

Research Notes



Monitoring Civic Learning Opportunities and Outcomes

Lessons From a Symposium Sponsored by
ETS and Educating for American Democracy

Laura S. Hamilton and Ace Parsi



Public schools in the United States are responsible for helping to ensure that graduates are prepared to succeed and thrive in college, in the workplace, and in their broader lives. In addition to these significant responsibilities, schools have recently been charged with responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the legacy of systemic racism, widespread mistrust of scientific evidence, and other societal challenges. As a means of addressing all of these outcomes and challenges, scholars and educators are increasingly calling upon schools to prioritize civic learning and are emphasizing the need for broader policies and supports that will encourage and enable this prioritization. Efforts to inculcate civic learning, as defined below, could provide one of the best safeguards against a possible collapse of civic norms and institutions.

One important set of supports for these efforts involves expanding and improving approaches to measurement of civic learning opportunities and outcomes. To help advance research and development in this area, Educating for American Democracy (EAD) partnered with ETS on a symposium held in July 2021 to take stock of what we know and to provide guidance for future research, policy, and practice. We hope to continue the conversation by issuing this research note. We start by providing some brief background about the civic learning landscape, EAD, and the symposium. We then discuss the role that assessment can play in promoting civic learning, summarize some key lessons from the symposium, discuss areas that are particularly ripe for additional evidence gathering, and suggest some short-term actions for the field. This research note should be useful to educators, policymakers, researchers, funders, and others who are committed to helping America's schools promote civic learning and democratic engagement.

Background

For decades, public kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) education policies, including state assessment and accountability systems, have encouraged an emphasis on English language arts, mathematics, and science (Hansen et al., 2018; Koretz, 2009). Although high levels of performance in these subjects are obviously crucial for ensuring student success, recent events such as the ones mentioned earlier illustrate the role that an informed and democratically engaged populace plays in protecting and advancing our society. Efforts to involve Americans in countering the pandemic and promoting racial equity, for instance, have run up against partisanship, the spread of misinformation, low levels of trust in scientists, and lack of understanding of the responsibilities of citizenship (Kavanagh et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021). Tackling these issues will require an understanding of not only how civic learning promotes individuals' life prospects and economic mobility, but also how it can uplift communities and the nation by building a generation of people who can engage in community problem-solving, work across differences, and understand how to leverage political and civil institutions to improve communities and lives.

Despite the common association of the word "civics" with the knowledge students develop in courses on government, scholars and advocates have recently put forth broader definitions that are relevant to the challenges we currently face. *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies* defined civic learning as "the study of how people participate in governing society" (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], n.d., p. 31), and UCLA's Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE)

initiative defined it as “a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with fellow community members to address shared problems. It includes preparation for both civic engagement (or practices seeking to promote the public good through non-governmental organizations and informal community work) and political engagement (or activities aiming to influence state action through formal avenues such as voting, lobbying, or petitioning)” (LEADE, n.d., p. 1). As these definitions make clear, the intended outcomes of civic learning include a broad set of competencies, as shown in Figure 1.

The EAD initiative is one recent effort to help educators understand and promote this set of competencies at an unprecedented scale. EAD recently published the *Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy*,¹ which

seeks to integrate civic and history education for all American students in grades K–12 and, in the process, support a more vibrant, healthier constitutional democracy. Along with the *Pedagogy Companion to the EAD Roadmap*,² the *EAD Roadmap* offers guidance for inquiry-driven content and instructional strategies for K–12 history and civics education across the United States. It is organized by major themes that are repeated with increasing complexity and depth as students build on the knowledge and competencies addressed in earlier grades. Importantly, the *EAD Roadmap* includes five “design challenges” that “state honestly and transparently some of the rich dilemmas that educators will encounter as they work with the content themes and pedagogical principles” (EAD, 2021, p.16). Implemented effectively, this integrated approach to teaching history and civics can help prepare young people to sustain and strengthen American democracy.³

FIGURE 1: Civic learning competencies

Civic knowledge: understanding of governments in the United States and in other nations, along with understanding of related social studies concepts, including the effects of history on current governments and societies

Civic skills: ability to engage actively and effectively in democratic processes by applying skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, written and oral communication, and information literacy

Civic dispositions: attitudes that support democratic participation, including an appreciation of the responsibilities of citizenship, interest in the welfare of others, a sense of personal and collective agency, and capacity to engage in civil disagreement while maintaining civic friendship

Civic engagement: integration of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to solve public problems, improve communities and societies, and navigate formal and informal political systems and processes; can occur individually or collectively and encompasses civic actions and civic participation.

Note: Definitions based on Hansen et al. (2018), Vinnakota (2019), NCSS (n.d.), and LEADE (n.d.).

The growing availability of instructional guidance and professional learning for educators is encouraging. However, there continues to be a missing piece: a comprehensive approach to assessing civic learning that can help educators and others gauge students' learning outcomes as well as document the opportunities they have to develop the set of competencies shown in Figure 1. Scott Marion (2020) defined "opportunity to learn" as encompassing "the conditions and resources provided to schools to enable students to succeed" (p. 2). As we discuss below, efforts to monitor civic learning will benefit from both outcome and opportunity data and must consider assessments *for* learning as well as assessments *of* learning.

Several high-quality assessments do exist, of course. Most notably, as symposium participant Peggy Carr, Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) discussed, is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

"Whether or not a student has become a critical consumer of current events.... giving people a foundation for understanding what is going on around them...this is one of the critical strategies we have for reclaiming the importance of truth and evidence in civic discourse....that is one of the goals of civic education: Reclaiming this idea of truth, the value of truth."

— Christopher Edley, Jr., Honorable William H. Orrick, Jr. Distinguished Professor and Dean Emeritus, UC Berkeley School of Law

NCES measured students' civic learning outcomes in its initial NAEP assessment in 1969. Since 1998, NAEP has intermittently measured civic learning on a comparable scale score.⁴ These NAEP data also provide information on opportunity to learn. Other available data sources include the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study* (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, n.d.) and recent surveys of principals (Rogers, 2019) and teachers (Hamilton et al., 2020). Moreover, researchers and educators have been exploring new approaches to gathering data on student competencies; a recent example is the Civic Online Reasoning study in which students responded to constructed-response tasks that asked them to evaluate digital sources (Breakstone et al., 2021). These and other data sources have provided valuable information about student outcomes and opportunities to learn, but there is currently no ongoing effort to gather civic learning outcome and opportunity data across all age groups, to track learning and opportunities over time, or to assess learning in ways that could inform instruction that is aligned to the *EAD Roadmap*.

To help launch a discussion of how we might address these critical needs, EAD partnered with ETS to host a symposium on monitoring civic learning opportunities and outcomes.⁵ This research note is a follow-up to the symposium. In the sections that follow, we describe the role that assessment can play in improving policy and practice related to civic learning. We provide a brief recap of lessons that presenters and other participants shared at the symposium, followed by a discussion of important next steps. This research note is intended to help educators, education support providers, policymakers, researchers, and assessment developers identify opportunities for engagement and collaboration and inform potential funders about investments in future civic learning assessment

research, development, and implementation so that students are equipped to sustain and strengthen American democracy.

Why assessment?

Of the numerous well-meaning reports and frameworks that have been produced to inform education policy and practice, relatively few are successful in influencing the types of learning experiences students receive. Many fade away, gathering dust on shelves or vanishing into online archives. If EAD is to succeed in achieving its bold and essential ambitions, the field must have means to assess and reflect on civic learning outcomes and progress while gathering data that can support continuous improvement of civics instruction.

Assessment can contribute in a number of ways to EAD's success. Formative assessment strategies can help inform educator practice by pinpointing challenges and assets students might present in their civic and historical thinking and identify instructional strategies that meet students' needs. Summative assessments can show education leaders, families, communities, and policymakers alike whether investments and approaches in deploying EAD are helping students develop key knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for a thriving democracy. In the case of some capstone assessments as well as some classroom-based assessments, student participation in the assessment can itself function as transformative learning experiences by providing opportunities to apply key skills such as research, writing, collaboration, and presentation on topics related to civics. Such assessments can be designed to provide useful feedback to learners while affirming their progress and recognizing them as civic participants. Finally, larger scale monitoring of civic learning opportunities and outcomes plays a crucial role in informing policy, especially as it relates to promoting equity.

Civic learning involves the "ability to seek truth, and I would also add, the ability to understand one another, as really important core competencies of civic life.... How do we understand all these aspects of civic character, civic competency, civic skills and knowledge to understand what students are capable of doing, and can we do that at a large scale?"

— Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Newhouse Director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Tufts University

Of course, the nation's history with educational testing, particularly of the large-scale variety, suggests a need for caution (Koretz, 2009). A system of assessments that supports high-quality, equitable civic learning, broadly defined as in Figure 1, must avoid becoming (or being perceived as) one more high-stakes, burdensome testing and reporting system. At the same time, if we are not identifying ways to measure the success of initiatives such as EAD, how can we be certain that we are succeeding or supporting our students and educators in the most effective way? Put simply, we can't. That is why the learnings from the symposium and subsequent collaborative research, thinking, and action in the area of measurement will remain fundamentally important to EAD's success and to the broader national effort to promote civic learning. In the next section, we summarize some of the key lessons from the symposium.

EAD's ambitious goals will not be achievable "without the assessments to innovatively and creatively track knowledge, skills, and engagement.... Detailed and rigorous investigation of what works for which students and under which circumstances...promotes excellence and equity in civic education."

— Emma Humphries, Chief Education Officer, iCivics

What we learned

The presentations and subsequent discussions generated some valuable lessons for the field about how to design and use assessments in ways that will maximize benefits for students and society while minimizing potential harms. These lessons are not all new; in fact, some reflect well-known principles and standards for assessment development and use. But the lack of a centralized source of guidance specific to assessments of civic learning suggests that there is value in bringing these ideas together and disseminating them to the field. Of course, a brief list cannot fully capture the rich, detailed discussions or the wealth of good advice that was shared at the symposium. Our discussion here is far from comprehensive, but we tried to distill some key takeaways that will be broadly relevant to the education and scholarly communities.

A comprehensive understanding of students' civic competencies requires assessment of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and engagement. The definition of civic competencies provided above makes it clear

that this concept goes well beyond understanding how government works and other content that is traditionally covered in middle and high school civics courses. The speakers at the symposium, including those representing EAD, discussed numerous critical outcomes of civic learning support for, and active participation in, democracy. Symposium moderator Irwin Kirsch noted the importance of a comprehensive framework to guide the development of assessments of these competencies across all age groups.

Civic learning assessments must be designed and validated for specific purposes. Experts in measurement have adopted a definition of "validity" that emphasizes the need to gather validity evidence to support specific interpretations and uses of assessment scores, and they caution users to avoid using an assessment for a purpose for which it is unintended or for which there is a lack of validity evidence (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014). The symposium featured speakers who described a variety of purposes for assessing civic learning, from large-scale assessments to those designed to inform classroom instruction.

"We have a utopian dream for the moment when we are able to have integrated, task-based, scorables reflection assessments where every reflection assessment would be scored for evidence of growth in knowledge, evidence of growth in civic dispositions and attitudes, and evidence for creativity and use of those civic skills."

— Danielle Allen, James Bryant Conant University Professor and Director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, Harvard University

Before selecting or using results from an assessment, users should be clear about their intended purposes and ensure that the assessment they adopt has been designed and validated for those purposes. An assessment intended for large-scale monitoring, for example, should be supported by evidence that it measures exposure to a wide variety of civic learning curricula and experiences, whereas one that is intended to inform instruction should generally have demonstrated alignment with specific curricular objectives while informing instructional next steps.

Assessment involves a set of practices that extend well beyond administering tests. Classroom teachers gather large amounts of data each day to inform their instruction, including informal sources such as students' levels of engagement in tasks or their contributions to classroom discussions. As 2018 Louisiana Teacher of the Year and symposium presenter Kimberly Eckert noted, these kinds of assessments can inform not only individual student progress, but also students' impact on their peers and the overall classroom climate.

"What gets measured? Whatever I want to be measured is what I measure. To me it's the critical skills, it's problem solving, it's effective project planning, it's their ability to be resilient and to have the sustainability, the stamina to get through something even whenever doors are closing in your face.... A lot of this comes down to rubrics."

— Kimberly Eckert, Dean of Undergraduate Studies for Oxford Teachers College, Reach University

Student voice can provide an especially powerful data source to inform instruction while simultaneously facilitating opportunities for students to practice civic engagement by contributing to decision-making. All of these data sources can contribute to a comprehensive approach to assessing student learning and engagement and can complement data gathered from other sources such as curriculum-based tests.

Assessments should be responsive to, and affirming of, students' social and cultural contexts. Assessment developers are increasingly reckoning with a need to consider their potential role in improving racial and socioeconomic equity. Conscientious assessment developers have long applied the best available methods to seek evidence of fairness and validity, but there is recognition that they must go further, including building in cultural responsiveness starting at the earliest phases of test design (Evans, 2021). Assessments of civic learning have the potential to draw on students' cultural context in ways that might be more challenging in other subjects, but they also pose potential risks. The ways in which questions are asked could not only influence the accuracy of inferences about students' capabilities but could also perpetuate biases and stereotypes and lead students from systematically marginalized communities to feel a sense of exclusion or inferiority. Assessments might also advance an assessment developer's political ideology rather than the students' civic knowledge and skills.

Development of assessments that are equally relevant to students regardless of background, political ideology, and other factors and that are not biased in terms of language, culture, or ideology must be a priority. The field also needs assessments that are relevant to a diversity of school governance models (traditional public, charter, faith-based, nonsecular private) as well as out-of-school settings.

"We need to pay attention to the sociocultural context of both learning and assessment.... This means we recognize that learners come from different life experiences, social and cultural contexts, and have different learning experiences and learning opportunities.... We need to take the sociocultural context into account in defining models of cognition and learning in civic education, in how we design tasks and how we interpret performance on assessments."

— Kadriye Ercikan, Vice President, ETS

Assessments designed to inform instruction should not be overly prescriptive. A key feature of EAD is that it does not prescribe a curriculum. Moreover, educators can promote civic learning through a variety of school and classroom activities that occur outside of traditional social studies classes, and they have numerous opportunities to gather data about student learning across these different contexts. Although many textbooks and other curriculum materials come packaged with assessments linked to lessons or units, an instructionally useful approach to civics assessment requires flexibility for teachers to tailor assessments—at least in part—to their own needs and contexts.

Lei Liu's symposium presentation provided an example of how assessment developers might build civics content into an assessment of learning in a subject like science, thereby providing an opportunity to gather

data on civic learning outside the social studies class. In that same panel discussion, Joseph Kahne described a strategy for gathering schoolwide data to inform planning. He pointed out the need for alignment of the data-collection strategy with the goals of the school (e.g., by gathering input related to civic learning activities that the school is emphasizing) and recounted how such data can foster productive discussion about progress toward those goals. And Julia Kaufman discussed teachers' needs for instructional materials and assessments that are engaging and tailored to their students' needs. To ensure that assessments are sensitive to good teaching and to the provision of high-quality civic learning opportunities, while also informing classroom- and school-level decision making, educators can leverage resources such as the *Pedagogy Companion to the EAD Roadmap* to design an assessment approach that is aligned with their needs and priorities.

Measurement for large-scale monitoring should document learning opportunities and not just outcomes. To be actionable, large-scale data on civic learning outcomes should be accompanied by information on the experiences that might have contributed to those outcomes. These opportunity-to-learn data could be gathered through a variety of approaches including student and educator questionnaires and administrative data on course-taking. Ideally, this information will not be limited to in-school experiences but will incorporate evidence of learning that is fostered by the many out-of-school organizations and experiences that support youth civic development (though, of course, there are feasibility concerns related to such an expansion). Data on learning opportunities are especially important for understanding and addressing disparities in learning outcomes across student groups (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019).

Opportunities for civic learning and engagement abound for young people of all ages. EAD's focus is on K–12, but one panel at the symposium was devoted to exploring how postsecondary education institutions can also help students build on the competencies they developed before arriving in college. As moderator Michael Nettles noted, higher education has made significant strides recently in improving the civic participation of their students and promoting civic learning. David Wilson, president of Morgan State University, described how, throughout the organization's history, his institution's students were leaders in engaging in, and promoting more broadly, civic participation among college-aged students. Dr. Wilson also discussed how the university's administration and faculty helped create opportunities for them to do so.

What we still need to learn

One clear takeaway from the symposium is how much we still do not know about how to assess civic learning outcomes and opportunities in ways that will benefit learners and society. We hope that the following list of questions, while certainly incomplete, will guide the efforts of researchers, assessment developers, funders, educators, and others who are working to create and implement high-quality measures of civic learning.

"The institution from Day 1, the way that it was birthed, was never confused about what its educational role is. Its role is to ensure that everything we do at Morgan is about participatory democracy and being true to the founding purpose."

— David Wilson, President
Morgan State University

Questions related to assessment format and content

How can we assess constructs such as civic dispositions and participation? Much of the currently available testing technology supports relatively low-cost, low-burden assessment of civic knowledge and some civic skills. These outcomes constitute only a small fraction of the full set of civic competencies that EAD and other civic-focused groups aim to promote. Symposium participant Andrew Weiss explained how new digital tools might support the measurement of civic dispositions and participatory skills through the use of virtual environments, scenario-based tasks, and other item features that promote interactivity (e.g., tools that allow students to access multiple media sources or engage in simulated conversations). Innovative approaches to analysis of data, including of the test-taker actions in a digital environment, will be necessary to take full advantage of such tools, and nontest data on activities such as volunteering (and, for studying longer term outcomes, voting) can supplement data from assessments. Finding ways to engage in new approaches to assessment and data collection without imposing high costs or other burdens should be a priority for research.

How can we create civic learning assessments that do not exclusively measure reading and writing skills? The participants in our first panel discussed the relevance of literacy skills to civic competencies. Although it would be impossible to disentangle these competencies completely, we will need to figure out how to assess civic competencies in ways that are not overly dependent on the extent to which students have mastered reading and writing skills more generally. This issue is particularly salient for assessing English learners.

How can civic learning assessments build on, or integrate with, assessments of social and emotional learning (SEL)

competencies? The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, n.d., para 1). Support for SEL is widespread among educators (Bridgeland et al., 2019; Hamilton & Doss, 2020), and there are clear connections between SEL and civic learning competencies, as shown in Table 1.

Assessment developers could capitalize on the widespread popularity of SEL in schools and recent efforts to improve measurement of SEL competencies to the extent that these competencies map onto those in the civic learning space (Hamilton, 2020; Vinnakota, 2019). Doing so will require deepening the engagement between the SEL and civic learning research communities as well as a robust portfolio of research on how educators and policymakers can best make use of data from assessments that integrate SEL with civics.

How should users of civics assessment data make sense of correlations between civic competencies and political ideology? It is crucial that we assess civic competencies in ways that do not simply reflect differences in party affiliation or other indicators of political perspective, such as tendency to embrace liberal or conservative policies. At the same time, we should not necessarily expect every civic competency to be unrelated to political ideology; it is entirely possible, for example, that students who embrace a particular ideology are more likely than others to pursue (or to be exposed to) educational experiences that focus on a particular competency. The success of any civic learning effort will

depend in large part on its ability to avoid being widely perceived as promoting specific partisan objectives, so getting a handle on this issue will be essential.

How can we incorporate social and contextual factors into assessments in ways that improve engagement and measurement? The growing interest in culturally relevant assessment practices (Evans, 2021) is leading to a fundamental rethinking of assessment design, administration, analysis, and use among measurement professionals and educators alike. Assessments of civic learning provide an opportunity to engage youth directly with content that is aligned with their social, cultural, and political contexts, but the civics assessment field has yet to grapple with how to create such assessments while maintaining important features such as the ability to produce scores that can be compared across contexts. Further, building social, cultural, or political context into assessment tasks creates a risk of political backlash, so addressing this issue will require a delicate balance and frequent engagement with a diverse set of stakeholders.

Questions related to educator and school capacity

What student learning experiences and classroom/school environments support the teaching of civics and history through an EAD lens? To develop high-quality, useful measures of opportunity to learn, it will be important to draw on research evidence regarding the kinds of classroom and school conditions that are needed to support the instruction envisioned by EAD.

What supports do teachers need to teach and assess civic learning? Teachers of all grade levels and subjects have opportunities to promote civic learning through their instruction, but many lack access to important supports such as preservice or inservice professional learning opportunities and high-quality curricula

TABLE 1: Selected SEL competencies related to civic learning

CASEL 5	DEFINITION	SELECTED COMPETENCIES
RELATIONSHIP SKILLS	The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups	Demonstrating cultural competency Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem solving Resolving conflicts constructively
SOCIAL AWARENESS	The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts	Taking others' perspectives Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones Understanding the influences of organizations and systems on behavior
SELF-AWARENESS	The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts	Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets Demonstrating honesty and integrity Developing interests and a sense of purpose
SELF-MANAGEMENT	The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations	Exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation Setting personal and collective goals Demonstrating personal and collective agency
RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING	The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations	Learning how to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts Identifying solutions for personal and social problems Anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one's actions Evaluating personal, interpersonal, community, and institutional impacts

Note: CASEL 5 = CASEL's five core competencies to navigating the world effectively. SEL = social and emotional learning. From *What Is Social and Emotional Learning?* by CASEL, n.d. (<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/>). Copyright 2022 CASEL.

and assessments (Hamilton et al., 2020). Moreover, not all educators have the resources or experience needed to develop and properly use formative assessment strategies, effectively restricting benefits of such assessment to students of educators who do. Educators and researchers could establish partnerships to pull together the often informal assessment

practices developed by educators into a set of clear formative assessment recommendations and methods. Equipping teachers with such resources is essential, especially given the key role teachers play in preparing the next generation of learners, workers, and community members.

"Educators are actually our nation's first responders for democracy. The primary goal of every educator is to improve the lives of students through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and compassionate dispositions."

— Jacqueline Rodriguez, Vice President, Research, Policy, & Advocacy, AACTE

How can we design rubrics that generate instructionally useful data without creating obstacles to effective teaching? Rubrics can be helpful tools that, if used judiciously, provide timely, instructionally relevant data to inform educators' practices. Although examples of such rubrics have been shared (including in our symposium), there remains a need for research and development that will help identify the features of rubrics that are associated with high-quality instruction. Rubrics may also be useful in creating coherent connections between students' K–12 and postsecondary learning experiences. For example, rubrics such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities' Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) can leverage EAD to provide instructionally valuable information on students' capacities in inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, teamwork, and other skills that students begin to develop in K–12 education and that continue through students' postsecondary experiences.

What are effective best practices to incorporate EAD-relevant skills and dispositions into other existing assessment areas? As noted, assessing civic competencies shouldn't be exclusively limited to the social studies discipline. Reclaiming the civic mission of schooling and reducing the overall assessment burden

on educators demands that we take a hard look at how EAD questions, themes, design challenges, and civic competencies can be embedded within other assessed subject areas (see also Lee et al., 2021). English language arts instruction provides a natural connection, especially given recent efforts to incorporate more nonfiction texts into English language arts instruction and assessment. Science and mathematics also provide opportunities to assess constructs such as quantitative literacy and argumentation skills, which are highly relevant to civic learning. Yet, there is little published research on best practice in integrating constructs from other disciplines and civic competencies across these assessments and relatively few resources to help educators do this.

How can we create assessments that capture the more complex civic skills and dispositions but that do not impose excessive costs or other burdens on educators? In addition to integrating EAD questions, themes, and design challenges within other tested subjects, assessment developers could provide educators more formative assessment tools and performance assessments that can serve as learning experiences. These assessments could be more effective in gauging development of complex civic skills and dispositions while also contributing to instructional decision making, thereby reduce the heavy assessment burden educators often face. EAD is convening a task force on research, evaluation, and measurement that will contribute to this need.

Age-specific transition questions

A key final area that demands attention is strategically navigating civic development across key transition points including lower elementary to upper elementary grades, elementary to middle grades, middle grades to high school, and high school to postsecondary

education or workforce training. Symposium moderator Irwin Kirsch asked whether it might be “feasible to be able to develop consensus around a broad framework that connects students with adults in terms of what they should know and be able to do in terms of their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions all along the educational and posteducational pathway.” This is a crucial area for future research. New evidence to answer the following questions would help educators and learners make the most of these transitions.

How do civic skills and dispositions evolve as students mature, especially across key transition points, and how can we ensure that assessment approaches are aligned with a developmental perspective? New resources such as those developed through EAD demonstrate the variety of ways in which students of all ages can engage in activities that promote civic learning and engagement. Identifying assessment strategies that align with students’ developmental needs will be an important part of any effort to document students’ civic competencies. Such alignment is essential not only for providing high-quality, useful data, but also for promoting buy-in from parents, educators, and other stakeholders.

"How do we build that pathway between K-12 and higher education, how do we inspire to enact and support our work with the acknowledgement that this work starts when we're very young and needs to continue along an intentional pathway?"

— Felice Nudelman, Associate Vice President of Academic Innovation and Transformation, AASCU

What resources could help improve alignment between K-12 and postsecondary civic learning opportunities without imposing constraints on how institutions support their students’ civic development? The significant autonomy and variability that characterizes the American postsecondary education system makes it impossible (and arguably unwise) to impose standards or other structures that would ensure alignment with K-12 education. Instead, there is a need for resources that institutions at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels might use to engage with one another in ways that would support alignment.

Earlier, for example, we discussed the ways in which rubrics might support this alignment. Future research and development efforts should aim to bring together experts and stakeholders from the K-12 and postsecondary sectors, ideally representing the great variety of postsecondary institution types, to explore additional strategies to ensure that students have opportunities to engage in developmentally appropriate, coherent civic learning opportunities throughout their educational journeys. Moreover, as symposium participant Katrina Roohr discussed, evaluating civic learning efforts in higher education will require assessments of student learning that start with a baseline measure to understand where students are when they enter college and track their learning as they progress through their postsecondary careers.

Some short-term next steps

Drawing on the work of our symposium participants and the broader field, we have identified some priorities that can guide policy, practice, development, and research in the near term and that will lay groundwork for a longer term, strategic approach. These potential next steps fall into two categories: system-level supports and resources for educators.

System-level supports. States, school districts, and other systems already require a variety of assessments and other data-collection activities. So, it is important to ensure that new measurement related to civic learning doesn't simply layer on additional requirements for state education agencies and the districts and schools they serve. Instead, to the extent possible, the activities suggested below should be integrated with existing efforts, and this should be done in a way that promotes efficiency and coherence. Policymakers, advocates, scholars, and others can support education system leaders through actions such as the following:

- Create design principles to inform local assessment development, including principles for designing assessment tasks that are culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate.
- Develop an audit/vetting process to help ensure quality and utility of locally developed solutions.
- Provide analysis and recommendations on how civic/EAD skills can be incorporated into existing assessments, including those in subjects such as science and English language arts.
- Develop a set of school and district indicators of support for positive civic development; these could include activities that emphasize student voice and agency in matters related to school governance. These indicators could be used to monitor equity and inform future investment of resources and supports. The NASEM (2019) report described earlier provides useful guidance , and Hamilton and Kaufman (in press) offer some ideas for a system of civic learning indicators.
- Develop a resource for higher education institutions to gauge incoming students' civic readiness, along with a postassessment to gauge how effectively

students developed skills across their higher education experience and use such a system to facilitate greater coherence and alignment between K-12 and postsecondary civic education goals.

- Develop a formal recognition system for K-12 schools and higher education institutions that are investing in measures and supports for civic learning.

Development of educator resources. In general—and especially in the context of pandemic-related disruptions to learning—more is being asked of educators than ever before. State departments of education, research entities, and other stakeholders should provide educators with resources that help them gather data on their students' civic learning while minimizing any burden. Potential actions include the following:

- Create an item/task bank and develop an associated set of discussion questions teachers can use to discuss student work and share ideas about how to address identified instructional needs. Developers of a resource like this would need to implement a mechanism for quality reviews.
- Create templates for reports so that educators and schools can communicate civic progress to families and communities.
- Develop a set of teacher competencies in supporting civic development that can be incorporated into teacher observations and used to provide formative feedback and inform professional learning for teachers.
- Develop and collate case studies of teachers and teams of teachers assessing student civic learning effectively and using assessments to inform their practice.

Conclusion

It is often said in educational assessment that we miss the forest for the trees. In our pursuit of measurable outcomes, we sometimes fail to assess key aspects of learning that prepare youth to tackle the most pressing challenges of our time. The dysfunction evident in our political discourse and the complexities of dealing with seemingly infinite sources of information and misinformation shows no sign of abating, nor does the challenge of living and working in an increasingly interconnected world and global economy.

Preparing youth to meet these challenges demands a reprioritization of the civic mission of public schooling. The viewpoint-diverse consensus that led to the development of the *EAD Roadmap* provides a unique opportunity to re-engage with this essential public, civic mission.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to achieve this vision without a system to effectively measure progress and inform our actions. A single test cannot fulfill all needs with regards to civic readiness. A quality measurement system is essential to ensure we are allocating resources effectively, informing instructional practice, supporting who delivers this practice, and aligning efforts to meet the needs of all learners in an equitable and comprehensive manner. The *EAD Report* begins with a clear warning: "The United States stands at a crossroads of peril and possibility" (EAD, 2021, p. 8). It is our belief that with an effective assessment system to inform our actions and measure our progress, we can navigate our way out of the peril and achieve the full promise of the possibility that the *EAD Report* lays out. And yet this will only be possible through asking and answering difficult questions raised at the symposium and investing in the answers that arise from the symposium and other deliberations. This responsibility, like the gift of democracy, is one we all share, and it deserves nothing less than our best efforts.

"There must be a way to [improve civic learning] that's not business as usual because we're facing a sociopolitical challenge that is not just unusual but extraordinary."

— Christopher Edley, Jr., Honorable William H. Orrick, Jr. Distinguished Professor and Dean Emeritus, UC Berkeley School of Law

References

- American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. American Educational Research Association.
- Breakstone, J., Smith, M., Wineburg, S., Rapaport, A., Carle, J., Garland, M., & Saavedra, A. (2021). Students' civic online reasoning: A national portrait. *Educational Researcher*, 50(8), 505–515. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211017495>
- Bridgeland, J. M., Weissberg, R., & Atwell, M. (2019, December 18). *Social-emotional learning can be an answer to America's meltdown, and principals are getting on board*. The 74. <https://www.the74million.org/article/bridgeland-weissberg-atwell-social-emotional-learning-can-be-an-answer-to-americas-meltdown-and-principals-are-getting-on-board/>
- CASEL. (n.d.). *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>
- Educating for American Democracy. (2021). *Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in civics and history for all learners*. iCivics. <https://www.educatingforamerican-democracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Educating-for-American-Democracy-Report-Excellence-in-History-and-Civics-for-All-Learners.pdf>
- Evans, C. (2021, November 3). Culturally sensitive, relevant, responsive, and sustaining assessment. *Centerline*. <https://www.nciea.org/blog/culturally-responsive/culturally-sensitive-relevant-responsible-and-sustaining-assessment>
- Hamilton, L. S. (2020, November 19). *Youth need better civic learning opportunities, and SEL can pave the way*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://casel.org/casel-award-blog-2020-laura-hamilton/>
- Hamilton, L. S., & Doss, C. J. (2020). *Supports for social and emotional learning in American schools and classrooms* (RR-A397). RAND. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA397-1>
- Hamilton, L. S., & Kaufman, J. H. (in press). Indicators of equitable civic learning in U.S. public schools. *Educational Assessment*.
- Hamilton, L. S., Kaufman, J. H., & Hu, L. (2020). *Preparing children and youth for civic life in the era of truth decay* (RR-A112-6). RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-6.html

- Hansen, M., Levesque, E. M., Valant, J., & Quintero, D. (2018). *The 2018 Brown Center report on American education: How well are American students learning?* The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/the-2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education/>
- International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. (n.d.). *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016*. <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/iccs/2016>
- Kavanagh, J., Carman, K. G., DeYoreo, M., Chandler, N., & Davis, L. E. (2020). *The drivers of institutional trust and distrust: Exploring components of trustworthiness* (RR-A112-7). RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-7.html
- Koretz, D. M. (2009). *Measuring up: What educational testing really tells us*. Harvard University Press.
- Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Engagement. (n.d.). *The LEADE initiative*. https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/What-Is-Civic-Learning_-LEADE-Initiative.pdf
- Lee, C. D., White, G., & Dong, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Educating for civic reasoning and discourse*. National Academy of Education. <https://naeducation.org/educating-for-civic-reasoning-and-discourse-report/>
- Marion, S. (2020). *Using opportunity-to-learn data to support educational equity*. Center for Assessment. https://www.nciea.org/sites/default/files/in-line-files/CFA-Marion.OTL_.Indicators_0.pdf
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *Monitoring educational equity*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25389>
- National Council for the Social Studies. (n.d.). *College, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history*. <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/2017/Jun/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>
- Rogers, J. (with Ishimoto, M., Kwako, A., Berryman, A., & Diera, C.). (2019). *School and society in the age of Trump*. UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access. <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/school-and-society-in-age-of-trump/>
- Vinnakota, R. (2019). *From civic education to a civic learning ecosystem: A landscape analysis and case for collaboration*. Red & Blue Works. https://rbw.civic-learning.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CE_online.pdf

Appendix: Agenda for Monitoring Civic Learning Opportunities and Outcomes: State of the Field and Future Directions

Date: July 13, 2021, Eastern Daylight Time

12:00–12:20 PM	Welcome Laura Hamilton, Associate Vice President, ETS Walt MacDonald, President and Chief Executive Officer, ETS
12:20–1:00 PM	Keynote Danielle Allen, James Bryant Conant University Professor and Director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, Harvard University
1:00–2:00 PM	Session 1: Large-scale monitoring of civic learning opportunities and outcomes Moderator & Discussant: Irwin Kirsch, Ralph W. Tyler Chair in Large Scale Assessment and Director of the Center for Global Assessment, ETS Peggy Carr, Commissioner, NCES Christopher Edley, Jr., Honorable William H. Orrick, Jr. Distinguished Professor and Dean Emeritus, UC Berkeley School of Law Andy Weiss, Assessment Specialist, ETS Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Newhouse Director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Tufts University
2:00–2:15 PM	Break
2:15–3:15 PM	Session 2: Assessing civic learning to inform instructional practices Moderator & Discussant: Laura Hamilton, Associate Vice President, ETS Julia Kaufman, Senior Policy Researcher and Co-Director of the American Educator Panels, RAND Joseph Kahne, Ted and Jo Dutton Presidential Professor for Education Policy and Politics and Co-Director of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG), University of California, Riverside Lei Liu, Managing Senior Research Scientist, ETS Kimberly Eckert, Dean of Undergraduate Studies for Oxford Teachers College, Reach University

3:15–4:15 PM	<p>Session 3: Connecting K–12 and postsecondary civic learning and democratic engagement</p> <p>Moderator & Discussant: Michael Nettles, Senior Vice President and the Edmund W. Gordon Chair of Policy Evaluation and Research, ETS</p> <p>Felice Nudelman, Associate Vice President of Academic Innovation and Transformation, AASCU</p> <p>Katrina Roohr, Senior Impact Scientist, ETS</p> <p>Jacqueline Rodriguez, Vice President, Research, Policy, & Advocacy, AACTE</p> <p>David Wilson, President, Morgan State University</p>
4:15–5:00 PM	<p>Wrap-up and next steps</p> <p>Kadriye Ercikan, Vice President, ETS</p> <p>Emma Humphries, Chief Education Officer and Deputy Director of Field Building, iCivics</p>

Notes

1 <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/the-roadmap/7themes/>

2 <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Pedagogy-Companion-to-the-EAD-Roadmap.pdf>

3 EAD emphasizes integration of civics and history by explicitly naming how history and civics are intricately connected, as in “neither without the other.” For scope reasons, our symposium—and this research note—focused on civic learning, which incorporates some aspects of history, but we did not attempt to cover the discipline of history in a comprehensive way.

4 The NAEP civics assessment was administered at Grades 4, 8, and 12 in 1998 and 2006. In 2014 and 2018, the assessment was administered at Grade 8 only.

5 Video of the full symposium is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nx_jQ1P8jWo

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Trish DiZio and Kristen Mitchell for their work in setting up the ETS/EAD seminar. They also thank John Davis, Anita Sands, and Madeline Goodman for their helpful comments and Kim Fryer and Ayleen Gontz for their editorial and production work on this research note.

Laura Hamilton is an associate vice president at ETS. lshamilton@ets.org

Ace Parsi is the director of coalition engagement at iCivics. ace.parsi@icivics.org

About ETS

At ETS, we advance quality and equity in education for people worldwide by creating assessments based on rigorous research. ETS serves individuals, educational institutions, and government agencies by providing customized solutions for teacher certification, English language learning, and elementary, secondary and postsecondary education, and by conducting education research, analysis, and policy studies. Founded as a nonprofit in 1947, ETS develops, administers, and scores more than 50 million tests annually — including the TOEFL® and TOEIC® tests, the GRE® tests and The Praxis Series® assessments — in more than 180 countries, at over 9,000 locations worldwide.

[ets.org](https://www.ets.org)

About Educating for American Democracy

With a vision of excellence in history and civics for all learners, Educating for American Democracy (EAD) represents a call to action to invest in strengthening history and civic learning and to ensure that civic learning opportunities are delivered equitably throughout the country. The EAD discovery phase involved collaboration among more than 300 academics, historians, political scientists, K–12 educators, district and state administrators, civics providers, students, and others representing viewpoint, professional, and demographic diversity. Following its public launch in March 2021, the EAD initiative entered its implementation phase, following a model that is distributed, iterative, collaborative, and empowering of practitioners throughout the country.

educatingforamerican-democracy.org

Suggested citation: Hamilton, L. S., & Parsi, A. (2022). *Monitoring civic learning opportunities and outcomes: Lessons from a symposium sponsored by ETS and Educating for American Democracy* (ETS Research Notes). ETS.

Cover photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages. Used under a Creative Commons license: [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)

Copyright © 2022 by Educational Testing Service. All rights reserved.

ETS, the ETS logo, GRE, THE PRAXIS SERIES, TOEIC, and TOEFL are registered trademarks of Educational Testing Service (ETS). All other trademarks are property of their respective owners.