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: Civics can be learned when students are directly engaged in ways that improve their communities, states, and the nation. It’s important to shift the paradigm away from students with disabilities being seen — and seeing themselves — as “beneficiaries” to being seen as “change agents” who are actively engaged in service. This can be accomplished when service opportunities are tied to learning, and when students have opportunities to reflect on their experiences. A recent study highlighted that those with disabilities were 9 percent less likely to have engaged in service-learning in high school than their peers. More than half had never had the opportunity to volunteer.¹

Key Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions

**Challenges:** Community-based partners may lack training to fully engage individuals with disabilities in service-learning experiences. Privacy issues may preclude the school from sharing information with community partners about activities that involve individuals with disabilities in service-learning activities.

**Opportunities:** Individuals with disabilities can enrich projects and partner organizations with unique vantage points that make the delivery of services more effective.

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

For Students: Do you feel that you can effectively make a positive difference in your community right now? If not, how can this change? Who do you need to approach to have your voice heard and your needs met?

For Educators: How explicit are you in facilitating critical reflection in service-learning experiences that empower traditionally disadvantaged groups in your classroom to examine their experience in light of their particular disability or disadvantage?

For Families and Communities: How effective are service-learning experiences in empowering the inclusive implementation of key elements of service-learning experiences? Are these opportunities of sufficient duration and intensity, are they meaningful to prepare students for civic engagement, are they true to "student voice," and do they include essential features such as reflection and progress monitoring?

For Policy Makers: What technical assistance, professional development, and/or policy guidance exist to support access to high quality service-learning for students with and without disabilities?