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:** For students to want to learn history, they have to envision how they, and those like them, can see themselves reflected in that history. States, districts, and schools can promote this sense of engagement and belonging by celebrating accomplishments and hard-won progress of the disability rights movement against discrimination. They can also find ways to honor famous historical individuals with disabilities. A recent study of the exposure of individuals with disabilities to best practices in civics education found that those with disabilities were 38 percent less likely to have had a civics course in high school than their peers.¹

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Key Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions

Challenges: Students with reading disabilities may struggle to access civics curriculum, and the content knowledge gap could be widened if these students are removed from class to receive targeted literacy instruction. Additionally, content is often devoid of characters and stories related to important milestones of the disability rights movement, leading to students with disabilities not seeing people like themselves described in historical events.

Opportunities: Showcasing historical progress in the disability rights movement can inspire young people with and without disabilities to engage in learning.

We ALL Have a Role to Play: Questions for Consideration

For Students: How much do you know about the history of the disability rights movement and how it impacts your life today? How can you learn more, and what is the best way to teach others what you’ve learned?

For Educators: Are there any disparities in access to 1) civics and government courses between students with and without disabilities at your school; 2) course content reflecting the experiences of students with disabilities? If so, what steps can you take to rectify these disparities?

For Families and Communities: How do you explicitly celebrate the accomplishments of the disability and civil rights movements in your household or community?

For Policy Makers: How effectively do civics curriculum and textbooks honor the contributions and struggles that led to gains in the civil and disability rights movements? What steps can you take to elevate these historical developments in curricula and textbooks?