



iCIVICS
Readers

Civic Education for the Elementary Grades

Introduction

iCivics Readers was created in collaboration between iCivics and Teacher Created Materials (TCM), to help students begin to think about what it means to be global citizens, learn where they fit in the practices and processes that help governments run, foster a love for reading about interesting and compelling topics, and spur their newfound knowledge into action by exploring age-appropriate, real-world problems. TCM and iCivics have joined forces to create a curriculum that meets this need. Patriotism, civic discourse, twenty-first-century skills—it's called many different things, but it all boils down to helping students figure out their roles and responsibilities in a globally connected community.

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The Logic Model

The Logic Model in Figure 1 demonstrates how iCivics Readers is designed to develop successful, civic-minded citizens. Evidence of this is suggested through its resources and activities, which are linked to positive outcomes for students. The goal of this table is to help visualize how implementing iCivics Readers can support and contribute to achieving school and district goals.

Figure 1—Logic Model

Problem Statement: There is a need for civic education at the K–5 level.					
Outcome/Goal: To help students build civics skills					
Theory of Action					
Educators implement evidence-based iCivics Readers strategies and materials.	K–5 students engage in and utilize iCivics Readers content and strategies.	K–5 students will have increased skills and experience with civics.	K–5 students will have increased achievement in ELA/ Literacy/ Writing.	K–5 students will be prepared for secondary and post-secondary education success.	Students will become active, civic-minded citizens.
Logic Model					
Assumptions	Resources/Inputs	Activities	Outputs/Metrics	Outcomes	Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School districts are interested and prepared to incorporate civics and literacy instruction. Students can learn civic education content through successive 30-minute lessons. Identified reading comprehension strategies lead to increase in reading comprehension. High-interest texts engage students in reading. Technology is accessible in the classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management Guide with key research Materials developed in partnership with iCivics organization. 10 topic-driven, high-interest books featuring fiction/nonfiction paired texts 5-day lesson plans to support literacy and social studies standards Civic discourse mini-lessons embedded within every lesson 3 civics-based card games Multimedia resources, including videos, speeches, songs, and audio files Assessments Paired-text extensions Reflection opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30-minute daily lesson Exploration of essential questions Explicit instruction in comprehension strategies Explicit instruction in content vocabulary Teacher modeling of reading of texts and think-alouds Collaborative reading and reflection opportunities for students with high-interest texts Daily text discussion Engaging activities and structured practice for students to engage in text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student engagement in texts and resources Meet or exceed expectations of ELA and social studies standards Completion of lessons Formative and summative assessments Involvement in civic activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of reading comprehension strategies Increased civic involvement Application of literacy skills to other more complex texts. Greater achievement in ELA skills and social studies subject matter Engagement in reading, writing, speaking, and listening Consistent practice in reading across content areas Increased confidence in reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased interest in literacy and civics among school-aged students Development of civic-minded citizens Creation of life-long readers Prepared for secondary and post-secondary education success

Civic Education: Historical Importance

Since the founding era, if not before, a primary purpose of schooling in America has been civic education. Preparing children for their future roles as citizens in America's republican government, for the preservation of said government, was the primary purpose of schooling.

Once America reached the later decades of the nineteenth century, "modern" civic education emerged as a recognized and discrete curriculum. Civic education was increasingly viewed as a subject matter within schooling, a question of curriculum choices, rather than playing a central role. Thus began its decades-long fight to be recognized as a critical subject area, battling the other disciplines for instructional time as the purpose of schooling shifted from social to financial—from preparing citizens to preparing workers.

For the past 60 years, civic education has been losing this fight. The mid-nineteenth century space race with the Soviet Union ushered in an era of prioritizing STEM education, which is a trend that continues today. While an average of \$54 per student is spent each year to ensure their learning in science, technology, engineering, and math, only \$0.05 is spent to ensure students' civic education (Adams 2019). Moreover, some states have no civic education requirements.

Our nation's disinvestment in civics happened slowly over time. Additionally, there has been a gradual mindset shift about the purpose of schooling. Perhaps the most notable example of this occurred in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2001, which prioritized the teaching of reading and mathematics by linking those subjects to testing and school-level accountabilities. There was no specific



mention of civic education, or even a broad mention of social studies, and thus began an even greater diminishing of resources and instructional time for civics, especially at the elementary level.

Recently, the U.S. political landscape has shifted in such powerful ways that it has pushed civics into the national dialogue. Despite an increase in polarization, most Americans seem to agree with the need to reinvest in civic education. The form that civic education should take and what should be emphasized remains a contentious issue divided mostly along partisan lines. However, most people agree that more and better civic education has become a necessity.

Defining Civic Education

Civic education is the study of citizenship. It is the pursuit of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors that allow individuals to effectively participate in government. Whereas the study of government is all about institutions, people, and processes, civic education is about the role of citizens.

Civic education is often referred to as *civics*. Civics derives from the Latin word *civicus*, meaning “relating to a citizen.” According to political scientist and Harvard professor Danielle Allen, the phrase “civic education” refers to forms of learning and pedagogy that draw on a suite of disciplines and experiences. Civic education scaffolds the development of young people into “self-aware, well-informed, equitable, and effective democratic citizens” (Allen 2019). This education also helps them possess the bodies of knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions necessary to maintain a healthy democratic society (Democratic Knowledge Project 2020).

In the past, civic education focused primarily on the accumulation of knowledge of government structure, government processes, relevant social studies knowledge and concepts, and American history and political thought. While civic knowledge, or content mastery, is still viewed as foundational to robust civic education, additional dimensions of civic learning and expression have been recognized as equally important:

- **Intellectual Skills:** critical thinking, perspective-taking, media literacy (analysis, evaluation, bias), speaking and listening about public issues, the importance of building an argument, and drawing connections between democratic concepts and one’s own life experience
- **Civic Dispositions:** attitudes important in a democracy, such as a sense of civic duty, sense of efficacy, tolerance of differences, compromise, concern for the welfare of others, and commitment to trustworthiness and bridge-building

- **Civic Skills and Behaviors:** competencies in the use of one’s voice, dialogue across differences, practices of democratic coordination and political institutions, alongside access to networks, opportunities to participate, and other forms of social capital that promote civic agency

The C3 Framework

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) is a guideline to help today’s teachers overcome the challenges of teaching social studies. This framework calls for teachers to move students beyond simply memorizing narratives. The C3 Framework reinforces skills to help students become critical evaluators of past and present societies and to better prepare them for college, career, and civic lives.

Advocates of citizenship education cross the political spectrum, but they are bound by a common belief that our democratic republic will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; know the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good. There will always be differing perspectives on these objectives. The goal of knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens, however, is universal (NCSS 2010, 5).

Whether students are studying American history, world geography, or microeconomics, the underlying goal of social studies education is to prepare students to fulfill their citizenship responsibilities. Social studies courses should raise students’ civic competence.

The Partnership

iCivics is a nonprofit driven by an ambitious goal: to reimagine civic education for the next generation. Founded in 2009 by Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, iCivics publishes educational video games and classroom resources that teach young Americans the civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors they need to effectively participate in American democracy. Their mission is one of equity: all students must benefit from excellent civic education, regardless of their race, ethnicity, native language, geography, or family income. iCivics games transform abstract concepts into



Sandra Day O’Connor

real-life problems. Its success as a teacher-driven organization comes from its free, nonpartisan, and deeply innovative resources.

Teacher Created Materials has been meeting the curricular needs of students and teachers since 1977. The organization publishes innovative, imaginative, and award-winning resources for teachers and students in all subjects for grades K–12. TCM consistently searches for opportunities to help teachers and students think about how they fit into the world, how they can make a difference, and when to take action.

The Purpose of iCivics Readers

The books and lesson plans in *iCivics Readers* were designed to meet the needs of civic education today. This resource teaches students the ins and outs of civic education and provides educators with high-quality, engaging resources to prepare students for both civic engagement and citizenship responsibilities. Literacy and civic education merge to help students gain civic knowledge, practice civic skills, and develop civic dispositions. Students engage in critical-thinking exercises, thoughtful discussions, and engaging activities that guide them to becoming active, civic-minded members of society who understand the value of their citizenship.

iCivics Readers' Topics—K–5

Each grade-level kit in the *iCivics Readers* series includes 10 books that cover these crucial topics:

- **Making Changes Together** books showcase real-world examples of how citizenship can be exercised today and the importance of working with others to achieve civic goals.
- **Elections** books explain the democratic election process. Students learn about the election process and how they can exercise their citizenship through voting.
- **Changemakers** books look at the lives of individuals who have influenced civic changes throughout history and the context surrounding their actions.
- **Global Citizenship** books illustrate that individuals are citizens of communities, nations, and the world and that people in these places make choices and act in ways that affect people all around the world.
- **Money Matters** books examine how money flows into and out of a democracy and how economics and civics affect each other.
- **21st-Century Civics Skills** books encourage the skills that are integral to becoming active, effective citizens today and in the future.
- **Civic Leaders** books describe the roles of leaders or groups of leaders who support and develop civic virtues and values in society.

- **Civic Issues Today** books delve into the facts, details, and varying perspectives on current civic issues.
- **Words to Remember** books analyze historical words from famous documents, speeches, and court rulings to explore the impacts of these primary sources and the effects of powerful words.
- **Sharing Information** books explore the roles that media plays in a democracy and one's own responsibility in evaluating and disseminating accurate information.

In Today's Classrooms

Research urges today's schools to offer civic learning experiences that encourage and increase young people's civic engagement. Specifically, a report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE (2003) lists "Six Promising Approaches to Civic Education" to follow:

1. Provide **instruction** in government, history, law, and democracy.
2. Incorporate **discussion** of current, local, national, and international issues and events in the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.
3. Design and implement **service-learning** programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Offer **extracurricular activities** that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.
5. Encourage **student participation in school governance**, and provide space for their voices in meaningful decisions about issues that are important to them.
6. Encourage students' participation in **simulations** of democratic processes and procedures.

Civic Education Best Practices

The Founders knew from the start that well-educated citizens would be key to making our democracy work. In the government that the framers established under the U.S. Constitution, citizens have the final authority. With this authority comes a responsibility for Americans to understand basic civic concepts, such as the separation of powers, federalism, individual rights, and the role of government.

Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and Congressman Lee Hamilton wrote, "Knowledge of our system of governance and our rights and responsibilities as citizens is not passed along through the gene pool...each generation of Americans must be taught these basics" (Gould et al. 2011). Research shows that students who receive high-quality civic education are more likely to understand public issues, participate in civic activities, and view the political process as a method of enacting change in their communities.

Civic education provides skills transferable to college and career, such as the development of evidence-based argumentative reasoning and writing skills. Civic education encompasses civic knowledge as well as appropriate civic skills, behaviors, and attitudes. To be effective, responsible members of society, students should seek to preserve principles of democracy and learn how to engage in their communities to solve civic problems. They should learn to advocate for informed positions, identify consensus-building opportunities, and work to implement solutions. As noted in the *Educating for American Democracy* report, "When civic education succeeds, all people are prepared and motivated to participate effectively in civic life" (2021). States that have worked to revitalize and strengthen their approach to civic education are finding test scores are improving and their youth are taking an informed interest in civic affairs. *iCivics Readers* provides the perfect opportunity to teach civic education, which will strengthen schools and communities.

Building Content Knowledge

A high-quality civic education must include direct instruction in U.S. history, government, law, and democracy (Gould et al. 2011). Those courses should include the following concepts:

- the fundamental principles of democracy and the U.S. Constitution
- major themes in U.S. history
- relationships between the U.S. government and other sectors of American life
- tensions between the public good and the rights of individuals
- diverse values and interests held by Americans and ways in which elected officials, interest groups, and political parties represent those values and interests

High-quality civic education also incorporates current events, especially events that are important to young people. Carefully moderated discussions of current events allow students to share and respond to a variety of viewpoints. Students who participate in those conversations at school report greater interests in politics outside of school.

Teaching Methods for Civic Education

While the content of social studies classes is important, so are the methods of teaching that content. There are four general principles that should guide civic education per the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (Gould et al. 2011). Effective civic programs are able to do the following:

- Focus on the civic outcomes required of citizens, such as voting and following the news.
- Advocate for students to personally participate in politics (without advocating for specific political parties or positions).
- Avoid rote memorization of facts and instead use active learning to engage students in discussions, debates, service learning, and simulations of democratic processes and procedures to gain a deeper understanding of content and skills.
- Emphasize the principles in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution and connect those historical documents to the current realities of students' lives.

An informative and engaging civic education prepares young Americans for their responsibilities as citizens. It also inspires them to get involved. Civic knowledge boosts students' confidence in democracy and encourages them to vote, discuss politics, join civic groups, and contact government officials. This fulfills the overall goal of civic education—to prepare young people to be competent and responsible global citizens.



Developing Skills and Dispositions

It is often said that knowledge is power. But people need more than knowledge to be competent and responsible global citizens. They need skills that help them get involved in effective ways. They also need dispositions, or character traits, that spur them toward action.

Democracy requires people to think critically and take collective action. This aligns with the four Cs that are considered essential in twenty-first-century classrooms: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (National Education Association 2012). The building blocks of these complex skills can be taught and practiced in any civics class:

- speaking and listening
- collaboration
- community organizing
- gathering and processing information
- public advocacy

In addition to civic skills, there is also a set of civic dispositions that are important in democratic societies (Gould et al. 2011). Those dispositions include the following:

- a concern for the rights and welfare of others
- a belief in fairness
- reasonable levels of trust
- a sense of public duty

Best practices in civic education can help students cultivate these dispositions. For example, research has shown that discussions in civics classes increase students' concerns about the unfair treatment of others. Learning about America's beginnings can lead to a sense of public duty, and studying historical events can improve students' understanding of fair and unfair policies.

The social-emotional learning (SEL) standards and policies that many states and school districts have adopted also support the development of civic dispositions (Taylor et al. 2017). The goal of SEL is "to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL 2019). These social-emotional skills will support the development of civic dispositions in American students.

21st-Century Literacy Demands

Utilizing the three-part framework of the reading process is an effective and easily implementable way to develop the necessary college, career, and civic literacy skills needed today.

Before Reading—Students engage in activities that make the text more relatable, such as previewing the text and generating questions, studying complex vocabulary, and making personal connections.

During Reading—Students use strategies to read texts closely with different purposes, such as seeking text-based answers to questions, examining text structure, and self-monitoring comprehension.

After Reading—Students deepen their understanding and reflect on their learning by engaging in research, synthesizing information, and crafting written responses.

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has gained increased attention in education over the past decade. SEL involves supporting students with a variety of skills, behaviors, and attitudes that they need to be healthy, happy individuals, now and in the future. These skills include the ability to identify, understand, monitor, and regulate emotions in oneself, as well as the ability to recognize emotions in others, build successful relationships, and make positive decisions for their well-being, the well-being of others, and the well-being of society as a whole.

The benefits of SEL integration include the following: higher academic achievement, improved classroom behavior, more positive attitudes about school, themselves, and their peers, and better stress management. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five core competencies related to SEL. Within these five competencies, multiple strategies and behaviors are present (CASEL 2017).

- **Self-Awareness:** Recognize your own emotions, thoughts, and values. Assess your strengths and weaknesses. Have a growth mindset.
- **Self-Management:** Manage your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Set and work toward goals.
- **Social Awareness:** Take on the perspectives of others, especially those who are different from you. Understand societal expectations and know where to get support.

- **Relationship Skills:** Establish and maintain relationships with others. Communicate effectively and negotiate conflict as necessary.
- **Responsible Decision-Making:** Make positive choices based on established norms. Understand and consider consequences.

Project-Based Learning

Ask questions. Brainstorm responses. Evaluate options. Problem-solving is a twenty-first-century skill that students need to successfully navigate high school, college, and future careers. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2019), an important learning and innovation skill is for students to identify and ask significant questions that clarify various points of view and lead to better solutions. Students today must learn how to learn, while responding to endlessly changing technologies and social, economic, and global conditions (Barron and Darling-Hammond 2008).

Cultural Responsiveness

Culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) teaching brings students' backgrounds to the forefront of classrooms. CLR recognizes the importance of embracing students' diverse lives in all aspects of learning. Teachers can build on experiences of students' home and community lives to help all students experience success in school.

Researcher Kathryn Au (2009) urges teachers to strive for settings that incorporate high academic goals that are appropriate for all students while also providing a comfortable environment that allows students to meet those goals. One issue, Au notes, is that good teaching changes based on the students in class. To be responsive to all students' cultural backgrounds, Au recommends structuring classrooms to allow for success both in individual achievement-oriented ways as well as in group-oriented ways.

Dr. Sharroky Hollie (2018) recommends educators supplement core thematic texts with culturally responsive texts. To be culturally and linguistically responsive, educators must know their students. When educators validate students' cultures and languages through classroom management and materials, they help students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and allow students to use their backgrounds to supplement the classroom learning environment.

Civics in Action Using iCivics Readers

An effective way to engage students is to make learning active rather than passive. The practice of linking civic education in the classroom with real-world issues beyond school walls, aims to do just that. This instructional model gives students opportunities to define problems in their communities, brainstorm and enact solutions, and reflect on their experiences.

The *iCivics Readers* call this Civics in Action. High-quality Civics in Action instructional models have eight key components:

- student-led planning, implementation, and evaluation
- rigorous performance expectations
- structured reflection opportunities
- meaningful and personally relevant service activities
- promotion of diversity and respect for differing perspectives
- collaboration and focus on community needs
- frequent and timely feedback
- a significant investment of students' time and effort

To fulfill the mission of preparing global citizens to be active participants in democracy, schools should provide students with a variety of opportunities to practice self-government. Student government and extracurricular activities are proven practices for civic education.

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