



Overview

Illinois has a historic opportunity to restore the role of our schools in educating our next generation of citizens. Legislation has passed the General Assembly with strong, bi-partisan majorities that will require Illinois high schools to provide a civics course. Illinois is one of only eleven states that does not require students to complete a civics or government course in order to graduate. As Representative Deborah Conroy (D-Villa Park) stated in sponsoring the legislation, “Many students graduate without even basic knowledge of current events and how to become active members of their communities.” The legislation, which awaits Governor Rauner’s signature, will help fill this civic education gap, and bring civics back to all of our schools.

The Need for Civic Education

Illinois’ civic health is ailing, and our youngest residents graduate high school ill-prepared for informed, effective, and lifelong engagement in our democracy.

- The Nation’s Report Card (NAEP) revealed that only 23% of eighth graders are proficient in civics.
- Illinois Millennials (18-29) are less likely to vote in local elections, speak to or exchange favors with neighbors, or work within their communities to solve problems than young people in other states.
- 70% of Illinoisans overall have little to no trust in state government.
- Minority and low income students have less access to quality civic education, contributing to a lifelong civic participation gap.
- A 2014 study by the [Paul Simon Institute](#) show 79.5% of Illinoisans favor a high school civics course requirement for graduation.

We Know Quality Civic Education Works

Best practices in civic education, including formal classroom instruction, discussion of current events, and service learning are proven to develop students’ civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

- Students exposed to high school civics courses exhibit greater civic knowledge. The quantity and recency of civics course exposure predicts civic knowledge.
- When Florida recently introduced a required civics course (in middle school), 61% of Florida students achieved proficiency in civics, compared to 23% of middle school students nationally in the most recent NAEP Civics Assessment.
- In a national survey of youth ages 18-24 after the 2012 presidential election, those with quality high school civic learning experiences were more likely to understand campaign issues, form political opinions, recall facts about U.S. political system, and vote.
- A study of Chicago high school students demonstrates classroom learning experiences and service-learning opportunities are the primary contributors to building students’ civic engagement commitments.

We also have examples of many schools across the state that are already implementing high quality civic education. In the past decade, the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition (ICMC) has recognized 31 Illinois high schools as [Democracy Schools](#). With the mission to provide high quality civic learning opportunities for all students, Democracy Schools emphasize civic learning through development of professional faculty and staff capacity and foster a school climate that nurtures and models civic character and build relationships within the surrounding community.

Additionally, the Global Citizenship Initiative (GCI) with Chicago Public Schools is in full swing in more than 30 high schools, offering a civics course, multiple service-learning experiences, and student voice committees that meet regularly with the principal to discuss common issues of concern.

The Proposed Legislation

The Illinois General Assembly passed legislation ([HB 4025](#)) by strong, bi-partisan majorities in both chambers that will require a high school civics course for graduation. HB 4025 implements the principal [recommendation of the Illinois Task Force on Civic Education](#) which was established by the legislature to study the status of civic education in Illinois and make recommendations on how to improve it. The Task Force was comprised of legislators, educators, school administrators, and community leaders from across the state.

Implementing the New Legislation

In order to support statewide implementation of a new high school civics course, there is a need for teacher professional development serving all regions of Illinois. Teachers, schools, and districts in some areas outside of the Chicago region are underserved when it comes to professional development opportunities, and more resources may be required in these areas.

Fortunately, Illinois has a very robust community of corporations, foundations and non-profit organizations that actively support civic education and youth civic engagement. Nearly 50 organizations are already active statewide and are poised to assist with training efforts to ensure all areas of Illinois are covered. This work is supported by significant philanthropic contributions from corporations and foundations in Illinois and will be extremely helpful in supporting implementation of the civics course requirement. However, there may still be needs for additional resources in some parts of the state.

To ensure adequate support for professional development activities, the corporate and foundation communities are creating a new public-private partnership including an implementation fund of at least \$500,000 annually for a three year transition period. Together with existing programs, there will be well over \$1 million annually invested in quality civic education professional development during the implementation period.

The fund will be coordinated by the [Robert R. McCormick Foundation](#), in collaboration with other funders, and the Illinois State Board of Education and its regional offices. Potential professional development providers include non-profit organizations specializing in civic education, university partners, and regional offices of education. Grants will focus on programs that are aligned with best practices in civic learning and will include related program evaluation.

Time to Act – Contact Governor Rauner

- Contact Governor Rauner and urge him to sign HB 4025, a bill to #BringCivicsBack to Illinois high schools
 - Email: <http://www.illinois.gov/gov/ContactUs/Pages/VoiceAnOpinion.aspx>
 - Phone: 217-782-0244

For more information, contact Shawn Healy, Chair, Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, 312-445-5174 or SHealy@IllinoisCivics.org.