



# Five Ways to Increase Civic Engagement

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*In Brighton, Iowa, a few nights each month, children and teenagers come together to make food for starving children in other countries, like Guatemala, Romania, and Ethiopia. They prepare the food themselves to insure nutritional content.*

*In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, five Tennessee students donated 95 school desks, a commercial freezer, filing cabinets, lounge furniture, household appliances, and school supplies to Our Lady Academy, a school destroyed by the destructive winds. Afterwards, they did \$20,000 worth of labor to help rebuild one of the teacher's homes that was also devastated by the hurricane. —Make a Difference Day<sup>1</sup>*

These anecdotes are awe-inspiring and powerful, and they demonstrate how youth can make a difference. There are numerous other stories, but this article is not about them, it is about how you can create one of your own. The question is, How? How can we inspire elementary students to make a difference in the world? How can we encourage them to become more civically engaged? Have you ever noticed how many schools' mission statements include a phrase about creating productive and involved citizens? What are schools doing to accomplish this?

This article describes five ways to contribute to the development of civically engaged citizens based on activities that have been widely used and described in detail over the last ten years:

1. Service-Learning Projects
2. Extracurricular Activities
3. Class Discussions and Debates
4. Role Plays and Simulations
5. Home-School Connections

It is impossible to arrive at a formula or recipe for an educator to follow that will produce an ideal citizen; however, the activities described in this article have been found to yield positive results with young students in various settings across the United States.

## 1. Service-Learning Projects

Many researchers have found that participation in service learning is a strong predictor of civic engagement in later years. It's motivating for students to take concrete action on a cause they believe in.<sup>2</sup> Service-learning is an instructional strategy that ties the study of academic objectives to community service.<sup>3</sup> For example, students can learn about the causes and effects

of famine, as well as how hunger can be prevented. Such a topic links with several social studies curriculum themes, including **VI PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION**, as well as **IX GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**. "Students who donate time or organize a community food drive" as part of such a unit of study "report this as being the most satisfying activity of the project."<sup>4</sup> Students may decide to learn about the activities of an international organization that aims to reduce hunger such as Oxfam International or Heifer International and participate in some of their volunteer activities for children.

1. **Student Voice:** Students want to be heard; they want their thoughts and ideas to be respected. They want to know that they can make a real difference and be involved in the decision-making process. Studies have shown that teachers permitting and including students in student action have resulted in higher levels of civic behavior.<sup>5</sup>
2. **Collective Problem-solving:** It is imperative that after students discuss problems and challenges, they are afforded the opportunity to collectively explore potential solutions or ways to help remedy the situation. They need to hear the ideas and solutions of others. They can build upon them, generate fresh initiatives, learn from other perspectives, and cultivate empathy, tolerance, and communication skills.<sup>6</sup>
3. **Adequate Time:** If student action projects will be employed, it is crucial that students have adequate time to explore, design, implement, and reflect upon the project. In order to foster more sustainable civic engagement, projects should be at least a semester long.<sup>7</sup>



Students from Hot Springs, Arkansas, and a visiting delegation from Hanamaki, Japan, participate in a carbon offset program. Read more at [www.cityhs.net](http://www.cityhs.net) and search on "Sister City Program."

benefit. Studies have shown that students will become more motivated and engaged if it is relevant and meaningful to them.<sup>8</sup> Allow students to choose a goal for their action project that means something to them. You may need to facilitate this because sometimes students can get off course, aiming for a goal that may be unattainable, or are simply uncertain.

## 2. Extracurricular Activities

Four conditions were found to be the most correlated to predicting civic engagement:

1. **Alignment to political knowledge or skills:** There are many prominent and outstanding programs: National History Day, Project Citizen, Model UN, student activist projects, like Students for a Free Tibet, Human Right Activist Projects, Amnesty International Student groups, Environmental Club projects, student government, Habitat for Humanity, and so forth. The key to these before or after school programs is that the students must learn more than the background knowledge to their concern; they must also acquire the skills necessary to behaviorally solve and assist their cause.
2. **Accessibility:** It is integral that any extracurricular activity be accessible to all students. Some students may want to participate in a particular before or after school program but cannot because they have other responsibilities or duties, such as babysitting siblings, working another job, lack of transportation, or involvement in another activity like football or dance.

This is difficult to rectify; however, knowing your students and their interests is pivotal here. Before starting a new club, project, or program, find out who is interested, when the most convenient time is for all students to meet, and schedule accordingly. You could schedule the extracurricular activity

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4. **Reflection:** Research demonstrates that ongoing and relevant reflection in student action projects is another potent predictor of civic engagement. Ongoing reflection means that students pause to consider what they are doing before, during, and after the project. For example, throughout the implementation of the student action project, continually provide opportunity for

reflection. This allows the learner to assess and reassess his or her thoughts, emotions, and behaviors while participating in the student action project.

5. **Meaningful Goals:** Don't do student action projects just for the sake of doing them; make the goal actually produce something meaningful to your students and whomever it will

before and after school if some students would be able to participate earlier rather than later in the day. If your school allows, you could meet during lunch or study hall. These are all ideas for ways to include as many interested parties as possible without excluding them.

3. **Student Interest:** The extracurricular activities must be of interest to the students if you want them to participate and be engaged in the activity.<sup>9</sup> It only makes sense that if we are to encourage civic engagement, forcing students to participate in a before or after school program in which they have absolutely no real interest is not going to cut it. Find out what the students' interests are via interviews, class discussions, or surveys.
4. **Serving the Greater Good:** If extracurricular activities aim to engender civic engagement, then their purpose must benefit the whole group, not just the individual.<sup>10</sup> For example, students in a Yearbook Club must all work together to produce a finished product of which they are all proud and to which they have shared equitably in contributing. A school newspaper or Journalism Club must create an attention-grabbing, accurate, infallible, and interesting newspaper. The Environmental Club must serve the environmental interests of the community or student population by selecting appropriate projects, such as planting trees, picking up trash, painting graffiti-ridden walls, collecting recyclables, and so forth. The point is that the goal of the activity must be directed toward benefiting others, not self-profit.

### 3. Class Discussions and Debates

This is something many teachers employ; however, four elements should be incorporated if this strategy is to contribute to civic engagement:

1. **Connection to current events:** Recent research links class debates and discussions about current events to civic engagement.<sup>11</sup>
2. **There are no wrong answers; just appropriate responses:** Students need to be cognizant that the responses they give during class discussions and debates will be respected and acknowledged. There are not to be any right or wrong answers but appropriate responses. Prepare students by informing them they must substantiate opinions, rationales, and thoughts with evidence and facts, even if these same facts can be used for the opposing side or individual.
3. **Student-led:** Students need to lead the debates and class discussions because that will create stronger ownership, interest, responsibility, and engagement. The teacher's role should be more of the facilitator than a director.

4. **Open and Respectful Dialogue:** Students should be mindful and respectful toward the opinions and beliefs of others. This should be nurtured from the inception of the school year. An atmosphere of security, reassurance, and acceptance should resonate from the classroom during class discussions and debates. Role playing and practicing appropriate responses and behaviors toward others who have an opposing view are essential to cultivating an inviting academic environment.

### 4. Role Plays and Simulations

Students participating in role plays and simulations of the democratic process tend to become interested in civic behavior. There are several programs and curricula that emulate this: Project Citizen, Model UN, and The Game of Politics, for example. These simulations require students to make real life connections to the political process in a fun and engaging way. Everyone in the classroom needs to be involved in this process, not just the actors. Some students may need to serve as the jury or audience. If they do, they are not to be passive participants, but active contributors. Their role may be to take notes on strong and weak points, describe what they observe, ask the actors further questions, make judgments or predictions, and if specific changes were made, discuss how outcomes were modified.

### 5. Home-School Connections

Three activities in the home tended to invoke civic engagement:

1. **Discuss social issues of all sorts.** Discussions at home regarding politics and volunteering reflected future civic engagement for youth.<sup>12</sup>
2. **Be a role model of citizenship.** Children growing up in households where adults served as committed agents emulating civic dispositions demonstrated higher levels of future civic engagement than their disengaged counterparts.<sup>13</sup>
3. **Get involved in your immediate neighborhood.** Students living in a neighborhood that participates in the democratic process are disposed to being more civically engaged.<sup>14</sup>

How can we connect this invaluable information to the school? We can encourage parents and other family members to discuss politics and current events with their children as well as inspire students to discuss current events they learn in school with their families. In an announcement or in a class newsletter, we can furnish information on current events, news programs, and television specials, while urging families to hold a discussion about a covered topic. It might be beneficial to include question prompts for parents to use after viewing a program or news broadcast. We can also invite parents and community members to come into the school and inform students about what

is occurring in their local communities and what they can do to help. Finally, we can design student action projects that center on the community and involve their parents in the project.

### Preserving Social Studies in the Curriculum

Sadly, the opportunity for educators to enact these activities is threatened in many states. In the advent of the federal education law known as NCLB, the time devoted to math and reading in the curriculum has grown at the expense of social studies, the arts, and science.<sup>15</sup> A 2008 report by the Center on Education Policy claims that districts have increased their reading and math instructional time by 43 percent and decreased instructional time in other subjects by 32 percent.<sup>16</sup> This development is depressing and dangerous.

Math and reading are essential, of course, but the Partnership for 21st Century Skills includes among its core subjects economics, geography, history, and government and civics.<sup>17</sup> It is essential that students have curricular opportunities to learn about the political process and civic dispositions. Can we afford to have civically unengaged and apathetic citizens? Educators, parents, and all concerned adults can be petitioning their state and national legislators to

1. Maintain or increase school hours toward social studies instruction.
2. Require mandatory service-learning hours for graduation.
3. Collaborate with colleagues (locally, nationally, or internationally) and local government officials to involve students in more service-learning projects and curricular civic opportunities.

If we as educators want to inspire and instill civic attitudes and behaviors toward our students, we need to model it ourselves!

### Conclusion

*“Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that generation.” —Nelson Mandela*

There is no magical antidote to the problem of declining resources for elementary social studies in many states. This article is not promising a panacea, but we are recommending powerful tools to engender a civically engaged citizenry. We have collected and analyzed contemporary studies on civic engagement, and have identified five strategies: student action projects, extracurricular activities, class discussions and debates, role play and simulations, and home-school connections. Let’s all become civic agents ourselves and inspire the next generation to appreciate their country, their world, and their fellow human beings, for this should be our “service-learning project.”

### Notes

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