn’t happen. An issue is consistency for education for all students in the Commonwealth, and if it doesn’t come from the state, it doesn’t happen.”

"The state is more limited than local because they don't and can't give guidelines that cover all communities. There should be minimal guidelines from the state."

"It's always been 'Oh, this policy is going to impact us!' but we never really learn about it. We don't REALLY figure out what that means for us."

"From a student's perspective, we have seen that opportunity or monetary costs are the biggest barriers [to civic education and engagement]. In the wealthiest areas, there are students that see this as an option instead of something they need to. For lower economic schools, they don't have the resources or monies to help their students engage. A lot of the activities aren't in their communities or schools. They are focused on other things, like using the monies for lunches."

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ The state should provide opportunities for schools to apply for state grants for larger investments in communities that do not have extensive resources to support civic education and engagement initiatives.
- ✓ The state should provide more clarity on recommended and required policies and better communicate these policies to divisions and teachers.
- ✓ The state and divisions should open a dialogue about civic education policies that are both student-focused and protect the classroom teacher from being a political scapegoat.
- ✓ States should work with divisions to determine clear guidelines for civic education that are both effective and measurable, including strengthening course requirements and clarifying performance-based assessment objectives.

COURAGEOUS CIVICS: OVERCOMING POLITICAL DIVISION AND FEAR

The divisive political climate is an issue that many in the civic education and engagement space face. The root issue is not the fact that conflict exists; it's how people choose to engage one another in the conflict of different opinions, ideas, and beliefs. Consistently, focus groups lamented that "compromise" has become seen as a negative in politics, and fear of growing political divide is a contextual reality in which this project emerges. In what ways can we elevate the importance and quality of civic education and engagement across the Commonwealth to minimize the effects of political division?

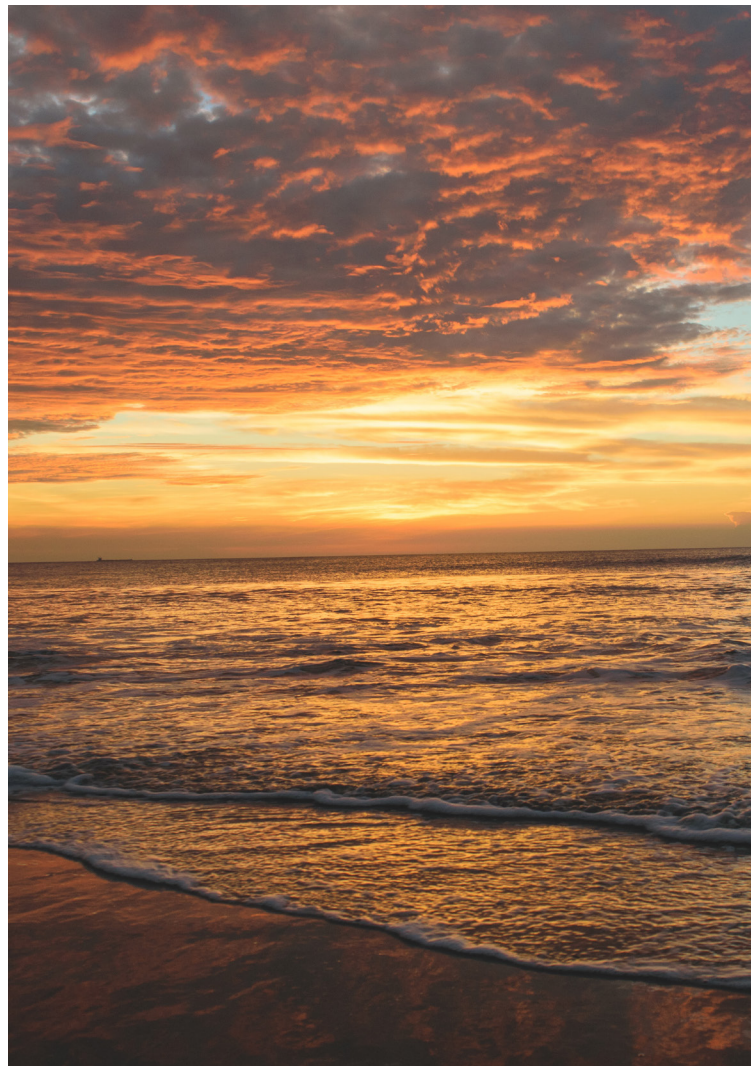
What are the concerns?

"Organizations that depend on grant funding can be scared to pursue this work. They have to worry about getting reprimanded or being 'canceled' if they don't get it perfect. People are anxious about hosting trainings for educators."

"You aren't going to eliminate the uncivil nature of politics in our country. It has never been if you look at the history of discourse in the United States. The question is, how do we manage that process and continue as a country?"

"The challenge is that we've lost a sense of compromise, so while working towards 'common community' betterment, how that is viewed needs direction. It can be very polarized, so people feel shut out if they don't get their way or their 'win.'"

"Even in the K-12 realm, I don't think we really delve into the value of compromise and working together in citizen engagement. It's not emphasized and, in some cases, not even included depending on the teacher and how much background knowledge of local government they have."



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ School administrators and educators should realize that this tension is never going to go away, but policies can be implemented to shield teachers who are teaching appropriately from any backlash associated with political rancor.
- ✓ Consider implementing a school culture that values and prioritizes good citizenship and civil discourse.
- ✓ The state can provide awards, perhaps with a monetary component, to recognize outstanding students, schools, civic educators that exemplify civic behaviors.
- ✓ Institutions of higher education or the state can provide monetary support for faculty who serve as leaders in civic education and engagement initiatives.
- ✓ The state can provide guidelines and/or incentives for institutions of higher education and employers to recognize/incentivize civics diploma seals.
- ✓ The state and community leaders should work with school boards to recognize civic engagement as a good thing.





Sources

All quotes throughout this report are from anonymous participants in the Coalition focus groups.

1. "Virginia Civics Education Survey for High School Seniors," Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Commonwealth University, September 17, 2021, p. 11.

2. "Virginia Civics Education Survey for High School Seniors," Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Commonwealth University, September 17, 2021, p. v. and vi.

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