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YMCA Youth and Government: Results of Impact Assessment

*A report prepared especially for the
YMCA Youth and Government
Program Association*

by Randell E. Trammell, Ed.D.



Table of Contents

Foreword.....	4
State of Civic Education	5
American civic education is failing	5
Evidence of decline.	6
Reasons for decline.	7
Political response to an educational problem.....	7
A lack of social science education.	8
Impact of current legislation on classroom practices.	9
Summary of the problem.	9
Solutions.	10
2015 YMCA Youth & Government Impact Assessment	11
Next Steps	16
References	17

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Foreword

For many years, those in the YMCA Youth and Government movement have felt that there was a tangible benefit to students participating in the programs. Certainly, any YMCA professional staff member or delegation advisor knows there are simply no words to describe the level of enthusiasm with which a student leaves one of the conferences, or seeing the shy student prepare a speech for weeks and then hit it out of the proverbial “park” in debate on the Senate floor of the State Capitol. We have long accepted there to be some intrinsic educational and civic value that comes from participation in such program.

However, communicating such to the administrators or Social Studies department chair of a school being recruited or to a potential donor requires data points that supports a set of outcomes. At the 2014 YMCA Youth and Government State Directors Conference, a charge was given to develop a national evaluative tool to help in communications with both internal and external constituents. This report is the conclusion of the study that was born out of that charge, and is a continuation of the doctoral study of Randell E. Trammell, State Director of Georgia.

It is important to know what this study is and is not meant to accomplish. This study seeks to understand the impact of experiential civic education programs (Youth and Government) on student participant’s levels of civic knowledge and sense of civic identity. This study is NOT an evaluation on the effectiveness of a specific program, but rather a broad assessment representative of a national sample.

Many thanks to those eight states and 1804 students who participated in this study and to their individual state directors for helping coordinate the implementation locally.

State of Civic Education

Thomas Jefferson once said, “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.” Fleming (2011) writes that “a curriculum for democracy is a curriculum for civic participation” (p. 48). Koch (2005) notes the importance of citizenship education, noting that “democratic political practice is premised on the principle of an informed citizenry engaging in a commitment to democracy...” (p. 160). In 1986, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, underscored the importance of civic education in teaching citizenship in a speech entitled *Education and Democratic Citizenship*: “How can we fail to build a world in which the rights due to every human being from birth are respected? In order to build this world . . . we must teach democracy” (Shanker, 1986). Highlighting the need for experiential civic education practices in a recent Political Psychology article, Kahne, Crow, and Lee (2013) state, “do not depend on whether students take a U.S. government course but instead depend on *the kinds of civic learning opportunities* students have in their civics classes and elsewhere in the curriculum” [italics added for emphasis] (p. 14). Civic education is vitally important as a tool to prepare future citizens for the duties of citizenship—a necessary foundation to preserve the very democracy of which they learn—one created for the people, by the people, and of the people.



American civic education is failing.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, cited by Matto & Vercellotti, 2012) examined the decline in civic knowledge from one generation to the next, noting “post-Baby Boom generations exhibit lower rates of knowledge about the processes of politics than preceding generations” (p.728). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) shared evidence of decreased knowledge with the results of a study by the National Constitution Center that found “only 38% percent of respondents could name all three branches of the government,” while a separate poll revealed that “59% of all Americans could name all three Stooges” (p. 242). The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2011) used voter turnout in presidential elections as an indicator of civic engagement. They reported that civic engagement among eligible adult voters was lower in 2010 (at 51.4%) than it was in 1974 (at 54.0%) (CIRCLE, 2011). Kahne and Sporte (2008) linked civic knowledge to continued civic participation as students transition into adulthood. This study explores the relationship between civic knowledge and civic identity, which serves as an indicator of continued civic participation (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Evidence of decline.

American high school graduates' understanding of basic civic tenets continues to decline (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Periodically, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a branch within the U.S. Department of Education, conducts tests to determine the level of student academic achievement in different areas. One of their reports, the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics 2010 (NCES, 2011), served as a foundation for this study. In fact, the NCES (2011) study showed that 36% of high school seniors failed to achieve a basic understanding of the U.S. political system. This represents a two-percent decline in civic knowledge among high school seniors since the 2006 NCES study (p. 35). The graph below (Figure 1) illustrates the decline since 1998. It shows the percentage of high school seniors failing to achieve even a basic level of understanding of issues related to the foundations and workings of the U.S. political system and the role that citizens need to play in a democratic society (Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer 1999).

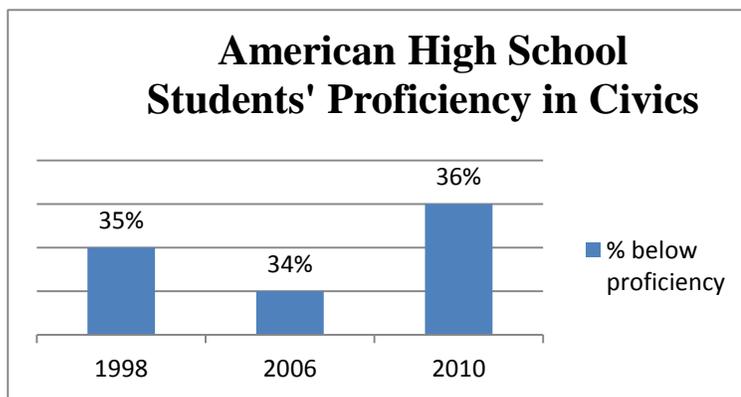


Figure 1. American high school students' proficiency in civics.

More than half of American high school graduates enter into adulthood without an understanding of basic civics—and this is a time when they gain the right to vote and responsibilities of citizenship (NCES, 2011). Three decades ago, United States Secretary of Education Terrell Bell remarked in his report to the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), *A Nation At Risk*, that "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (p. 5). Based on the statistics presented in the NAEP Civics 2010 (NCES, 2011) report, the American democracy is seriously threatened—not by foreign invaders—but rather by a systemic failure of the educational institution.

The NCES (2011) report documents a downward spiral in student understanding of civics. US Department of Education (2006) data suggested that the pedagogical methods used in high school civics are simply deficient. In his study, Doug Feldman (2010) cites research conducted by Riedel and his colleagues with high school students, finding that “as many as two-thirds of the students involved in a traditional civics course felt a strong disconnect from the curricular material being presented and its usefulness in their immediate surroundings, particularly as to their ‘obligation’ to be a civic participant” (p. 30).



Reasons for decline.

Based on the literature reviewed, the Trammell (2015) study asserts the underlying factors that contribute to this decline include insufficient curriculum and pedagogy (Ives & Obenchain, 2006), a lack of common national standards (Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010), and a narrowing curriculum that is assessment-driven (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003a, 2003b). According to Llewellyn and colleagues (2010), “political engagement is not a priority for schools” (p. 792). We can hypothesize that these contributing factors are merely symptoms related to the political response given for an educational problem.

Political response to an educational problem.



United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan commented on the state of the US educational system, admitting, “The US came in 23rd or 24th in most subjects. We can quibble, or we can face the brutal truth that we’re being out-educated” (Dillon, 2010). As Secretary Duncan highlighted, the US education system, in general, is in a state of decline. Much debate has occurred regarding the state of education in America. It has become much more of a political issue than an educational one. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) added the subtitle “Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals” to their article “Educating the ‘Good’ Citizen,” as a reflection of their “belief that the narrow and often ideologically conservative conception of citizenship embedded in many current efforts at teaching for democracy reflects neither arbitrary choices nor pedagogical limitations but rather political choices with political consequences” (p. 1).

There has been a myriad of political responses to the issue of faltering student achievement overall, including Clinton’s Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Gewertz, 2012), No Child Left Behind (US DOE, 2006), and most recently, the Race to the Top (Johnson, 2012). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) placed emphasis on reading,

writing, proficiency in English, mathematics, and science, and mandated evaluation of the progress of the student in each of the areas through standardized testing (US DOE, 2006). The Obama administration's Race to the Top provided competitive grants to school districts who focus on STEM, or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Johnson, 2012). Yet, legislation has introduced specific assessment measures in specific subjects, leaving other important areas unaddressed.

The legislative mandates have placed their greatest emphasis on the content areas of reading, mathematics, and science and the measure of achievement is through the instrument of standardized testing (Feldman, 2010, p. 29). Because the areas of 'focus' for each program have become the capstone of the student educational plan, other areas, such as civics in the high school classroom, are not receiving the emphasis given in the past. For example, in a speech at a national conference, Rick Theisen, former president of the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), said, "NCLB has done more harm to social studies education than anything else" (GreatSchools, 2008). He tied NCLB mandates to testing: what is tested is what is taught; and what is taught is what is funded. Social sciences are not tested.

A lack of social science education.

In a publication for the American Youth Policy Forum, Boston (2005) highlighted the impact of legislative interventions, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, describing "the disturbing imbalance and obsession with academics," noting that such "emphasis on academic performance has overpowered the nation's responsibility to help our children become engaged and productive citizens of our community" (p. 122). Walling (2007) cited the Civic



Mission of Schools report, and noted, "The movement for high-stakes testing has had a huge impact on education nationally: schools are under unprecedented pressure to raise student achievement, which is now measured by standardized examinations of reading and mathematics" (p. 285). Walling (2007) cited civic education scholar Margaret Stimmann Branson's remarks to the Idaho State Civic Learning Summit: "Although No Child Left Behind legislation speaks of 'core learning,' only reading and mathematics are used as measures of schools' success. Science is a poor third. And civic education is forgotten" (p. 285).

Godsay, Henderson, Levine, and Littenberg-Tobias (2012) released the results of a national survey of state civic education requirements, revealing that only "39 states require at least one course in American government or civics" (p. 1). The report disclosed that only nine states have graduation requirements that include the passage of a social studies test (Godsay, et al., 2012, p. 2). In fact, Georgia will soon phase out the social studies requirement on the high school graduation test completely. Kahne and Westheimer (2003a) stated "civic education is getting inadequate attention and is actually being cut back in some states as pressure to raise scores in math, reading, and science mounts" (p. 8). Simply put, these authors are saying the mission of

education follows the money and civic education is not a priority for investment (Godsay, et al., 2012; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003a).

Impact of current legislation on classroom practices.

Lewis and Williams (1994) were prophetic when nearly two decades ago they said, “educators are being

*“A democracy
lacking in
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democracy at risk”
Wade & Yarbrough
(2007)*

held accountable for what learners know and are able to do...the pressure for accountability has caused educators to design competency-based measures of learning and experiential techniques for assessing learning outcomes” (p. 5). Llewellyn et al. (2010) wrote, “teachers pointed to long lists of content and assessments as the reason why essays and tests took precedence over interactive lessons that may encourage students to engage in democratic reform, such as running meetings and even civil protest” (p. 801). Assessment driven curriculum leads to a

more narrow focus on behalf of the educator not out of desire, but out of necessity, according to Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh (2006).

Ives and Obenchain (2006) cited assessment driven curriculum as a negative consequence of a “high-stakes testing policy,” as it forces teachers to “focus on the recall of basic information over in-depth understanding as well as focusing primarily on information that teachers believe will be tested” (p. 63). Some schools are even carving out more time in their schedule for “score boosting drills in reading and math,” taking time away from civics, art, and physical education (Feldman, 2010, p. 29). Kahne, Chi, and Middaugh (2006) asserted that while “some educational practices and contexts promote the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that support a democratic society,” the same research “also suggests, however, that schools are not doing all they could” (p. 388). Wade and Yarbrough (2007) stated that a democracy lacking in participation is a democracy at risk. White, Marsh and McCormack (2011), citing Kincheloe, “calls much of social studies teaching and learning the ‘non-conceptual, technical view of social studies teaching’ ” (p. 35).

The disconnect between the learner and the curriculum and lack of participation is directly linked to relevance of the instructional material or teaching methodologies. Kahne, Chi, and Middaugh (2006) found that “although experienced-based curricula appear desirable, substantial evidence indicated that they are not commonly found in classrooms” (p. 403). Battisoni and Beaumont (2006) reported that civic education teachers are not given proper tools nor are they adequately trained to use techniques, such as an experiential learning program, in the context of their instruction and therefore “rely on conventional teaching methods” (p. 244).

Summary of the problem.

The combination of insufficient curriculum, a ‘teach to test’ mentality, and ineffective pedagogy may yield results that could eventually lead to students being ill-equipped to assume their role as a citizen. The continued under-education of students in civics will have lasting implications on the American democracy for

generations as students leave the public education system with little or no understanding of how their government works or what role and responsibility they have in it (Ives & Obenchain, 2006).

Solutions.

Over the past decade, research centering on civic education, and more specifically, experiential civic education, has gained prominence. Many studies including Kahne and Westheimer (2003b) cite varying “pedagogies and curricular strategies for supporting the development of democratic citizens” (p. 57). Ives and Obenchain (2006) suggest that instruction using experiential methods promote high order thinking skills more than does traditional instruction (p. 61). Lay and Smarick (2006) suggest that the use of simulations is not new to the field of civics education and can be an effective teaching strategy (p. 132-133, 143).



As educators seek out the best methods wherein to teach civics to their students, many heed the century old advice of John Dewey and embrace the philosophy that experience and education are inseparable (Lay & Smarick, 2006, p. 132). This concept is called experiential learning. This view of teaching is supported by Schachter (1998) in his summary of all the early twentieth Century American Political Science Association (APSA) task force reports that “inveigh against rote learning; the practice of having students memorize passages from constitutions and textbooks met universal disdain” (p. 631).

2015 YMCA Youth and Government Impact Assessment

There were 8 states participating in the survey: California, Georgia, Maine, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington. A total of 1804 students participated. Demographic breakdowns can be seen below.

It is noteworthy that there was not an equal distribution of participating students among the states. Respondents from California and Georgia's YMCA Youth and Government comprise 82% of the usable responses. The remaining 18% of responses were from Maine, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington.

The aggregate dataset was statistically significant at the national level. The minimum required sample size (to be representative of the estimated 14.4 Million US high school students) to have a 99% confidence level was 664. With a sample of 1,804 students, this was clearly met and presented a 2.31% margin of error. The number of responses from California and Georgia allowed for disaggregation of the data for these two states allowing for more localized impact analyses with confidence levels of 99% and 98% respectively. Due to smaller samples from other participating states, statistically significant results could not be obtained using the disaggregated data.

<i>Descriptive Statistics for Major Demographic Variables</i>			
Variable	Category	N	%
Grade (<i>n=1804</i>)			
	8 th Grade	35	1.94%
	9th Grade	360	34.92%
	10th Grade	343	19.01%
	11th Grade	351	19.46%
	12th Grade	298	16.52%
	No Response	147	8.15%

Gender (<i>n=1804</i>)			
	Male	733	40.63%
	Female	915	50.72%
	Other	7	0.39%
	Prefer Not to Answer	5	0.28%
	No Response	147	8.15%

Ethnicity (n=1804)			
White/Caucasian	1007	55.82%	
Black/African American	159	8.81%	
Hispanic	157	8.70%	
Asian/Pacific Islander	109	6.04%	
Other	106	5.88%	
Multiple Selections	38	2.11%	
Prefer Not to Answer	16	0.89%	
No Response	212	11.75%	

Free and Reduced Lunch (n=1804)			
Yes	371	20.57%	
No	1159	64.25%	
Prefer Not to Answer	37	2.05%	
No Response	240	13.30%	

# Years in Youth and Government (n=1804)			
First-Timer	672	37.25%	
1 year	355	19.68%	
2 years	272	15.08%	
3 years	196	10.86%	
4 or more years	162	8.98%	
No Response	147	8.15%	

Data from Pre/Post Tests

Civic Knowledge

The multiple-choice questions selected from the NAEP Civics test encompassed the history and principles of the U.S. Constitution, as well as how the legislative process works. They are based on the national curriculum standards generated by the National Council for the Social Studies (Golston, 2010). The NAEP instrument allows the researcher to determine what impact the independent variable (participation in civic experiential learning programs) has on the dependent variables (student knowledge in civics and level of civic identity). In this study, twenty select questions from the NAEP Civics test will be used to determine mastery of standards. A sample question is presented below:

Federalism: A way of organizing a nation so that two or more levels of government have authority over the same land and people.

Which fact about American government reflects the above definition of federalism?

- a) Power is divided among legislative, executive, and judicial branches.
- b) Private organizations in the United States do much of the work that is performed by local governments in other countries.
- c) Citizens in the United States are subject to both state and federal laws.
- d) Citizens in the United States have a right to protection from intrusion into their private affairs.

The correct answer is C.

While there is no empirical data on the overall validity and reliability of the NAEP Civics Test, the American Institute for Research has, since 1995, maintained an independent expert panel, the NAEP Validity Studies (NVS) panel. The NAEP assessment is an instrument widely used for many items including gauging college readiness (Sparks, 2012), determining mastery of standards (Fleming, 2012), identifying achievement gaps (Robelen, 2012) as well as school resource and teaching gaps (Lee, 2012), and for many other evaluation-based decisions that impact education. Therefore, it is an accepted and valid measure of civic knowledge.

Students' Pre-Test Average: 85.7 (on a 100 point scale)

Students' Post-Test Average: 89.3 (on a 100 point scale)

Commentary: Students did gain civic knowledge by participating in YMCA Youth and Government programs. It is important to note that there was not a comparison group (non Youth and Government participants) to demonstrate how big a jump in knowledge based on program participation versus traditional civic education. The Trammell (2014) study with Georgia's student population demonstrated a sizeable gap in the amount of knowledge gained by the participants in the Youth and Government program versus traditional civic education students.

Civic Identity

Civic identity was assessed using a summary composite score from the three questionnaires: the Social Responsibility Scale (SRS; Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968), the Citizen Duty Scale (CDS; Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954), and the Political Efficacy Scale (PES; Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995). Civic identity is a broad construct that can be operationalized through any civic action. The researcher believes three scales chosen to measure civic identity encompass voluntarism (SRS; Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968), likelihood or willingness to vote (CDS; Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954), and sense of voice (PES; Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995). These three scales incorporate many of the major civic actions associated with civic engagement as defined by Levine (2007).

Social Responsibility Scale (SRS). The SRS (Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968) is a self-report questionnaire that measures an individual's traditional social responsibility; i.e., the willingness of an individual to help other persons even when there is nothing to be gained for one's self. The SRS includes eight items and yields a total social responsibility summary score. Possible responses to items range from “strongly disagree” (a score of 1) to “strongly agree” (a score of 7). Anderson and Cunningham (1972) wrote that the SRS “was constructed by combining items from the Harris scale with new test items developed by Berkowitz. This pool of test items was subjected to several item analysis tests, using college students as a sample” (p. 25).

Students' Pre-Test Average: 63.7 (on a 100 point scale)

Students' Post-Test Average: 59.8 (on a 100 point scale)

Commentary: The Trammell (2014) study discovered that in the given context, the Social Responsibility Scale had no correlation to civic knowledge or participation in the Youth and Government program. While the results of the scale may present an interesting snapshot of the respondents' views of social responsibility, they do not accurately assess the intended portion of programmatic impact (educational value) of the YMCA Youth and Government program.

Citizen Duty Scale (CDS). The CDS (Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954) is a self-report measure to determine feelings of obligation in citizen voting behavior in elections. The CDS includes four items and yields the likelihood of an individual's willingness to vote. Possible responses to items range from “strongly disagree” (a score of 1) to “strongly agree” (a score of 4).

Students' Pre-Test Average: 53.6 (on a 100 point scale)

Students' Post-Test Average: 64.2 (on a 100 point scale)

Commentary: There was absolutely growth in this area. This question gets to the heart of the matter of the philosophy of what we do through the YMCA Youth and Government programs and what differs from classroom based civic education—we are teaching students the importance of not only knowing and understanding civic tenets, but becoming an active and engaged part of our Democracy.

Political Efficacy Scale (PES). The PES (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995) is a self-report measure that assesses how much influence the respondent feels he or she has over local and national government, and more specifically, if they were to log a complaint whether it would be addressed. The PES includes four items and has been shown “to be a strong predictor of political involvement” (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995, p. 346). Possible responses to items range from “none at all” (a score of 1) to “a lot” (a score of 4).

Students’ Pre-Test Average: 48.6 (on a 100 point scale)

Students’ Post-Test Average: 47.9 (on a 100 point scale)

Commentary: The Trammell (2014) study identified a significant gap between Youth and Government program participants versus the non-participant group. I feel that would be the case here as well, and while there was a drop in a sense of political efficacy by the sample of YMCA Youth and Government students, it was what I would consider insignificant. This could be linked to political undertones happening at the time of the post-test response, the discovery through the YMCA Youth and Government program that government is very complex and not easily navigable, or a myriad of other reasons.

Additional Commentary: It is noteworthy that post-hoc analysis of the Trammell (2014) data explored interactions between the variables and the differing demographic groups. The Post-hoc analysis found an interaction between civic identity (social responsibility) and gender as well as between civic identity (political efficacy and social responsibility) between ethnicity and socio-economic status. In other words, these factors produced positive increases in the various expressions of civic identity. The current study did not have that level of analysis.

Next Steps

Limitations: One of the limitations of this study is that it allowed for only quantitative data collection. Qualitative methodologies would have allowed for written responses explaining their selection, the use of focus groups, or other mechanisms that help understand the “why”. This is an area of possible future research that would help us as professional youth development practitioners understand the impact and touchpoints (which can be adjusted to change the outcomes) of what we do.

Other limitations include a lack of a ‘control group’ (non Youth and Government participants) with which to compare the results. While the Trammell (2014) study does provide a comparison sample, it is possible that stronger results could be achieved with the comparison group in this study.

The findings of this pilot study are encouraging in as much as there is a link between how students *experience* the curriculum and increased civic knowledge and their sense of civic duty and efficacy in the civic process. As a result of the study, the following next steps are proposed:

- Additional research across the nation to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of experiential civic education programs on civic knowledge, civic identity, and other related civic outcomes;
- Additional research containing qualitative elements to allow for narrative that may better explain responses;
- Distribution of this study report to YMCA Youth and Government Programs across the country.

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