

A Major New CEE Initiative
**Securing the Future of Our Democracy:
Preparing Students for Civic Participation**



The 2016 presidential election campaign underscored some very worrisome trends in the present state of our democracy: the extreme polarization of the electorate; the dismissal of people with opposing views; the failure of many voters (and, quite often, the candidates) to focus on substantive policy issues; and the widespread acceptance and circulation of one-sided and factually erroneous information.

Other troubling trends have been present for decades: the proportion of eligible voters who actually vote is substantially lower than in most other developed countries, the number of citizens who actively participate in local community activities has dramatically declined, and Americans are increasingly neglecting basic civic responsibilities like jury service.

The trends put in such stark relief by the recent election and its aftermath raise the question of whether the schools have been fulfilling their critical civic mission to prepare young people to be good citizens, capable of safeguarding our democracy and stewarding our nation toward a greater realization of its democratic values. The ability of the schools to carry out their traditional civic-preparation role has also been thrown into doubt by the large “civic empowerment gap” that exists today between middle-class and affluent white students and many students in poverty and students of color because of the differing opportunities for effective civic preparation that are available in the schools they attend.

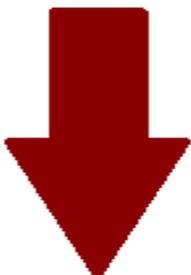
Preparation for civic participation has historically been one of the fundamental purposes of public education in the United States. In New York and most other states, civic preparation is also a core part of students’ right to education under the state constitution.

Evidence of Lack of Effective Civic Preparation

- Only 23% of a national sample of 18 year olds performed at or above a “proficient” level on the 2014 civics exam administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).
- A study by the Center on Education Policy found that 71% of districts reported cutting back time on other subjects to make more space for reading and math instruction. Social studies was the part of the curriculum that was most frequently cited as the instructional area in which these reductions occurred.
- The Center for Educational Equity’s study of the impact of cuts in school funding in New York State on students in the years following the 2008 recession found that budget cuts had forced most high

schools in high-need areas to eliminate their civics-related afterschool offerings, including community-service programs, student government, school newspaper, and programs like Model UN and moot court.

- Only 9% of Advanced Placement high school students and only 7% of college students were able to distinguish between reliable and unreliable internet sources in a study of 8,000 students by the Stanford History Education Group.



Additional Factors Contributing to the Decline in Civic Preparation

- The tendency of many schools to focus on test preparation in basic reading and math to the detriment of the humanities, social studies, civics, and the development of higher-order thinking skills and habits of mind;
- A loss of faith in traditional institutions, stemming from their failure to respond adequately to the rights articulated, and expectations raised by the civil rights era, and to the inequities that have resulted from globalization and automation;
- Teacher and administrator reluctance to discuss controversial issues and ideas that must be confronted to develop a healthy skepticism that can sustain a belief in the ultimate value of societal institutions and to overcome political polarization;
- The fast spread of the use of new media, among students and adults, and the slower pace of skill-building to use them critically and responsibly;
- Inequitable and inadequate funding, especially for schools that serve large numbers of students in poverty, both in urban and rural areas; and
- The failure of many schools, particularly those serving large numbers of students in poverty and students of color, to provide and promote experiential learning opportunities, the arts and extracurricular activities that foster civic empowerment and develop interpersonal skills.

As a nation, we must ensure that our schools can rise to the challenge of preparing students effectively for civic participation under contemporary conditions. Despite their current shortcomings, schools continue to be the only major institutional venue in our society in which people from diverse political and social backgrounds come together in a setting where rational discussion and understanding of differing views can be prized and rewarded.

Preparing students for meaningful civic engagement in the 21st century will require approaches that recognize current political, social, economic, and cultural realities and how they are playing out in our schools and classrooms. For civic education to succeed, schools must be able to create environments that respect and harness both pluralism and individualism; provide equitable learning opportunities; adopt new pedagogical approaches that promote civic agency, critical inquiry, and participatory experiences; and capitalize on the positive possibilities of the internet and the new media.

Substantial further research must be undertaken to identify effective practices that now exist and that can be developed, and to understand what stands in the way of their widespread use. Barriers resulting from the lack of knowledge or data, policy impediments, and legal-rights violations will require public engagement, policy development, advocacy, and legal action to communicate solutions to educators,

parents, students and the public at large and to convince policymakers to adopt the laws, regulations and funding reforms that are necessary to accomplish these ends.

CEE's Action Plan

Serious attention to these critical issues is urgently needed. For this reason, the Center for Educational Equity is initiating a major new Civic Preparation Project to respond to each of these needs. This project builds on CEE's unique experience and expertise in theoretical and applied research, policy analysis, public engagement, and litigation. Specifically, CEE intends to implement, over the next two years, the interrelated activities outlined below.



Research

Initial scholarly research. In 2016, as a fellow at the Edmond J. Safra Institute for Ethics at Harvard University, CEE executive director Michael A. Rebell undertook a broad literature review and legal analysis and wrote a book that discusses in detail the importance of civic preparation for maintaining a democratic society and explores how and why most schools are currently failing to meet this challenge. He proposes specific reforms that all schools—and especially schools serving students in poverty and students of color—can and must take to prepare students to be capable citizens in a diverse, rapidly changing, media-oriented 21st-century society. Rebell also outlines how the federal and state courts can take the initiative in inducing schools to make civic preparation a high priority. *Flunking Democracy: Schools, Courts and Civic Participation* will be published by the University of Chicago Press in the winter of 2018.

School-based field studies. CEE is currently analyzing data from a pilot study of six public high schools in affluent, average-wealth, and high-poverty school districts in the New York metropolitan area to examine the educational resources and practices necessary for preparation for capable civic participation. This study will identify the problems and obstacles these different schools encounter in preparing all students effectively for civic participation, strategies they employ, and the resources and policies that are needed for them to accomplish this task effectively. CEE intends to expand this study over the next 6 to 18 months in order to undertake a more comprehensive analysis of these issues in a representative sample of schools in New York State.

New scholarly research. Together with other scholars at Teachers College, CEE intends to undertake studies on issues regarding the link between specific educational initiatives and improved voter participation and civic engagement rates; effective civics-education strategies for different kinds of schools; methods for overcoming the civic-participation gap experienced by students of color, students living in poverty, and students in rural areas; and developing appropriate metrics for assessing the effectiveness of specific civic-participation programs.

Collaborative projects. Working with the Learning Policy Institute, CEE prepared a primer on civic preparation in the schools that was presented at a conference of the National Conference of State Legislators in September 2017. Collaborative projects with CIRCLE, Tufts University, the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition and other national organizations are also under consideration.

Public Engagement and Advocacy



Public-Dialogue Series. In 2018, CEE intends to initiate a year-long public-engagement process throughout the state of New York. In the first phase, students, educators, parents and members of the public will take part in facilitated conversations in 8 to 10 locations throughout the state. The tentative main discussion questions include, “In today’s world, what does an effective civic participant need to know and do,” and “How can schools prepare students to function productively as civic participants?”

In the second phase, 4-5 representatives from each of the regions will attend a two-day conference in Albany to engage in extensive dialogues on common themes and differences in responses around the state. The delegates will also be trained and encouraged to return to their home communities and initiate further community conversations on these issues. CEE publications documenting the process and the outcomes of this work will be shared locally and nationally in order to contribute to the knowledge base and help guide similar efforts in additional regions and states.

Policy Advocacy. CEE will (1) convene a statewide task force of educational organizations, advocacy organizations and civic groups to develop a platform for civic-preparation issues and develop proposals for specific reform of educational laws, regulations and policies in New York State, based in part on the results of our research and input from public-engagement participants; (2) enter into discussions with the New York State Education Department, legislators, and members of the governor’s staff to implement these proposals; (3) support efforts by parents and students to motivate school leaders to give adequate attention to education for civic participation in their local schools, and to motivate policy makers to implement the necessary reforms; 4) working with students, parents and tech-based career-development organizations, develop a mobile application that will be used by thousands of teens and parents to learn about and advocate for the civic-preparation opportunities; and (5) build networks with collaborating organizations in New York State and nationally to identify shared civic-participation goals and coordinate advocacy efforts.

Legal Action



Especially because of the current paralysis of many of our political institutions, the impetus and sustained support for these profound and much-needed changes may need to come from the courts. The equity and adequacy decisions that have been issued by more than two dozen state courts, and the U.S. Supreme Court’s repeated linking of equal educational opportunity and the maintenance of a democratic society, provide important precedents for judicial action to enforce a right of all students to meaningful education for citizenship.

In its 1973 decision in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, the U.S. Supreme Court stated that all American students should be provided the basic level of education that they need to become capable voters and to exercise their First Amendment free-speech rights. The Court left open for another day the question of what that basic level of education should be. The New York Court of Appeals and a majority of other state supreme courts throughout the country have specifically held that preparing students to function productively as civic participants is the primary (or *a* primary) purpose

of public education, but none of these courts has been asked to take steps to implement these rulings.

CEE—working with Columbia Law School, Teachers College, a major national law firm, and collaborating attorneys from around the country—is currently researching and intends to file in 2018 a federal lawsuit that will seek to establish a federal right to an education adequate to prepare students to be capable citizens.

Dissemination



Conferences: Over the next two years, CEE will convene a series of conferences at Teachers College, and with national organizations, to engage (1) educators and researchers in discussing best practices for preparing students for civic participation; and (2) judges and lawyers in considering goals and strategies for pursuing federal and state litigations.

Publications: CEE will prepare and disseminate books, position papers, research briefs, articles, blog posts, and audio and visual materials that explain the benefits for students, parents and the public at large of adequate civic preparation in the schools and provide specific policy recommendations for reform of current practices. CEE will also develop and maintain an active website, and Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, to inform and engage with the public on all of these issues.

Media outreach: We expect to participate regularly in television, talk radio, op-eds, and briefings for journalists related to the full range of CEE’s research, advocacy, public-engagement and litigation activities.

The Center for Educational Equity (CEE) is a nonprofit policy and research center at Teachers College, Columbia University. CEE champions the right of children everywhere, whatever the current political and economic climate, to a meaningful opportunity to graduate from high school prepared for college, careers, and civic participation. We work to define and secure the full range of resources, supports, and services necessary to guarantee this right to children in poverty and children of color currently being denied this opportunity.

Founded in 2005 by educational law scholar Michael A. Rebell, who successfully litigated the landmark school-funding lawsuit, CFE v. State of New York, CEE pursues systems change through a dynamic, interrelated program of research, legal analysis, policy development, coalition building, curriculum development, and advocacy to advance this agenda at the federal, state, and local levels.