



## **Democracy at a Crossroads: Our Nation's Future Needs Civic Learning Now!**

On September 21 in Washington, D.C., a diverse group of civics enthusiasts came together to discuss the state of civic learning in our nation. The event, “Democracy at a Crossroads,” centered on the intersection of civic learning and democracy. Panelists included educators, students, academics, funders, practitioners, congresspeople, and a supreme court justice. The event was a collaboration between [iCivics](#), the [Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools](#), the [Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life](#), and the [Lou Frey Institute](#), with support from the [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#) and the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#) and [Robert R. McCormick Foundation](#).

Over 30 [partners and champions](#) supported the event and made concrete commitments to ensure the conversations and work continue after the summit. An influential ambassador network signed on to pledge their commitment to raising awareness and leading the conversation about the need for greater civic education. Ambassadors include Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (Ret.); former president Jimmy Carter; comedian Stephen Colbert; rapper and actor Chris “Ludacris” Bridges; actresses Whoopi Goldberg, America Ferrera, and Alyssa Milano; NBA star Shane Battier; philanthropic leaders Jean Case and John Bridgeland; and political leaders David Skaggs, George Nethercutt, and Mayor Marty Walsh.

This document offers a snapshot of the conversations that took place. For additional information about civic learning, check out the resources list below. For more about the event, visit the summit website at [civxsummit.org](#), follow [#civxnow](#), and make sure to sign the [CivX pledge](#). Much of the summit was recorded and links to the video archives will be added to this document when available; in the meantime, [watch videos](#) that were recorded for the summit about the power of civic learning.

### **Civic Learning Resources (Released in conjunction with the Summit)**

- [The Republic is Still at Risk--and Civics is Part of the Solution](#), a white paper by Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg
- [The PACE Civic Learning Primer](#), an introductory resource by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement
- [Young People’s Views and Engagement With Democracy and Civic Learning as a Solution](#), an infographic from iCivics

## Additional Civic Learning Contextual Resources

- [Democracy Counts: A Report on U.S. College and University Student Voting](#) by the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education. (Coverage of the study [here](#).)
- [Illinois Civic Blueprint](#), a report by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation on its landmark civic initiative in the state of Illinois
- **Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools Reports:** [Guardian of Democracy](#) (2011) and [The Civic Mission of Schools](#) (2003)
- [Listing of Civic Learning Programs and Resources available to classrooms nationwide](#), provided by the Civics Renewal Network, Annenberg Public Policy Center

**Session Summaries:** What follows are some high-level notes and quotes from sessions that took place at the summit. They are attempts to capture sentiments shared, but may not be fully representative of the depth or breadth of conversation that took place. Omissions or errors are unintentional; citations for data quoted by panelists are provided where available.

## State of our Democracy: What's at Stake?

*Panelists: Danielle Allen, Director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics and James Bryant Conant University Professor, Harvard University; and Diana Hess, Dean of the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Daniel Stid, Director of the Madison Initiative, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation (moderated by Judy Woodruff, News Anchor, PBS News Hour)*

- The session emphasized the reality of our nation's civic landscape: "we are building a ship while sailing it."
- We've sorted ourselves into entrenched camps; the challenge we face is not partisanship but *hyper*partisanship. Partisanship has always been a part of our country--healthy and necessary part of checks and balances, but hyperpartisanship breaks that balance
- Our 20-year drive towards STEM education has negatively impacted civic engagement: STEM students are less civically engaged ([40% gap](#) between humanities and STEM students)
- We are all aware of the need to bridge difference, create political friendship, and this can begin in schools, by introducing contradictory viewpoints to students. When we avoid debate and discussion, it makes it easier to retreat to our camps
- Our nation's political climate has changed dramatically and very quickly; our schools must teach "political climate change" and media literacy.
- Students need to learn how to be effective civic agents in this hybrid environment: online and in person.
- Despite challenges, there are reasons for hope: individuals taking personal responsibility in their own spheres of influence. Also, "business as usual" is just no longer acceptable to vast swathes of people. Change is afoot.

## **Policy Innovation: Getting results from Renewing a Commitment to Civic Education**

Panelists: *Hon. Bob Graham, Former Governor and United States Senator, Florida; Shawn Healy, Director Democracy Programs, Robert R. McCormick Foundation; Peter Levine, Associate Dean of Research, Former Director of CIRCLE, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University; Rachel Roti, Civic Teacher, Washington High School. (Moderated by: Michael Smith, Director of Youth Opportunity Programs and Executive Director, My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Alliance)*

- There are not ultimate victories in politics. You may win/lose occasionally, but don't leave the field.
- This is a critical time for America, but we've been through periods like this in the past (Lincoln's Land Grant College and Roosevelt's GI Bill)--we've gotten through before and can again.
- Civic education cannot be a partisan issue; we need to build a coalition around civic education
- How can we make civic education a policy priority like STEM and other initiatives? Show leaders why innovative civics is so important
- In Illinois, teachers and students mobilized and reached out to legislators to advocate for civic learning. Civics courses emphasize knowledge, skills, and dispositions
- According to Rachel Roti: 600 students (freshman and junior level) are learning civics. It creates an opportunity and a space to talk about issues that affect them on a daily basis. "Students don't think world history applies to them, but civics does."
- The solution isn't just about policy, but about follow-through. It's tempting for a policymaker to create a course or a test, but there is no evidence that a quick fix works; it's not sustainable. Implementation is critical--whatever you do, you have to follow through.
- Professional support for teachers must be a part of the policy discussion

## **How Civic Learning Got its Groove Back: Demand, Proof and Innovation in Today's Classrooms**

*Charles Best, Founder and CEO, DonorsChoose.org; Walter Parker, Professor of Social Studies Education, University of Washington, Seattle; Jeffrey Rosen, President & Chief Executive Officer, National Constitution Center. (Moderated by: Judge Marjorie Rendell, Third Circuit, United States Court of Appeals)*

- Civic learning cannot start too early; it must start in the earliest elementary grades
- Examples of civic learning innovation: National Constitution Center's [Interactive Constitution](#), Dr. Walter Parker's [re-design](#) of AP Civic Course
- Great strides have been made in civic learning innovation, but schools are not taking advantage of these innovations early enough
- Teachers are hungry for innovative civic learning in the classroom

- DonorsChoose (essentially a marketplace connecting teachers to donors interested in funding classroom innovations) has seen a 200% surge in teacher requests for civic education projects in their classrooms since the 2016 election.
- While we need our education systems to make room for innovative civic learning, we need to listen to what our teachers are telling us their classrooms need...which is more innovative civic learning.

### **Civic Learning Across the Divide**

Panelists: *Brian Brady, President, Mikva Challenge; Hon. John King, Former Secretary and President & CEO, United States Department of Education and The Education Trust; Robert Pondiscio, Senior Fellow and Vice President of External Affairs, Thomas B. Fordham Institute; Gary Schmitt, Resident Scholar and Director of the Program on American Citizenship, American Enterprise Institute. (Moderator: Stefanie Sanford, Chief of Global Policy & External Relations, The College Board)*

- The knowledge won't just bubble up. Instead, we need the trifecta: action, skills, and knowledge. Brain science indicates that information goes into our hard drive when we're engaged.
- The panel emphasized the importance of developing empathy. To develop empathy, must engage with people with whom you disagree
- Civics is about power and how we make decisions. Are we teaching core knowledge of civics without teaching power dynamics at play?
- Students are not the future. They're the present. Their challenges are real now. Democracy can be a matter of life and death: good schools, good hospitals, safe communities
- [2/3 of American high school students](#) graduate reading below proficiency. That's a civic ed crisis.
- Informal analysis of 100 largest school district's mission statements: most name college/career readiness as part of mission, only 2 named civics. We must prepare students to be part of our economy, but also our democracy
- Empathy can't be taught as a unit; students must see through the eyes of another, including reading books by diverse authors. In fact, civic learning should be taught throughout the curricula not only as a subject.
- We have no future if we fail to educate low-income kids and kids of color.
- Resources in American society follow more affluent kids; there is stark resource inequity, which furthers divides in our nation. We must resource kids in school together.

### **Spotlight: Next Generation Democracy**

Panelists: *Mabel Abascal, Social Studies Teacher, West Miami Middle School; Shane Battier, Two-Time NBA Champion and Co-Founder, Miami Heat and Take Charge Foundation; Herminia Sanchez, Student, Farragut High School; Zac Schroepfer, Student, Former Leon County Schools (Moderator: Steven Olikara, Founder & President, Millennial Action Project)*

- Democracy is an active form of government--it only works when people participate

- Millennials are the most civically engaged and socially idealistic generation; there is a stark disconnect between idealism and lack of trust in confidence. Civic education can close that gap.
- American [distrust government at record levels](#), and also distrust their fellow citizens to participate in governance. According to the Pew Research Center, “Just 34% say they have ‘very great’ or a ‘good deal’ of trust and confidence in the political wisdom of the American people. Fully 63% have ‘not very much’ confidence or ‘no confidence at all’” (Pew Research Center, 2015)
- What’s motivating student to act? When people can connect policy with their lives and colleagues’ lives.
- “I might not remember the powerpoint slides, but I will remember the opportunity I had to have a mock trial.” -Zac Schroepfer, student

### **Making the Case for Civic Education: Why We Must Act Now**

*Panelists: Victoria Reggie Kennedy, Co-Founder and President of the Board, Edward M. Kennedy Institute; Hon. Ed Rendell, Former Governor, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*

- If kids don’t receive civic education before adulthood (age 17-18), it’s often too late
- When we teach history, we have to make it more than a statistic, we need to make it come alive
- Kids will respond if you treat them intellectually and ask tough questions
- Political courage must run deeper than winning elections
- 1 of 10 students think the right to own a pet [is in the constitution](#).
- If people view our politics as broken, how do you get them interested? By telling them they can fix it. And they can.

### **Digital Engagement: Gaming, News, and Young People**

*Panelists: Louise Dube, Executive Director, iCivics; Joseph Kahne, Professor and Dutton Presidential Chair, The University of California, Riverside; Nichole Pinkard, Associate Professor and Founder, DePaul University College of Computing and Digital Media and Digital Youth Network (Moderator: Greg Toppo, Contributor and Senior Writer, USA Today)*

- We misunderstand how young people use and relate to media.
- Play is important, but connecting is most important. One way to do that is through community. And when you’re connected, then everything you do has more relevance.
- Schools are the way to access students—across race, ideological, and other lines
- We need to think about distribution channels. Thru teachers or FB. These games should come standard on ipads, etc.
- The game is effective, but the real effectiveness comes through teachers. Need to give them tools and capacity to have these conversations across diversity.

- Educators leverage the power of the game. Also connected to parents and community and ecosystem. To articulate core value of civic concepts.
- We in education tend to downplay the importance of play

### **Laying the Groundwork for Equity in Our Democracy**

Panelists: *Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor, CUNY Graduate Center; Michelle Morales, Chief Executive Officer, Mikva Challenge; Michael Petrilli, President, Thomas B. Fordham Institute (Moderated by Erica Williams Simon, award-winning content creator and host of “My Peoples”)*

- It is disingenuous to talk about democracy without talking about justice
- Important to distinguish difference between equality of experience and equity in outcomes and explore what institutional responsibility is associated with each.
- Values of opportunity and fairness often resonate across political ideologies
- The idea of equity must include who is invited or allowed to ask the tough questions in schools and of schools-- students of color often do not experience same access or permission to ask questions without being perceived as disrespectful or challenging
- When we have inequitable practice in what we teach students and the experiences provided to them, that’s when the seeds of inequity are planted, and they will continue beyond school
- School climate and policies are critical to fostering voice, participation, and access

### **A Conversation with Justice Sonia Sotomayor** *(moderated by Nia-Malika Henderson, Senior Political Reporter, CNN)*

- The law is a bare minimum, but it is so critical. It sets the foundation for how we interact and help one another and how we create a more perfect union. Morality plays a role as well.
- Civic education is how we inspire students to be a part of our country.
- When discussing the role of television cameras at the Supreme Court, the Justice remarked that she changed her mind on this issue and is now against television in the Court because television media is about sound bytes, and sound bytes risk cutting off conversations that need more consideration.
- Literacy and civic ed go hand in hand. “Books taught me there was a world outside of where I was living.”
- Civic life requires us to begin from the foundational view that we all have good intentions. No matter how much we disagree, we are equally in love with those principles. But that disagreement is not from a lack of good faith. If you can start there, look at another person, and understand that no matter how much you disagree, you will find something good in them.
- In response to a question from the audience, Justice Sotomayor responded: “Justice doesn’t do. People do. What are you going to do?” To see more of this exchange, check out [this video](#) (password: civics).

- By definition: if you come to court, it's because the question or problem exists in a grey area--because of the facts of the case are on the margin of the law. You're asking the judge to decide which side they fall on, and decide what the new boundary of the law is. That's life. There's very little in life that's black and white. In every choice you make, you're giving something up.
- Civics is not just a course, but an ethos schools must promote, as well as schools and communities