



# RESOURCES AND READINESS: EXPLORING CIVIC EDUCATION ACCESS AND EQUITY IN SIX NEW YORK HIGH SCHOOLS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## **About the Center for Educational Equity**

The Center for Educational Equity (CEE) is a nonprofit policy and research center at Teachers College, Columbia University. CEE champions children's right to a meaningful opportunity to graduate from high school prepared for college, careers, and civic participation. We work to define and secure the full range of resources, supports, and services necessary to guarantee this right to all children, particularly children in poverty and children of color.

Founded in 2005 by educational law scholar Michael A. Rebell, who successfully litigated the landmark school-funding lawsuit, *Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) v. State of New York*, CEE pursues systems change through an interrelated program of research, legal analysis, policy development, public engagement, coalition building, and advocacy to advance this agenda at the federal, state, and local levels.

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## Executive Summary

Preparing future generations for their civic roles in a democracy has historically been an essential purpose of schooling in the United States. In most states, including New York, preparation for civic participation is also central to the right to education, afforded to all students by the state constitution (Center for Educational Equity, 2018). New York's highest court, the Court of Appeals, ruled in the *Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE)* case that the state government has a constitutional obligation to provide all students "the opportunity for a sound basic education" that prepares them to "function productively as civic participants." It further held that adequate resources for that purpose must be available in *every school* (CFE, 2003).

There is significant consensus about the knowledge, skills, and democratic values students need to develop to be prepared for civic participation. There is also considerable agreement about the school-based resources and practices that help students to progress in their development of these civic competencies. Disparities in access to some of those programs and practices among subgroups of students have been documented, as have differences in civic learning outcomes.

However, efforts to understand and promote civic readiness have not explored the school-level specifics—that is, the extent to which individual schools are or are not equipped to provide the learning opportunities needed for civic preparation and how access to necessary resources and practices varies across schools. These details establish realistic reference points for families, educators, school officials, and policymakers who want to understand the relationship of civic learning opportunities to outcomes and to develop and advocate for more effective and equitable civic learning practices.

We compared three typical New York City high schools (schools serving large numbers of students in poverty and Black and Brown students) and three suburban high schools in the New York City metro area, one from a low-need-to-resource capacity school district, one from an average-need-to-resource capacity district, and one from a school district serving mostly students living in poverty. Our research focused on high schools because that's the level of schooling where civic education is currently concentrated in most school districts. Through examination of publicly available documents, online data, and in-depth interviews with educators in six high schools in New York City and nearby suburbs, we obtained insights into the resources and practices necessary to prepare students for civic participation, and explored the extent to which these and other learning opportunities were actually available in each school. We compared the data for the various schools and then compiled them to scan for themes.

We found disparities among our schools in many of the civic learning areas we examined. These differences were widest between the four schools that served mostly students in poverty and Black and Brown students and the two schools that served most students from White and more affluent families. Specifically, we found:

- *Disparities in access to quality, up-to-date history, civics, and government courses.*
  - All six schools provided at least the state-required minimum social studies courses; however, there were significant differences among schools in the
    - number and variety of social studies courses offered;
    - curriculum and teaching of Participation in Government;
    - depth and breadth of content covered in the required classes; and
    - availability of required academic supports for students who are struggling to master the necessary material.

- *Disparities in access to a full basic curriculum.*
  - The high-wealth and average-wealth high schools provided numerous course offerings across a broad curriculum. In ELA, social studies, the arts, and other content areas, they offered both required courses and electives that helped build civic knowledge, skills, and mindsets.
  - Many students in the suburban district serving mostly students living in poverty, and nearly all students in the three New York City high schools, had access only to the minimum number of courses and the minimum rigor the state permits, and few other options across the curriculum.
- *Disparities in access to experiential learning opportunities in and outside of the classroom.*
  - The affluent and average-wealth high schools provided numerous hands-on learning opportunities, both in and outside of the classroom, that help build students' civic knowledge, skills, and mindsets.
  - The four schools serving large numbers of students in poverty offered many fewer experiential civic learning opportunities (particularly in our New York City schools). In most of the schools, many students from families living in poverty did not participate in extracurricular activities after school because of competing responsibilities.
  - None of the schools could offer sufficient opportunities for students to intern in the public and nonprofit sectors, particularly paid internships, though educators recognized that such internships could provide students opportunities to develop a number of civic competencies. The wealthier schools that had staff members devoted to student internships were considerably more successful in securing them.
- *Most of the schools had room for improvement in facilitating controversial discussions and disagreements.* Principals tended to be less confident than teachers themselves in teachers' abilities to help students with diverse opinions and cultural backgrounds deliberate civilly and democratically.
- *None of our schools provided comprehensive, coherent media literacy education.* Some schools lacked basic required resources to provide it, such as library media specialists (school librarians).
- *All the schools worked to provide a supportive and civic school climate.* The three NYC high schools, in particular, invested time and resources into providing a supportive and civic school climate, focusing on centering issues relevant to students, attending to the social-emotional wellness of students, and providing constructive opportunities for discussion.
- *The abundance of civic learning opportunities in our average-wealth and high-wealth schools surprised us almost as much as the scarcity in our schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty and/or struggling academically.*
  - Whether by design or by tradition, both the high- and average-wealth schools seemed to assure multiple opportunities for students to develop necessary civic competencies. Students had access to a wide range of classes across the curriculum, including in social studies; a large proportion of experienced teachers; many classroom practices centered on hands-on problem solving; civic-action and service-learning opportunities; and extracurricular opportunities associated with the development of civic skills and knowledge.

- Redundancy in key supports for civic learning and development would also, of course, benefit students in schools that are less economically advantaged. However, the New York City high schools and the suburban high school enrolling mostly students living in poverty could provide many fewer of these opportunities and seemed to give students, at most, one bite at any given civic-learning apple.
- *The extent of the deficiencies suggested that the four schools serving predominantly students in poverty and Black and Brown students lacked adequate resources to meet their students' civic learning needs and fulfill their constitutional obligation to prepare all of their students for civic preparation.*
  - The schools with high concentrations of students struggling academically, students in poverty, and students learning English as a new language, provided scant resources in most categories. In a few resource areas, such as access to library media specialists and academic intervention services, some of these schools were out of compliance with state requirements.
- *Important civic learning opportunities that research shows to be essential for civic readiness—and, we argue, are constitutionally mandated—are not required under current New York State education law.*
  - Providing social studies electives, field trips, civic action projects, and civic-skill-building extracurricular activities, for example, was optional, but the well-resourced schools invested extensively in them. The schools in districts with high concentrations of students living in poverty schools were unable to provide or sustain them—though educators recognized the value and importance of these civic learning resources.

Analysis of these cases supported our hypothesis that schools' capacity, or lack of capacity, to prepare all of their students for civic participation would correlate with levels of school-district resources. Our findings further illuminate the effects of school-funding levels and student need on civic learning opportunities in individual schools. Civic learning opportunities, like other learning opportunities, appeared to be negatively affected by, for example, shortages of qualified teachers and other personnel, such as school library media specialists; narrowing of the breadth and depth of curricula and course offerings; lack of access to learning technologies; lack of sufficient experiential learning opportunities; and shortages of student support staff, such as school counselors.

This small pilot study examined only six schools, and they are not necessarily representative of other public high schools. Nonetheless, our cases suggest trends and issues that should be tested and explored through further research with a larger, fully representative sample of public schools. The broad disparities in civic learning opportunities also suggest the need for statewide public dialogue to develop a shared understanding of the civic competencies that students must develop and the civic learning opportunities that students must be provided.

New York State is poised to be a leader in this area. The Board of Regents and the State Education Department have taken important steps to elevate New York schools' civic mission. They included "civic readiness" among the measures of student performance to be used for school accountability and support in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan approved in January 2018. In September 2018, they established a statewide Civic Readiness Task Force. We hope this study contributes to that effort by advancing an understanding of how to ensure that all schools can prepare students to be civic ready.

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