



Preparing All Students for Capable Civic Participation in a Democratic Society

A Statement on Civic Education in New York State

DemocracyReady NY is a statewide, nonpartisan, multigenerational coalition of organizations and individuals that works together to ensure that K-12 schools in New York State provide a comprehensive education that prepares all students to exercise their civic responsibilities. Our members include education stakeholders and educational and civic organizations from all parts of the state.

DemocracyReady NY is issuing this statement in response to recent discussions about how civics and history education should be taught in the classroom. Key topics in this dialogue include the role of deliberation on controversial issues and the challenge of teaching a full and accurate U.S. history. We are concerned that statements and positions that discourage proven practices of civic education, such as discussing current events and deliberating about public policy issues in an open classroom climate, undermine, rather than support, schools' vital role in preparing students for capable, informed citizenship in a multiracial, democratic society.

Schools have a critical role in preparing students to function productively as civic participants. Indeed, schools provide a rare institution in our highly polarized society where youth can interact with people from diverse backgrounds and with varied views on public and academic issues. There, they can engage with multiple perspectives in a setting that encourages rational discussion, and promotes constructive, public-spirited action. In schools, children also acquire the basic knowledge, critical thinking, participatory experiences, and values necessary for building and maintaining a democratic community. These educational opportunities should be enhanced, not constricted, if our democratic system is to be maintained.

Specifically, we encourage a vision of civic education where youth can develop robust knowledge of history and governmental systems, as well as strong civic skills, including the ability to deliberate on public matters and to engage constructively in improving their communities and beyond. This vision must include teaching about difficult histories, engaging with potentially contentious conversations including, but not limited to issues of race and gender, wrestling with competing perspectives, and fostering students' involvement in authentic civic spheres. These efforts will make for a stronger democracy.

Over the past half century, civic education in schools throughout the nation has been neglected. Far too many students have been denied access to civic learning opportunities and many schools, particularly those that serve students in poverty, immigrants and students of color, have lacked the resources to provide a robust civic education. Many young people are ready for supportive entry into civic life, but not enough of them have been given this opportunity.

Fortunately, in New York State, many of our leaders have understood the dire implications of this neglect and have begun to take steps to turn the tide. The New York Court of Appeals, the highest court in our state, has proclaimed that the core purpose of education is to prepare students to “function productively as civic participants,” and that the state constitution guarantees all students a “meaningful opportunity” to obtain such an education. The New York State Board of Regents and the State Education Department have redefined the expected outcome of education in New York State in terms of ensuring that students are “college, career and *civically* ready.” They have also adopted a robust definition of “civic education,” which includes not only civic knowledge but also skills, experiences, and mindsets, and they are in the process of implementing a State Seal of Civic Readiness initiative that will recognize students who have excelled in civic preparation activities, including, but not limited to, course work and substantial capstone projects.

DemocracyReady NY supports the definition of “civic readiness” adopted by the Regents. It emphasizes “civic knowledge, civic skills, civic mindsets and civic experiences.” Included in the examples of civic readiness cited by the Regents are:

- Viewing and analyzing history and current issues from multiple perspectives;
- Knowing the impact of individual and collective histories in shaping contemporary issues;
- Demonstrating a broad array of critical analytic, verbal, communication, media literacy and other skills;
- Respecting the rights of others in discussions and classroom debates;
- Participating in activities that focus on a classroom, school, community, state or national issue or problem;
- Valuing equity, inclusivity, diversity, and fairness.

In order to meet the New York State definition of civic readiness outlined above, students must grapple with issues with which classmates might have reasonable differences of opinion, and about which they may encounter divergent perspectives for the first time. Through this process, students learn practical skills related to engaging with individuals holding differing opinions, as well as how to deal with real world policy challenges. We need to equip our educators with tools to shepherd their students through discussions of important historical and current social

studies topics, including those about which there are multiple perspectives, recognizing the inherent role of engaging with diverse viewpoints in a democracy. Furthermore, meaningful discussion of contentious issues stems from and fosters knowledge about history, government, philosophy, and other areas of a liberal arts education and leads to informed civic participation.

The members of DemocracyReady NY do not express these views from a vacuum. We do this work. We are educators, youth development specialists, policymakers, researchers, youth leaders, and others who advance this vision of a robust civic education in our practice. We see firsthand the positive impact it has on young people. Stemming from our experiences, we produced a four-part webinar series in spring, 2021, that welcomed a wide audience of educators and other participants to explore critical components of civic learning opportunities. We focused on the timely topics of media literacy, discussion of controversial issues, youth civic action, and ultimately, the political levers that would need to be moved so to ensure these opportunities for all New York youth. The dialogue within the webinars and in our coalition in general recognizes that civic education needs to be multifaceted, meaningful, and accessible for all.

We urge all educators, all policymakers—and, indeed, all New Yorkers—to support these important, realizable principles and to do everything they can to ensure that our schools adhere to these precepts in educating our students and preparing them for lifelong participation in a thriving, multicultural, democratic culture.

For more information about the work of DemocracyReady NY, please visit www.democracyreadyny.org.