



**CIVIC  
EMPOWERMENT**

**GUIDEBOOK**

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This resource was created to support educators and others in empowering and inspiring young people to become active, engaged citizens. This guidebook complements the YouthTruth research report, [Youth Civic Empowerment: Insights from the Student Experience](#).

For YouthTruth partners who surveyed students during the 2023-2024 school year, these activities can be further enriched by incorporating your school's or district's own data related to these questions:

1. Helping others is important to me.
2. In school I have learned how to make my school, my community, or the world a better place.
3. In school I have learned how to evaluate the evidence that backs up people's opinions.
4. Being actively involved in national, state, or local issues is important to me.
5. It is important to vote.
6. It is important to work with people with backgrounds and experiences that are different from mine.
7. I can make a difference in my school, my community,
8. I work with others to solve problems in my school or community or the world.
9. I have helped change things for the better in my school, my community, or the world.

*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree.*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC EMPOWERMENT

At the heart of civic empowerment is the belief that every student, regardless of age, background, or circumstance, has the potential to contribute positively to their school, community, and the broader society. Civic empowerment goes beyond simply understanding government structures to include fostering a deep sense of civic responsibility, developing civic skills, and providing young people with opportunities to take action for the common good.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

This guidebook is composed of a series of activities that together form a comprehensive workshop. You can use the entire guide to run a full workshop, or adapt individual activities to suit your needs. Each activity is designed with clear objectives, detailed instructions, and includes sample responses from actual civic empowerment workshops that YouthTruth piloted with students in districts in Ohio, Texas, and California.

## Definition of Terms

To guide the activities and discussions in this guidebook, it's important to share with students key concepts related to civic empowerment:



### CIVIC DISPOSITIONS

Opinion about community involvement, helping others, and a sense of responsibility to the community.



### CIVIC SKILLS

Belief in one's skills and ability to positively impact the broader community or society.



### CIVIC ACTIONS

Community-focused actions a young person has taken, intends to take, or is interested in taking.

# Warm-Up Activity: Introduction to Surveys and Civic Readiness

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Introduction to the Activity:

» Begin by explaining to the students the objective of the activity.

### 2. Discussion Starter: “Why Surveys?”

» Ask students, “Why do you think surveys are important?”

» Encourage a brief discussion about how surveys are used to collect opinions, understand experiences, and make decisions.

### 3. Introducing Likert Scales:

» Explain that surveys often use a scale to measure opinions, such as agreeing or disagreeing with a statement.

» To make it fun and relatable, consider introducing the concept of Likert scales using emoji faces representing different levels of opinion (e.g., sad face for disagree, neutral face for neutral, happy face for agree).

### 4. Survey Practice with Fun Questions:

» Start with a few light-hearted questions to get students comfortable with surveys and expressing their opinions.

» Examples: “I like pizza,” “I enjoy watching movies,” or “I love recess.”

» Ask students to physically move to the side of the room that corresponds to their level of opinion: “Disagree,” “Neutral,” or “Agree.”

### 5. Civic Empowerment Questions:

» Transition to the topic of civic empowerment by introducing the following statements.

» Read each statement aloud, and have students move to the appropriate side of the room based on their opinion:

- I have helped change things for the better in my school, my community, or the world.  
-Share that overall 30 percent of US High School students agree with this statement.
- Being actively involved in national, state, or local issues is important to me.  
-Share that overall 34 percent of US HS students agree with this statement.

## REFLECTION:

Conclude the activity by asking students how they felt about the statements and the process of using a survey to gather information.

## OBJECTIVE

To engage students in understanding the purpose of surveys and how they can be used to gather opinions from a group. In addition, students will reflect on questions related to civic empowerment to set the stage for deeper exploration in subsequent activities.

## HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON CIVIC EMPOWERMENT

30%

OF ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS agree that they have helped change things for the better in my school, my community, or the world.



34%

OF ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS believe it is important to be actively involved in national, state, or local issues.

For more information, see [Youth Civic Empowerment: Insights from the Student Experience](#)

## Civic Skills Activity

### INSTRUCTIONS:

#### 1. Introduction to the Activity:

- » Begin by explaining to the students the objective of the activity.

#### 2. Reviewing the Definition of Civic Skills:

- » Review the definition of civic skills with the students: Civic skills refer to the abilities needed to positively impact the broader community or society. (Examples include public speaking, teamwork, and problem-solving.)
- » Engage students in a brief discussion to ensure they understand the concept and can identify examples of civic skills.

#### 3. Civic Skills Identification:

- » Question 1: Describe one specific civic skill that you have. Where did you learn it?
  - Give students 5 minutes to write their responses.
  - Facilitate a group discussion where students share their civic skills and how they've acquired them.
  - Create a list of where these skills were learned, noting specifically whether they were acquired in school.

#### 4. Generating Civic Participation Ideas for Your School:

- » Question 2: Imagine you're in a meeting with decision-makers aiming to transform high schools into spaces for civic empowerment. What recommendations would you make to get students more actively involved?
  - Allow 5 minutes for students to brainstorm and write down their ideas.
  - Have students share their ideas with the group.
  - Group students with similar ideas together to develop a more comprehensive recommendation.

#### 5. Connect Civic Skills to Action:

- » Have students share their most important civic skill and write it on sticky notes or the whiteboard.
- » As a class, vote on the top 3 civic skills.
- » Select one proposal to develop further, focusing on advocating for experiences in school that specifically teach and develop those top 3 skills. Consider presenting this proposal to school leaders or at a school board meeting.

### OBJECTIVE

In this activity, students will identify and reflect on their civic skills and how they developed them, generate ideas to inspire civic participation among their peers, and recognize their roles as engaged citizens.



## Civic Skills Activity Sample Responses

These are examples of responses from students who participated in a civic empowerment workshop:

### Civic Skills Identified by Students:

- » Communication: Students highlighted communication as a key civic skill, developed through leadership roles, volunteering, and family influence.
- » Leadership and Confidence: These skills were nurtured through sports, friendships, and school activities, helping students take initiative in various settings.
- » Critical Thinking: Recognized as crucial for civic engagement, this skill was developed both in school and through personal experiences.
- » Collaboration and Service: Emphasized by students, these skills were often shaped by parental guidance and community involvement.

### **Student Recommendations for Enhancing Civic Engagement in Schools:**

- » Integrate Civic Skills: Develop curricula that emphasize communication and leadership skills, with practical applications in community settings.
- » Increase Community Involvement: Provide more opportunities for students to participate in service projects, such as environmental cleanups or helping senior citizens.
- » Implement Civic Engagement Classes: Offer mandatory classes that encourage active participation in school and community service.
- » Expand Leadership Programs: Introduce more programs that allow students to voice their needs and contribute to their communities.
- » Create Supportive Classrooms: Foster environments where civic engagement is emphasized, and students feel heard and valued.

## Civic Role Models Activity

### INSTRUCTIONS:

#### 1. Identify a Civic Role Model:

- » Ask students to think of a civic empowerment role model, such as a public figure, community leader, teacher, family member, or peer.
- » Encourage them to choose someone who has made a significant impact through their actions, either locally or nationally.

#### 2. Reflect on Their Characteristics:

- » Have students write down or discuss what makes this person a strong civic role model.
- » Consider questions such as: What has this person done to engage with their community? What qualities do they possess that others might aspire to?

#### 3. Group Discussion:

- » Facilitate a discussion where students share their role models and the reasons for selecting them.
- » Explore common themes like leadership, dedication to community, and the ability to inspire others.

#### 4. Critical Thinking Questions:

- » Share that 34 percent of high school students believe being involved in national, state, or local issues is important, and 53 percent believe voting is important.
- » Pose the following questions for discussion or reflection:
  - Why do you think only 34 percent of students say it is important to be involved in national, state, or local issues? What factors might contribute to this percentage?
  - Can you be civically engaged if you do not vote? Consider ways to participate in civic life beyond voting.
  - Is voting enough to be civically engaged? Debate whether voting alone constitutes full civic participation.

#### 5. Connect Civic Role Models to Action

- » Have students choose one characteristic or action of their role model and brainstorm how they can incorporate it into their own lives through school or community service.
- » As a class, select a common civic characteristic (e.g., leadership, advocacy) and design a class project that embodies this trait, such as organizing a school event or starting a community service initiative.
- » Encourage students to present their project to the school community or local leaders through presentations, assemblies, or at a school board meeting.

### OBJECTIVE

This activity encourages students to identify and reflect on individuals who exemplify strong civic empowerment. It aims to inspire students by highlighting the actions and characteristics of civic role models while prompting them to think critically about their own civic involvement.

## HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: ATTITUDES TOWARD VOTING AND CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

**53%** 

**OF ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**  
believe it is important to vote.

**34%** 

**OF ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**  
believe it is important to be actively  
involved in national, state, or local issues.

For more information, see [Youth Civic Empowerment: Insights from the Student Experience](#)



## Civic Role Models Activity Sample Response

During a civic empowerment workshop, students identified a diverse range of role models, from well-known figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Greta Thunberg to personal mentors such as a grandmother who was a civil rights advocate and an older sister studying political science. These role models were presented for their courage, activism, and dedication to helping their communities.

When discussing why only 34 percent of all high school students believe it's important to be involved in civic issues, students pointed to the perception that civic engagement isn't seen as vital to young people's

lives, the need to prioritize close relationships, and the belief that adults don't listen to them anyway. They also noted that many students feel disconnected from broader civic matters and that they don't have time for such things due to the demands of school.

On the topic of voting, students agreed on its importance but emphasized that civic engagement goes beyond voting. They highlighted the value of small actions in making a difference and agreed that true civic participation involves more than just casting a ballot—it requires ongoing involvement in community life.

## Exit Ticket Activity: Advice to Adults

### OBJECTIVE

To give students the final word in the workshop by allowing them to offer anonymous advice to adults on how to better empower young people. This activity encourages students to reflect on their experiences and provides valuable insights for adults to consider.

### INSTRUCTIONS:

#### 1. Setting the Stage:

At the conclusion of the workshop, inform students that they have the opportunity to share their thoughts and advice anonymously. Explain that their input will help adults better understand how to empower young people.

#### 2. Writing the Exit Tickets:

Provide each student with a sticky note and ask them to write down their advice for adults on how to empower youth. Clarify that their advice could be specifically about school and addressed to adults in the school setting, or it could be directed toward any adult, including politicians or policymakers. Give them a few minutes to reflect and write.

#### 3. Collecting the Responses:

Once the students have finished, have them place their sticky notes in a designated area. This could be a board, a wall, or a box where all the notes can be gathered together.

#### 4. Close the Feedback Loop:

Explain that these responses will be reviewed by adults, who will reflect on the feedback and close the loop by sharing the summarized advice with the students and with other adults who can take action based on the students' insights.



## Sample Exit Tickets: Insights from Students

The following are real examples of advice from the exit tickets of students who participated in a civic empowerment workshop

1. "In order to support young people to become more civically empowered, y'all need to make the information more engaging towards our generation, while keeping it short and brief."
2. "Educating students on things like the ability to go to school board meetings is important so that young people know what they can do."
3. "To support young people to be more empowered, adults should get more engaged with the kids, and let them know no matter their age, kids can be heard and they will be!"
4. "Tell students how important it is to vote. Give them space and attention to speak out against things they feel are unjust."
5. "You are a role model to the people you encounter in your day-to-day life. Uplift young people's voices, educate them on their rights."
6. "Have young people actually use their voice. Tell them they can be heard and there are others who think like them, that they are not alone."
7. "Provide adequate resources to students so they know the importance of standing up for what they believe in while knowing exactly how to. Students just need to know how to start."
8. "There should be some kind of club, class, or opportunity to show and educate young people on how they are important to the community and the world even if it doesn't feel like it."



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTING YOUTH CIVIC EMPOWERMENT

To further explore youth civic empowerment, consider these key organizations that provide valuable resources, programs, and opportunities for young people to engage in civic life:

- » **Generation Citizen:** Offers action civics education that empowers young people to engage as effective citizens by learning how to drive change in their communities: <https://www.generationcitizen.org>
- » **iCivics:** Provides free educational resources, including games and lesson plans, to help students learn about civics and inspire them to become active participants in democracy: <https://vision.icivics.org>
- » **Mikva Challenge:** Engages youth in democracy through programs that focus on civic knowledge, skills, and action: <https://mikvachallenge.org>
- » **Rock the Vote:** Focuses on building the political power of young people through voter registration, education, and turnout: <https://www.rockthevote.org>
- » **CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement):** Conducts research on the civic and political engagement of young Americans and offers resources to foster youth participation: <https://circle.tufts.edu>
- » **Facing History and Ourselves:** Uses lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to bigotry and hate, fostering civic responsibility and awareness: <https://www.facinghistory.org>

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*Your contributions are invaluable!*

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**YouthTruth** | LISTEN. LEARN. IMPROVE.

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