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: Civics should not just be learning about the past. Rather, it should include an open discussion and analysis of what is happening in the present and how that could impact the future. It’s important for students with disabilities to have their views solicited and issues important to them discussed as part of this learning. A recent study of exposure to best practices in civics education with individuals with disabilities found that three out of four youth hadn’t had the opportunity to write an opinion letter. And four out of five never had an opportunity to persuade someone of an issue they care about.¹

Key Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions

**Challenges:** Top issues in the news don’t often relate directly to individuals with disabilities. And those individuals who are covered by the media rarely have disabilities.

**Opportunities:** Give all students opportunities to contribute personally relevant content for class discussion. Explicitly spark disability connections in discussions related to current events and curriculum-based content.

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

**For Students:** How effectively do you advocate for the perspectives and concerns of individuals with disabilities in local, state, and national discussions? What support do you need to be a more effective advocate for yourself and others?

**For Educators:** Compared to their peers, how much do your students with disabilities engage in classroom discussions about local, state, national, and international issues? If there is a disparity, what steps can you take to address it?

**For Families and Communities:** What supports do you provide for young people with disabilities to develop their own voice with regard to civics learning and engagement?

**For Policy Makers:** What steps have you taken to ensure that young people with disabilities fully realize their power to be part of the discussions in making their community a better place to live?

Disability-Relevant Example: An interdisciplinary science and civics unit discusses the implications of climate change and natural disasters. Educators facilitate discussion about how disaster relief efforts affect individuals with disabilities.

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