

The Civic Gap: A Call to Action

Schools teach students about civic life. Now they must give students real chances to practice it.

The country is living through a moment of deep political division, declining trust in institutions, and, in a growing number of states, restrictions on what schools can discuss. In this climate, teaching how a bill becomes a law is not enough. Students need opportunities to practice speaking up and working across differences. The disconnect between learning about civic life and practicing it is what we call the civic gap. In the 2025–26 school year, YouthTruth surveyed nearly 140,000 middle and high school students and 10,000 teachers to find out whether schools are providing students the practice they need to participate in civic life, and what it takes to make sure they do. The full report, *The Civic Gap: How Schools Can Cultivate Student Voice and Participation*, goes deeper on the findings. Here's a starting point for educators and policymakers.



Read the full report

FINDING 1:

1 in 3 students report having real opportunities for civic participation, while more than half of teachers assume they do.



38% of students report strong opportunities for civic participation in school



55% of teachers report strong opportunities for civic participation in school

"[Teachers] often make decisions that can greatly impact students without consulting them first or acknowledging their opinion, preferences, and/or needs." —9TH GRADE STUDENT

Students report experiencing opportunities to discuss important issues and connect with peers who are different from them. Fewer report opportunities to practice civic skills, such as having a voice in school decisions. In comparison, teachers perceive more opportunities for student participation than students report across all questions. This disconnect matters: many of the adults best positioned to close the civic gap don't yet see that it exists.

HOW EDUCATORS CAN ACT:

- Ensure opportunities for speaking up reach every student

Structures such as student government may exist, but consider whether they are reaching all students, not only those who are already involved. Highlight and celebrate examples of student-led change.

HOW POLICYMAKERS CAN ACT:

- Push policy beyond course requirements

Only 26% of students believe they have a say in how their school is run, while 49% of staff believe students do. Students need real chances to exercise voice, influence decisions, and engage with civic institutions – not just more coursework.

CONDITIONS EVERY SCHOOL CAN BUILD

FINDING 2:

Belonging and trust are the drivers of civic participation at school.

"I've joined leadership to have a say in what decisions are being made. Everyone in that group had different skill levels and things they needed to work on. We all gained each other's trust and learned how to work together. I learned how to communicate and have better speaking skills."

—7TH GRADE STUDENT

In schools, the relationship between belonging and civic participation is clear. Where students report a stronger sense of belonging, they also report more voice in how school is run, more opportunities to discuss important issues, and more opportunities to work with others and take action. The characteristics of a school matter too, but unlike location or enrollment size, every school can work to build belonging.

FINDING 3:

Instruction that challenges students and connects to their lives is linked to stronger civic participation.

"[Teachers] make me think about the deeper meaning of what we are learning about. For example in ELA we learn about things that actually have a deep meaning that connects to life."

—7TH GRADE STUDENT

Connected learning and civic participation also move together. When students make connections across what they are learning and it is relevant to their lives outside school, students report more voice in school decisions, more opportunities to discuss important issues, and more opportunities to work with adults and take action. Classrooms, in other words, can be everyday places to practice habits that lead to civic participation.

HOW EDUCATORS CAN ACT:

□ Build belonging through structure.

Belonging takes time, but it also takes intentionality. Use advisory periods, consistent relationships with adults, and discipline that applies evenly to every student.

□ Build trust that speaking up is worthwhile.

Students need to know how to raise concerns, trust adults will take them seriously, and believe school systems will respond fairly. Encourage students to speak out against bias and build relationships across differences. Make the process for reporting discrimination clear and trusted.

HOW POLICYMAKERS CAN ACT:

□ Protect school conditions that make civic learning possible.

Since 2021, 51 state bills and policies have restricted how race, racism, gender, and identity can be addressed in classrooms. Schools with the strongest equity practices also demonstrate the strongest conditions for civic engagement. Restricting equity practices does not make schools neutral. It makes them less civically minded.

□ Account for school context.

Schools in large cities and schools with lower enrollment show stronger civic participation, partly because of the sense of belonging those conditions make possible. Consider the strengths that already exist in a school community, and the resources that are needed when they do not.

HOW EDUCATORS CAN ACT:

□ Connect teaching to students' lives.

Civic learning happens across subjects, in hallway conversations, and in extracurriculars. Instruction must reflect students' identities and what their lives ask of them.

□ Use data to see who feels challenged and known.

Student experience data can illuminate where perceptions between adults and students differ, which students feel connected or disconnected, and the opportunities that may not be reaching everyone.

HOW POLICYMAKERS CAN ACT:

□ Prepare educators to teach in ways that connect to students' lives.

Teacher preparation should build the instructional and relational skills for strong civic participation, not only content knowledge.

□ Measure what actually matters.

Make school climate data, not only course completion and test scores, part of how schools are evaluated.

Students are telling us what they need.

We should listen.

"I hope that students' participation is not just about expressing opinions, but a process of truly influencing decision-making, understanding public affairs, and learning democratic practices."

—11TH GRADE STUDENT