



Getting Serious About the Civic Learning Gap

Young people with disabilities must be active participants in today's democratic society. While individuals with disabilities have made dramatic gains across education, employment, and civic leadership during the last 50 years, they have the lowest 2014 NAEP civic outcomes of any student group, they are less likely than their peers without disabilities to demonstrate self-advocacy skills and self-determination, and they have lower voter registration and voter turnout rates.

Our education system must provide students with disabilities access to six commonly agreed upon evidence-based practices in civics education.

Practice 1: Provide direct instruction in government, history, and civics.

Practice 2: Incorporate relevant discussion of local, state, national, and international issues into the classroom.

Practice 3: Implement service-learning opportunities that are embedded into local curriculum and students' instructional experiences.

Practice 4: Provide students with extracurricular learning opportunities that deepen their engagement in the school and general communities.

Practice 5: Encourage student participation in school governance.

Practice 6: Engage students in simulations of democratic processes and opportunities.

Description: Student government and engagement in school governance may provide students their first opportunity to engage in key democratic skills like campaigning and consensus building. It is important that students with disabilities have opportunities for deep engagement in this process — because who is and isn't engaged sends a powerful message to everyone in the school community about shared values and commitment to equity and inclusion.

Getting Serious About the Civic Learning Gap

Disability-Relevant Example: Student governments create liaison positions with the explicit goal of fully engaging and including students with disabilities in governance activities. A recent study highlighted that three out of four youth with disabilities never had the opportunity to write an opinion letter, and four out of five had never had the opportunity to persuade someone of an issue they care about.¹

Key Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions

Challenges: Students with disabilities often experience social exclusion, misunderstanding, and even bullying from their peers. Separate learning experiences may lead to separate concerns about school climate from their peers.

Opportunities: Participation of students with disabilities in school governance can provide explicit opportunities for the practice of self-advocacy skills and self-determination, important corollaries to long-term success for students with disabilities. Students' participation can also contribute to empathy and a culture of greater inclusion among all students – those with and without disabilities.

We ALL Have a Role to Play: Questions for Consideration



For Students: Does your school's student government effectively represent the values and views of students with disabilities like you? If not, what steps can you take to trigger change? Would you consider running for office to ensure that your views and those of your peers are represented?



For Educators: What steps are you taking to prevent bullying and eliminate other barriers that prevent students with disabilities from feeling like they could have a voice in the leadership of the student body?



For Families and Communities: What steps are you taking to mentor students with disabilities in developing the self-advocacy and leadership skills to more effectively impact school culture and policies?



For Policy Makers: How effectively are you modeling inclusive leadership that engages individuals with disabilities within your own decision-making bodies and in those you oversee?