

## 'Action Civics' Enlists Students in Hands-On Democracy Through 'action civics' lessons, students become activists in their communities

By [Catherine Gewertz](#)

The 8th graders in a civics class in Oklahoma may be too young to vote, but they've learned how to bring about change in their government anyway. Because of their work, lawmakers in the state Capitol are considering a bill that would require schools to provide students with accurate information about HIV and AIDS.

The story of how these teenagers turned anger into legislative action is one that's being replicated in varying forms around the country as an activist brand of civics education gains a foothold in classrooms.

The name of this instructional model—"action civics"—signals its mission: not only to teach students how their government works but to harness that knowledge to launch them into collective action on issues they care about. And its lofty goal is to revitalize democracy with a new generation of informed, engaged citizens.

Using the action-civics approach recently, middle school students in Anaheim, Calif., researched the water quality in their drinking fountains and persuaded their principal to install new filtration systems in an upcoming school renovation.

One group of students in Chicago persuaded the local transit agency to move a bus stop to a safer spot, while another started structured dialogues—and basketball games—between students and police officers to build mutual trust and understanding. Teenagers at an alternative school in Norman, Okla., immersed themselves in the nuances of school funding and won an \$11 million bond issue to renovate their school. Students in South Los Angeles surveyed homelessness among their peers, convened social-service agencies on campus to publicize their resources, and opened a food pantry on campus.

### **Teenagers Aim for Capitol**

In Del City, Okla., the HIV-education bill got its start last fall in the classroom of Aaron Baker, who had begun using an action-civics curriculum designed by Generation Citizen,

which works with schools in six states. The process began with his civics class weighing dozens of social issues to see what they cared most about.

The class decided to focus on LGBTQ issues. They'd noticed outdated information about HIV transmission in their instructional materials and felt angry that they were being misled. They traced that information to a 1987 state curriculum law that said gay or promiscuous people, intravenous drug users, and contaminated blood products were "primarily responsible" for transmission of the virus, and that abstinence was the only way to prevent it.

The students did more research about HIV and AIDS and invited guest speakers to brief them, including a Democratic state representative who'd tried two years earlier to get a bill passed to update instruction on those topics.

The students ultimately connected with another representative, Republican Marcus McEntire, who worked with them to draft [House Bill 1018](#). It replaces the outdated language with a requirement that students receive "medically accurate" instruction that defines HIV and AIDs and includes "analysis" of HIV transmission and prevention methods.

As of early March, the measure had been passed by the House and was awaiting consideration in the state Senate.

### **'I Can Still Make Changes'**

One of Baker's students at Del Crest Middle School, DeAngelo Irvin, 15, said he was surprised that state lawmakers responded to his emails when he reached out to them on behalf of his class. The experience has changed his view of his role in society. "Last year, I didn't think I could really change anything, that anyone would care what I think," he said. But working on the bill "says that I have a voice, and even though I'm not old enough to vote, I can still make changes."

Another student, Reagan Hare, 14, said she didn't think adults would listen to young teenagers. "Adults want to dismiss us, like, 'You're a kid and you don't know what you're talking about.' But sometimes we do," she said. "And I actually did something."

Action civics has been welcomed by educators, funders, and policymakers who worry that dull, textbook-and-lecture approaches lack the spark to transform Generation Z into the

engaged, informed citizenry that democracy needs to address societal problems and heal political divides.

The dominant, book-learning approach hasn't produced stellar results so far. Only [23 percent of 8th graders scored "proficient" or better](#) on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, in 2014. But advocates believe that blending action with book study can change that.

"Civics is transformational when we teach it as a lab and not just a sedentary class," said Brian Brady, the president of Mikva Challenge, which provides action-civics training and curriculum for schools in 11 cities. "It's just good project-based learning."

Some activists and scholars, however, worry that schools could shortchange the nuts-and-bolts academic study that gives students a crucial foundation in how government works.

Chester E. Finn Jr., the president emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative-leaning think tank, said instructional priorities shaped by accountability, labor-market demands, and other forces can create a worrisome gap in civics instruction if teachers aren't careful.

### **Overlooking the Basics?**

"At a time when subjects other than math and reading are getting squeezed, and social studies in particular is getting short shrift relative to STEM and social-emotional [instruction], civics and history have a very limited purchase on the time and attention of kids and teachers," he said.

### **About the Citizen Z Project**

U.S. public education is rooted in the belief by early American leaders that the most important knowledge to impart to young people is what it means to be a citizen. If America is experiencing a civic crisis now, as many say it is, schools may well be failing at that job. To better understand the role of education in the current crisis, *Education Week* consulted experts, visited classrooms, and conducted surveys. This article is part of that ongoing effort. Look for more pieces from our [Citizen Z project](#) in the months ahead.

"If, within that limited time, we are giving top priority to action civics, then I do worry that kids will never really learn the basics of how government works and why."

Others are concerned that action civics can too easily use students to further adults' political agendas. A [2017 study of the "new civics" on college campuses](#) raised concerns that student projects were serving exclusively leftist causes. Peter Wood, the president of the National Association of Scholars, which did that study, said he worries that similar dynamics could unfold in the K-12 sector.

"Trying to turn children into activists prematurely is not an especially good basis for a civic education," he said. "It might be a good basis for adults to gain a chorus of supporters. But that's just to say that it's manipulative."

Brady of the Mikva Challenge said such concerns are misplaced. He said students have done projects focused on liberal causes, such as gun control, but also conservative causes, such as right-to-life and school choice. But the vast majority of projects have "no ideological bent" other than enabling students to build the knowledge and agency to solve problems that affect their daily lives, Brady said.

The idea of getting students actively involved in learning is hardly new; its roots date back nearly a century to John Dewey's push for experiential learning. In civics, some schools have used participatory models to bring civics to life, such as casting students as lawmakers who draft and debate legislation.

In too many neighborhoods, however, what passes for civics teaching is a semester of lectures, readings, and class discussions that are unconnected to current issues or issues that feel relevant to students.

A recent form of experiential civics is service learning, which became popular in the early 2000s and encourages—or in some cases, requires—students to help out in their communities. While some of those projects are meaningful, and clearly connected to students' classroom studies of how government works—such as volunteering in a soup kitchen as students study poverty—others, like filing papers in a dentist's office, can be trivial and unrelated.

Action civics, the latest iteration of experiential civics, took shape in the last 15 years, out of frustration with the way social studies was sidelined by the math-and-English focus of accountability and with the perceived limitations of service learning.

Many schools received federal grants to support service learning, so they tended to encourage student projects that were decidedly nonpolitical, said Shawn Healy, who oversees work on civic education and engagement at the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, which provides financial support to the Mikva Challenge and other action-civics projects.

That depoliticization often meant that students didn't work on the issues that are most important and relevant to them and didn't get the chance to see a role for themselves in solving societal problems, he said. The branching off of action civics from service learning was among a flurry of activity in the 2000s aimed at revitalizing civics instruction and elevating the role student action should play in it.

A [2003 paper that outlined six key practices in civics education](#) drew a lot of attention, in part for calling on schools to let students "engage in meaningful work on serious public issues" and "pursue political responses to problems."

### **Laying the Groundwork**

[In 2010, six organizations came together](#) to create those kinds of approaches to civics instruction, [developing a framework](#) and [process for instruction](#). Central to that work was the idea that volunteering wasn't enough. Instead of just serving in a soup kitchen, for instance, students should study the root causes of homelessness, identify the local government systems empowered to improve it, and research strategies that might bring about those improvements.

[Influential reports in 2011](#) and [2017](#) sustained that conversation in the field by expanding on student-action themes. A [guidebook for putting good civics practices—](#)including student action—into practice came out in 2014.

Many organizations now offer programs and curriculum aimed at integrating the old-school book learning about civics with newer-age action projects. Experts advise that both are needed, in appropriate balance. Encouraging students to venture into community projects without a solid education in the government systems they'll confront is misguided, they caution.

"We don't want students to go in blindly on something. It won't help them," said Amy Curran, the executive director of Generation Citizen programs in Oklahoma. "Anyone can

be upset about something. Understanding how the government works, [and] what students can do and can't do in those systems, is part of learning government and civics."

The story of just how much Reagan Hare, one of the students who worked on the HIV-education bill in Oklahoma, can influence her state government is still being written. But no matter how it ends, she said, she's learned an important lesson about her own potential.

"If [the bill] doesn't make it [into law], I'll be disappointed," she said, "but we still got it as far as we did, and I feel like we've done something."

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