



Civic Education

State Initiatives

Education Commission of the States

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Florida and Illinois: Civics Initiatives, No Law Required

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Since the 1970s, public engagement has declined, generating great concern for some about the future of our nation's democracy. Some consider this decline a national crisis.¹

Two states, **Illinois** and **Florida**, have made significant efforts – without legislation – to create a network of academic institutions committed to providing students with opportunities to gain the skills necessary to be effective participants in a democracy. These efforts demonstrate how leadership can drive change.

Illinois and Florida take notably different approaches. Illinois' initiative is targeted at high school students through the state's Democracy Schools, which are schools recognized by the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition for their established commitment to civic learning. The Florida College System Civics Literacy Initiative, meanwhile, is viewed as a long-term project that will impact college students throughout the state as well as communities served by the participating colleges.

Both states are using systems-change to send a strong signal that civics education is a priority – in Florida, this refers to the college system, while in Illinois the focus is on the Schools of Democracy system. Illinois and Florida are examples of states affecting large-scale change without policy directives. With that, their work has caught the attention of the policy world.

Key takeaways from this report

- Florida and Illinois have statewide civics initiatives that were created without legislation.
- Both states ensured that their efforts were non-partisan, inclusive and collaborative.
- In Illinois, the success of Democracy Schools has inspired the legislature to act.
- The number of Democracy Schools in Illinois grew from four in 2006 to 22 in 2013.
- While based in the college system, the Florida College System Civics Literacy Initiative engages the K-12 system and is implemented in academic and extracurricular activities.



Illinois Democracy Schools

A Network of Secondary Schools

Illinois' Democracy Schools promote and strengthen civics education through a systemwide initiative focused on secondary schools. The state's commitment to civic education is reflected in the increase in the number of Democracy Schools from four in 2006 to 22 in 2013. The distinction of "Democracy School" is awarded by the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition (ICMC) to schools that show a deep commitment to civic learning.

The ICMC is a broad, nonpartisan consortium that includes K-12 educators and administrators, students, university staff, funders and nonprofit sectors. Their work helps schools weave civics through the curriculum and through extracurricular activities. It is designed to promote character development, strengthen school-community relationships and foster a positive school climate. Supported by the McCormick Foundation, Democracy Schools are part of a formalized network of teachers and administrators who, through the sharing of their experiences, strengthen their practices and help students better understand how civics education relates to the current challenges and controversies in their schools and beyond.³

"Like millions of their peers across the country, many secondary school students in this state lack sufficient formal instruction and opportunities for the development of civic engagement. ... The strength of our communities, this State, and our nation depends on future generations understanding, appreciating, and actively engaging in civic responsibility."

– Senate Resolution 149 (2011)²

To become a Democracy School, a team of faculty members and administrators must apply to ICMC. The application process includes a schoolwide civic assessment that shows evidence of how the school's courses, activities and policies offer high-quality civic learning opportunities. In addition to building a case for Democracy School recognition, prospective schools must identify gaps and articulate strategies to improve the quantity, quality and access to civic learning at the school. The McCormick Foundation civics program helps schools with the application by providing liaisons who can guide teams through the process.⁴

Revisiting the Mission of Public Schools

Democracy Schools' student bodies are racially and economically diverse and have numerous English language learners. The schools' approach to civics education strives to support understanding differences, encourages dialogue on difficult issues and places a value on positive contributions to the community – critical components of effective engagement in a democracy. "Preparing young people for their role as citizens of our great democracy should stand alongside college- and career-readiness as the central charges of today's schools," wrote Shawn Healy, chair of the ICMC and the civic learning and engagement scholar at the McCormick Foundation. To achieve this end, Democracy Schools:

1. Teach critical skills through a semester of civics and financial literacy.
2. Foster engagement through Student Voice Committees – opportunities for students to identify and discuss issues in their schools, and to deliberate with their principals to find solutions and improve school climate.
3. Support global learning through engagement in students' schools, cities and beyond.⁵

Democracy Schools – created without the directive of state law – inspired the state’s legislature to act in support. [Senate Resolution 149](#) from 2011 encourages all of Illinois’ secondary schools to become Democracy Schools and requires that each district's report cards identify which schools are Democracy Schools and which are not. “It is more than recognition; it is a challenge to continue to grow and improve, and a responsibility to maintain our focus and vision. It is affirmation of our civic mission and its importance for our students and the community,” wrote Sharon Smogor, a social studies teacher at Carmel Catholic High School in Mundelein, Ill.⁶

Florida

Closing the Gap: The Florida College System Civics Literacy Initiative

Pointing to research that ties academic performance and civic education, the Florida College System (FCS) Civics Literacy Initiative has broad support from the system administration, students and political leaders. Former Florida governor and U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, D-FL, inspired and championed the initiative. He gained the support of all 28 of the state’s colleges as well as stakeholders across the political spectrum. He called October’s forum on the Civics Literary Initiative, “One of the most important gatherings on this topic that will be held in Florida and indeed in the United States in 2013.”⁷

The initiative is a program of the St. Petersburg College Institute for Strategic Policy Solutions and will be implemented at all of Florida’s colleges. The initiative strives to:

- Develop models to integrate civic literacy into cross-curriculum coursework.
- Survey the Florida College System for best practices and establish an on-going clearinghouse to measure progress and share successes.
- Embed civic literacy in the mission statements of the colleges in the FCS.
- Develop a FCS Model Legislature.
- Develop strategies to promote civic engagement among domestic and international immigrants and other special populations.⁸

The initiative has been well-received and the college presidents continue to move forward in implementing its goals. Tom Furlong, president of Bachelor Degree Access Solutions and key player in the initiative, offers four strategies to states interested in developing such a civics initiative:

- 1. Stay focused on your goal**
Stay focused on increasing students’ knowledge of civics and commit to remaining nonpartisan. The Florida initiative included support from the Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of Florida, the Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government at the University of Central Florida, the Education Commission of the States and the FCS Council of Presidents.
- 2. Develop a statewide civics institute or center**
A statewide civics institute offers leadership and guidance and keeps the momentum moving forward. The Institute for Strategic Policy Solutions plays that role in Florida.
- 3. Partner with the K-12 system**
Through collaboration and partnership, the higher education system and the K-12 system support each other’s efforts. College students in Florida work with secondary schools to create programs such as Model United Nations.
- 4. Implement civics education in both the academic curriculum and in student activities**
Students benefit from both academic courses and involvement in civics projects. In Florida, students are involved in Turbo Vote, Model U.N. and other campus clubs and activities.⁹

Conclusion

Examples in Florida and Illinois show how civic initiatives are able to flourish, even without legislation. Inspired actors have the ability to affect substantive and systemic change and can help shape the conversation on civics education. Successful initiatives like these have paid attention to goal-setting and collaboration, and have gained support from a broad range of stakeholders. Through the networks created in each state, institutions have the opportunity to highlight exemplary practices in their schools and to create a strong culture around civics education.

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About the series

This is the third in a series of reports examining state initiatives related to civic education. Previous reports highlight [states addressing civics with mandated task forces](#) and explore [efforts in Florida and Tennessee to hold schools and students accountable for civics knowledge](#).

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Endnotes

¹ Sam Dillon, The New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/education/05civics.html?_r=0

² Illinois Senate Resolution 149. <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/97/SR/PDF/09700SR0149lv.pdf> 2011

³ Robert McCormick Foundation. <http://www.mccormickfoundation.org/page.aspx?pid=987>

⁴ Illinois Civic Blueprint, 2nd Edition. Robert R McCormick Foundation. 2013

⁵ John Schmidt. Chicago Public Schools. YouTube Interview. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GySN0k0qViY> 2013

⁶ Illinois Civic Blueprint, 2nd Edition. Robert R McCormick Foundation. 2013

⁷ Institute for Strategic Policy Solutions. <http://solutions.spcollege.edu/civic-literacy-initiative/> 2013

⁸ St Petersburg College News <http://newsspc.wordpress.com/2013/10/27/spc-florida-college-system-pledge-continued-support-for-statewide-civics-literacy-initiative/> 2013.

⁹ Tom Furlong. Interview. May 2014.