

Massachusetts K-12 Civic Learning Survey Executive Summary of Key Findings for District Leaders

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This is the first executive brief from the Massachusetts K-12 Civics Survey, which was fielded from November through December of 2017, with the goal of assessing the current status of civic learning in the Commonwealth. This first brief will focus on responses from district leaders such as superintendents and district administrators. There were 52 participants in this survey.

The key takeaway from these respondents is that, in principle, the district leaders strongly support civic learning and the development of informed citizens across all grades and disciplines. However, as district leaders, they are sometimes forced to prioritize other disciplines and many are aware that teachers do not have access to professional development related to the teaching of civics. District leaders are virtually unanimous in their opposition to a statewide, multiple-choice test on civics, much preferring more in-depth, locally developed assessments.

Key Finding 1: Majority of District Leaders see Civic Learning as District Mission

Six out of ten district leaders said that civic learning is included in their district's mission, and two-thirds expected students to behave in a manner consistent with their civic education. Consistent with this view, a majority (57%) of these leaders believed that discussion of current and controversial issues are incorporated across curriculum, and that district leadership in fact encouraged teachers to discuss current events as well as social and political issues. In the comments section, however, some leaders reported that K-5 teachers must prioritize other subjects over civics, and others felt that the state, not local districts, should be providing resources to support civics instruction. Classroom teachers shared additional barriers that prevented them from teaching civics more thoroughly, which included the lack of a civics course requirement, a lack of resources and funding for community-based projects, and the lack of statewide assessment (which shifts the pressure to other, tested subjects).

Key Finding 2: Imperative to Strengthen Civic Education Building

While many educators noted that social studies and, even more so, civics are “cast aside” while the district focuses on other priorities like testing and literacy, some district leaders see momentum to strengthen civic learning in their districts. For instance, 70% of the district leaders thought that their students' parents would support a decision to strengthen civic education in their districts (70%). Similarly, 64% thought that assessment of civics knowledge, skills, and attitudes would receive support from students' parents. Several district leaders explicitly mentioned the anticipated release of the new Social Studies Framework from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as an opportunity to clarify goals, define outcomes, and strengthen civic learning in their districts.

Key Finding 3: Professional Development is Much Needed but Unavailable to Many

Educator training is an essential part of strengthening civic learning at scale. In states like Florida and Illinois where statewide implementation of evidence-based civic education became a mandate, local foundations and other partners in the public and private sectors stepped in to support teacher training,

with positive results. In our survey, this is the area where districts leaders and classroom teachers differed the most. While 40% of district leaders thought professional development in civics is available to teachers, only 25% of the classroom teachers agreed with that statement. Similarly, 48% of district leaders believed that there were opportunities (time, space, and rewards) for teachers to develop civics lessons, but only 22% of teachers agreed. Finally, 60% of district leaders thought the district and schools provide curricular materials and training on civics, but only about one-third (37%) of teachers thought these resources were available to them.

Key Finding 4: Opinion Split on Any Statewide Assessment; Consensus Against Multiple Choice Test

District leaders were divided on the need for any form of statewide assessment: 40% supported it while 55% opposed it (5% neutral). In the comments section, the only unambiguous opinions about statewide assessment were negative. Many said they preferred establishing local assessments based on the new Social Studies framework, and emphasized that the DESE first needed to clearly define civic learning outcomes (through the anticipated framework), which would then inform locally developed assessments. District leaders were especially opposed to multiple-choice tests (only 4% thought it would be effective state-wide), an opinion likely based on their experiences with current local assessments. District leaders reported that multiple-choice quizzes and tests were very common ways to assess civic learning and competencies in their districts. A vast majority (more than 90%) of district leaders said they use tests, but only 10% said tests were “very effective.” Other common approaches for assessment of civic competencies are: tests with essay questions (32% said “very effective”), graded papers (29%), research on public policies or social issues (51%), individual presentations (46%), group presentations (56%), and individual reflections (39%). This suggests that district leaders by and large support local assessments that are not in the form of a multiple choice exam. While incorporating essay questions seemed to increase perceived effectiveness in this group, most simply preferred performance-based assessments.

About the Survey

With generous funding from the Fireman Family Foundation, the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University fielded a survey about the current status of K-12 civic education in the Commonwealth in response to the MA Civics Working Group, which was convened by the DESE. The survey aimed to answer three questions: How is civics taught in the commonwealth? What do our teachers need in order to strengthen teaching of civics in our schools? And how do our educators and district leaders see the possibility of a statewide course requirement or civic competency assessment, and why? We reached out to a wide range of organizations and individuals who work with educators in all grades across all disciplines and received 257 responses. Of these, 158 were classroom teachers or instructional coaches, and 52 were superintendents and other district administrators representing all regions of the state, with a strong concentration in Middlesex County. We would like to thank each of the survey participants, as well as the organizations and individuals who supported our work by encouraging others to participate in this survey.

About Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life

The only university-wide college of its kind, the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life (<http://tischcollege.tufts.edu>) offers transformational student learning and service opportunities, conducts groundbreaking research on young people’s civic and political participation, and forges innovative community partnerships. Its work is guided by two core beliefs: that communities, nations and the world are stronger, more prosperous, and more just when citizens actively participate in civic and democratic life; and that higher education has a responsibility to develop the next generation of active citizens.