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:** Students often engage in some of their most impactful in-school and out-of-school learning experiences through extracurricular activities. And the benefits of these types of activities can be long-lasting, shaping character development and civic engagement well beyond the school years. A recent study highlighted that less than one-third of students with disabilities had participated in one of 10 common civic-related extracurricular activities. It also found that about three-fourths of students with disabilities never participated in a school newspaper, TV, or other media club. More than 80 percent never participated in a speech or debate club.¹

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Key Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions

**Challenges:** Activity advisors may be ill-prepared to support the unique needs of individuals with disabilities. Implicit bias may communicate to individuals with disabilities that they are not welcome to participate in the activity.

**Opportunities:** Full engagement of students with disabilities in extracurricular activities can have a powerful impact on communicating an overall culture of inclusion. Students with disabilities who struggle in specific areas can demonstrate competencies and strengths in other areas of school engagement, helping them to build confidence and gain positive status among peers and others in the school community.

**We ALL Have a Role to Play: Questions for Consideration**

**For Students:** Is there a club or group that you’d like to be a part of, but feel like you can’t be? What barriers stand in your way and what actions can you take to address those barriers? What help would you like from peers or adults?

**For Educators:** If you’re a manager, coach, or advisor for a school-based extracurricular activity, are students with disabilities included? If they are, do they feel valued? Are there additional steps you can take to create a culture that facilitates inclusion and belonging?

**For Families and Communities:** Are non-school-based activities such as 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and other groups open and accessible to all learners, including those with identified disabilities? What steps can you take to facilitate a sense of belonging and inclusion?

**For Policy Makers:** Are you effectively communicating and enforcing civil rights protections as guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and other federal, state, and local laws? What steps can you take to more effectively communicate and enforce goals related to inclusion and assure access and meaningful participation to students with disabilities?