



Too few Americans are graduating High School without the analytical skills and civic efficacy and proficiency (the ability to participate as a responsible member of a community) to be prepared for life in the 21st Century (Bitter and Loney 2015). Youth are entering the post-secondary education world without the capability of participating in society at a level that is necessary to create change. This calls for a shift in our K-12 education system.

Action Civics is a student-centered, project-based approach to education that develops the individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for 21st century democratic practice. It is an iterative process where participants analyze and reflect as they move towards an action goal. All voices, concerns, and perspectives are encouraged and valued to the fullest extent possible. Students build both a solid knowledge-base and skill set through this experiential learning method. This process begins with students identifying an issue in their community that is relevant to them. They then research and analyze root causes, speak to community experts and stakeholders, develop goals and strategies to address their issue, put their plan into action, and then reflect on their experience (generationcitizen.org; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsburg 2015). These Action Civics experiences that reflect student interests and deepen understanding can help build students' participation in the democratic society in the future (Levinson 2014; Levy and Zint 2013).

Action Civics is one of many forms of “authentic” teaching, all of which have been shown to improve student learning, as well as increase student motivation and content retention, compared to traditional methods (Levinson 2014). The ways in which students experience civics education has been shown to matter in their levels of engagement (Matto et al. 2017). Active learning has been demonstrated to increase motivation, which has been shown to stay with students later in life (Matto et al. 2017). Civics education should be open-ended, allowing students to form their own views, and to deliberate with others (Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg 2015). Many studies show that if students participate in Action Civics as young people, they are more likely to participate in the political process when they're older (Almond and Verba, 1963; Ballard et al., 2016; Beck and Jennings, 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995). Levinson (2014) said it best, “What excites these young people, at least initially, is not the civic engagement itself; rather, it is the achievement of goals that are personally important to them, for which civic engagement turns out to be the means. By achieving their goals through civic action, however, these youth remain civically engaged and are motivated to continue participating.”

Along with motivation and civic participation later on in life, many learning gains have been documented in the shorter-term as a result of Action Civics instruction, including increased civics knowledge, retention, and self-efficacy, as well as general political knowledge (Ballard et al. 2016; Matto et al. 2017). This methodology has been shown to build citizenship, and help students become more tolerant of people not like themselves (Morgan and Streb 2001). Remy (1979) went so far as to identify seven learning competencies that improve with civic education. This paper, with these seven competencies (acquiring and using information, assessing involvement, making decisions, making judgements, communicating, cooperating, and promoting interests)



was clearly ahead of its time. These are essentially the 21st Century Skills that are heavily emphasized in education today, all of which are improved with effective civics education (Remy 1979; Billig et al. 2012).

Similarly to learning gains, attitudinal shifts have also been reported. Melchior (1998) saw a significant increase in students' acceptance in cultural diversity, service leadership, and personal/social responsibility after participating in action civics projects. The openness and discussion-based (versus traditional lectures) format has been shown to be particularly important in shaping political engagement in students (Matto et al. 2017). The open class climate has been shown to develop essential skills for democratic engagement and help students express their opinions (Matto et al. 2017). Billig et al. (2005) found that students were reporting a higher intent to vote compared to their peers.

This research shows that civics instruction should be active. It should involve student voice and investigation, engage them in their communities, spur discussions, and create change. This method creates citizens who are equipped to participate in democratic societies: who vote, engage politically, who are educated in their decision making. The pinnacle of Action Civics is when students' efforts result in real world policy or practice changes. While these changes are less frequent than practitioners would like, we are seeing an uptick in the number of student projects that lead to real world change (Gingold 2013). Action Civics transforms both individuals and communities, building essential civic leadership skills in youth who are actively improving their communities.

LITERATURE CITED

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Sage Publications.

Ballard, P. J., Cohen, A. K., & Littenberg-Tobias, J. (2016). Action civics for promoting civic development: Main effects of program participation and differences by project characteristics. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 58(3-4), 377-390.

Beck, P. A., & Jennings, M. K. (1991). Family traditions, political periods, and the development of partisan orientations. *Journal of Politics*, 53, 742-63.

Billig, S., Root, S., & Jesse, D. (2005). The impact of participation in service-learning on high school students' civic engagement. *Circle Working Paper*, 33.

Billig et al. (2012). *Engaging students through academic service-learning: national guide to implementing quality academic service-learning*. National Coalition for Academic Service-learning, www.service-learning.org/filemanager/download/K-12_Service-Learning_Project_Planning_Toolkit.pdf.



Bitter, C., & Loney, E. (2015). DEEPER LEARNING: Improving student outcomes for college, career, and civic life. Education Policy Center at American Institutes for Research, <https://www.air.org/policycenter>.

Gingold, J. (2013). CIRCLE Working Paper #78: Building an evidence-based practice of action civics: The current state of assessments and recommendations for the future. Tufts University College of Citizenship and Public Service.

Levine, P., & Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2015). Civic education and deeper learning. Students at the center: Deeper learning research series. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

Levinson, M. (2014). Action civics in the classroom. *Social Education*, 78(2), 68–70.

Levy, B. L. M., & Zint, M. T. (2013). Toward fostering environmental political participation: framing an agenda for environmental education research. *Environmental Education Research*, 19:5, 553-576.

Matto et al. (2017). Teaching civic engagement across the disciplines. American Political Science Association.

Melchior, A. (1998). National evaluation of learn and serve America school and community-based programs: final report. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcek12/2>.

Morgan, W., & Steb, M. (2001). Building citizenship: How student voice in service-learning develops civic values. *Service Learning General*, 83.

Remy, R. C. (1979). Handbook of basic citizenship competencies: guidelines for comparing materials, assessing instruction, and setting goals. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Rosenstone, S., & Hansen, J. M. (1993). Mobilization, participation and democracy in America. New York: Macmillan.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. (1995). Voice and equality: civic voluntarism in American politics. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.