

# Students in large-city schools and schools with lower enrollment report stronger opportunities for civic participation.

Students' opportunities for civic participation vary depending on where they go to school. Two school characteristics stand out: location and enrollment size. Students and teachers in large-city schools and schools with fewer than 300 students report stronger opportunities for civic participation than those in other schools. Here, the focus is on civic climate and civic practice, the two dimensions of the framework most tied to school-level structures and adult-shared decision-making.

*"I like the community aspect and how everyone knows each other."*

—12TH GRADE STUDENT

**Location Matters.** Students and teachers in large-city schools report stronger opportunities for civic participation than those in medium or small cities, suburbs, towns, and rural communities.<sup>4</sup> Among students, 45% in large-city schools rate their civic experiences positively, compared with 37% in other schools. Teachers see a similar pattern. Sixty-five percent of teachers in large-city schools agree that their school provides their students with civic experiences, compared with 57% elsewhere. The gap holds across both civic climate, including having a say in school decisions, and civic practice, including learning to take action and working with adults to make change.

Cities offer a natural backdrop for civic life, with greater proximity to government buildings, courts, community organizations, public advocacy efforts, and other opportunities beyond school. One high school student pointed to this access directly, saying they would speak up about "the amount of access to things outside of school in my city to do." In suburban, rural, and small town contexts, civic institutions tend to be more dispersed and less visible in students' day-to-day lives.<sup>5</sup> That does not mean these communities are less civic-minded, but the pattern raises questions about how the communities surrounding schools may shape the civic opportunities students encounter inside and outside the classroom.

*"I love the community at our school. Being a small school, I like that even if some may not like each other, we are like a big family and always have each other's backs."* —12TH GRADE STUDENT

**Size Matters.** School enrollment shows a similar, though more modest, pattern. Forty percent of students in schools with fewer than 300 students<sup>6</sup> rate their civic experiences positively, compared with 37% in larger schools. The difference is even more pronounced among teachers: 64% of teachers in smaller schools rate their schools positively across these civic experiences, compared with 55% in larger schools.

Similar to schools in large cities, students in small schools say that there are more opportunities for them to have a say in how their school is run, work with adults to make changes in their school, and learn how to take action. Teachers in smaller schools are also more likely to agree that students have these opportunities than teachers in other schools.

Smaller schools can make it easier for students to feel a sense of community, where they feel known, have a voice, and see themselves as part of something.<sup>7</sup> When students feel known and connected to their school community, opportunities to have a voice or contribute may also feel more accessible.

Schools cannot easily change their location or enrollment size, but these patterns confirm that where a school sits and how big it is shapes the civic conditions students walk into on day one.

<sup>4</sup> The location size is as defined by the federal government's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). See Appendix for more details.

<sup>5</sup> CIRCLE. (n.d.). *Lack of civic support for rural youth may lead to lower civic engagement*. Tufts University.

<sup>6</sup> School size is defined by NCES

<sup>7</sup> Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2009). A review of empirical evidence about school size effects: A policy perspective. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 464–490.