



## Advancing Creative Civics Education Policy

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The arts occupy a critical place in society and are essential in cultivating active and engaged citizens. As an artist, scholar, and art educator, I recently began to focus on the intersection of art and democracy in my teaching and work to bring creativity to civics education through a combination of high-impact education practices. This focus affirmed that the need for a robust national civics curriculum is paramount if we are to prepare the next generation to be the caretakers of our grand experiment in self-government. A new sense of civic imagination must be nurtured through the development and implementation of a new creative civics curriculum utilizing proven high-impact education practices, to best teach civics for the future flourishing of our multicultural democracy.

### Current Landscape of Civics Education in the United States

According to a recent policy scan conducted by the CivXNow Coalition of K-12 civics in the United States, thirty-eight states require a stand-alone high school civics course. Of those thirty-eight, only six states require civics for an entire year. This lack of robust civics has consequences for the country, including the deepening of political polarization and contributing to the breakdown of our public institutions.

The need for new civics has been advocated widely across the political spectrum, with bi-partisan support for investment in civics education, including bills such as the omnibus spending [H.R. 2617](#), allocating more resources to invest in civics education. In addition to that, in 2021, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, more than 300 experts with diverse political views developed the [Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy](#) as a guide for a revitalized national civics curriculum. That same year, the bipartisan bill [S.4384: Civics Secures Democracy Act](#) was proposed, calling for an annual investment of \$1 billion to develop civics and history curricula in schools nationwide.

While both proposals, unfortunately, failed with the critiques by a small but amplified group, they reveal that quality civics education remains desperately needed, especially given the recent attacks on our institutions and threats to our democracy.

### Goals for Creative Civics Education

The push for updated and revised civics education must include creativity and associated high-impact educational practices. A revised civics curriculum should:

1. Promote civic engagement and participation through the incorporation of arts-based projects that involve students in real community issues. For example, using mediums like theater, visual arts, and digital media to create projects that address local problems and foster a sense of agency and civic responsibility.
2. Enhance critical thinking and empathy by exploring diverse perspectives around local, national, and global issues. Using the arts can help students understand different points of view and develop empathy for diverse experiences. Discussions and creative projects can explore themes like human rights, social justice, international cooperation, and environmental concerns.
3. Stimulate creative problem-solving and innovation through interdisciplinary projects that combine the arts with the STEM fields through creative mediums like interactive installations, multimedia presentations, or performance art to address complex social challenges. Emphasize creative problem-solving and collaboration, allowing students to work together on projects that require innovative solutions.

These creative civic education goals are already being pioneered through programs including the **Judiciary and the Arts** program developed by the Justice Resource Center in New York City. The Center has created resources to familiarize intermediate and high school students with the structure and operations of the federal judiciary, involving them in the understanding and application of law in the United States. Another organization developing innovative and practical civics programs is the **Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)**. CUP develops civics projects aimed at practical issues of everyday self-governance. In their 2023 project "**Who Decides Where The Bus Goes?**" students from the Academy of Urban Planning and Engineering in New York City investigated ways to change the New York bus system to better serve residents. Throughout this initiative, students engaged with community members and stakeholders, gaining insights into the process of citizen advocacy while also developing skills in photography, video, printmaking, and graphic design.

As education programs lead the way, I am focusing my own research on creating civics initiatives at the university level by co-leading a nationwide faculty fellowship through the **Center for Artistic Activism (C4AA)** for their **Unstoppable Voters** project. Since its inception in 2009, the Center has worked in 38 countries, bringing creativity to advocacy work on various issues. Through the Unstoppable Voters program, established in 2020, C4AA has worked with over 115 national organizations and supported pro-voter projects in 29 states. Through this work, the Unstoppable Voters program reaches over three million voters. As part of the program, the Unstoppable Voters Faculty Fellowship also seeks to research the effectiveness of C4AA's creative civics work. The fellowship projects take place in a variety of higher education settings, including in research-intensive public universities, private liberal arts colleges, and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Creative civics projects are piloted in a variety of disciplines, including clinical psychology, political science, theatre, and the visual arts. These nationwide pilot projects will then become vital case studies, allowing C4AA to develop flexible and adaptive creative civics teaching modules for broad application.

## Recommendations for the Department of Education

The Department of Education has a pivotal role in catalyzing change in creative civics education. By implementing the below goals, the Department of Education can profoundly shape the landscape of civics education by:

- Supporting creative civic education as an essential part of a well-rounded K-12 curriculum.
- Identifying best practices in creative civic education through funded pilot programs utilizing high-impact practices, followed by rigorous assessment to aid the development of K-12 curriculum resources ready for nationwide implementation.
- Convening and catalyzing schools and postsecondary institutions to develop, increase, and enhance high-impact creative civic learning and engagement in their institutions.
- Funding training for future K-12 educators in innovative practices for creative civic education.

## Reigniting Our Civic Imagination

To address the most challenging issues we face as a country and a global community, we need functioning governments that are responsive to the people's will. Democracy is not meant to be static. Democracy requires change and adaptation to thrive and continually work toward "a more perfect union." We need creative, active, and engaged citizens to breathe new life into our great experiment in self-government. Implementing a national creative civics curriculum will not only enrich students' educational experiences but also empower them to become informed, active, and creative participants and contributors to their communities, our nation, and the world. A national creative civics curriculum will help students imagine a better future, draw people into the conversation, encourage participation, and help them to see and act upon their civic agency. Through creativity and hard work, we can reinvigorate and reignite our civic imagination. We can imagine anew what democracy can be, and we can demonstrate how to bring a vibrant era of a just multicultural democracy into being.