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:** Students with disabilities can learn about civic engagement and democratic processes through direct participation in school activities as well as through simulations. Most important is that they have opportunities to reflect upon who is and is not engaged in decision-making, can set goals and priorities for themselves, and take action to enhance their participation. A recent study highlighted more than four out of five students reported not having had the opportunity to write an action plan to solve a problem.¹

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Disability-Relevant Example: The Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities is discussed as part of a school’s Model UN activity.

Key Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions

**Challenges:** Simulations may inadvertently omit the voice and concerns of individuals with disabilities and other groups. Program curricula and materials (including print resources and technology tools and simulations) might be developed and delivered without assuring accessibility and without embedding core features of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

**Opportunities:** Simulations can help students to envision a society that embraces diversity and inclusion, and can lead to student-initiated action that reflect their aspirations for greater participation in civic engagement.

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

**For Students:** How well do activities such as Model UN or student government reflect the perspectives and experiences of individuals with disabilities? What steps can you take to elevate this perspective?

**For Educators:** How can you help your students gain a deeper understanding of how advantaged and disadvantaged groups have traditionally had different levels of decision-making power within the reflection portion of simulation activities?

**For Families and Communities:** How can you help create out-of-school experiences for students with disabilities to enhance understanding and encourage participation in civic institutions?

**For Policy Makers:** What training and learning opportunities can you provide students and individuals with disabilities to increase their participation in voting and other forms of civic engagement?

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