

Second Annual Convening of the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition: March 8-9, 2012

Illinois' civic health is on life support, and our schools serve as potential antidotes in preparing our next generation of citizens for their civic roles and responsibilities in our cities, state, and nation. Unfortunately, schools across the state have cut civic learning in response to a national standardized testing craze and statewide and local funding shortages. The dearth of high-quality civic learning opportunities in our schools yields lower levels civic engagement as youth enter adulthood and further imperils Illinois' civic health.

The [Illinois Civic Mission Coalition](#) (ICMC) was formed in 2004 in response to these challenges. The ICMC seeks to restore education to its core purpose—preparing America's youngest citizens to be informed and active participants in our democracy. The ICMC convenes annually to discuss promising initiatives, learn about the latest research on civic learning, and to consider possible Coalition initiatives for the future. The convening not only serves as an opportunity for ICMC to network with one another, but also as an avenue to expand the coalition by inviting individuals and organizational representatives who share a common commitment to school-based civic learning.



(L) ICMC members Benjamin Gness of Human Resources Development Institute and Dee Runaas of the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago network at the annual convening. (R) Social studies teachers Justin Jacobek of Morton West High School and Don Pankuch of Metea Valley High School compare notes.

Against this backdrop, the ICMC met in Chicago on March 8-9, 2012, for its second annual convening. The convening kicked off with a welcome dinner at the Pritzker Military Library and keynote address from Phil Boyle, the founder of Leading and Governing Associates and a faculty member of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia. Boyle is the co-author of [Preserving the Public in Public Schools](#) (2012, Rowman and Littlefield Education), which also served as the theme of his talk.

Boyle argued that public schools in the United States have served as the perennial battleground for the nation's competing ideals of a good society. He suggested that the balance of the convening would address the "how" side of the civic learning equation, but his talk and book boldly illustrate the "why."

Schools' role in preparing students for college and career is the current rage, and the ICMC seeks to add a third "C" to this equation: preparing young people for civic life. Boyle contends that liberty, community, equality, and prosperity are consistent strains in our national debates about the purpose of public schools, and the ICMC's mission to reinvigorate civic learning in schools falls within this matrix. Consistent with Boyle's framework, by attempting to position schools and their surrounding communities as central partners (community) and reduce a civic achievement gap associated with race and income (equality), the Coalition works in an environment of increasing school choice (liberty) and standardized testing (prosperity).



(L) Cynthia Woods of the Illinois Association of School Boards and ICMC member introduces keynote speaker Phil Boyle. (R) Phil Boyle discusses the democratic purpose of public schools.

With the "why" properly framed, the second day agenda was structured to explore collaborative work among Coalition members in four areas: the civic achievement gap, civics across the curriculum, policy advocacy, and statewide awards and recognition. The balance of this report summarizes the conference proceedings, held at the Union League Club Chicago, in these categories.



(L) Carolyn Pereira of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools provided a national update on policy, social studies standards, and the diffusion of the Democracy Schools framework. (R) Emily Burke of the Paul Simon Institute served on the annual convening planning committee and introduced keynote speaker Meira Levinson.

The civic achievement gap

To the extent that schools make high-quality civic learning opportunities available to students, they are more likely to occur in affluent, racially homogeneous, suburban communities. A dearth of high-quality civic learning opportunities extended to less privileged students translates into an

achievement gap. Keynote speaker Meira Levinson, Associate Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, takes it one step further, calling it a “civic empowerment gap.”

According to Levinson, this civic empowerment gap produces participatory inequalities throughout one’s lifetime, with correlated disparities in public policy outcomes. As educators, she claims, we share as much responsibility for closing this empowerment gap as we do the related achievement deficits targeted by No Child Left Behind. Levinson contends that the civic empowerment gap can be bridged via the extension of high-quality civic learning opportunities to all students. Youth are entitled to rich experiences where they are explicitly taught civic knowledge and skills, practice leadership and other civic habits, and have opportunities to apply what they learned in multiple settings.



(L) Meira Levinson presents her research on the civic empowerment gap via a remote broadcast. (R) Chanta Williams, Noemi Roman, and Cortez Hicks overcame the civic empowerment gap through high-quality civic learning experiences in high school.

A panel discussion moderated by Tiffany Middleton of the American Bar Association followed Levinson’s talk, featuring youth who overcame the civic empowerment gap through exemplary civic learning opportunities. Chanta Williams, a Mikva Challenge alumnus, volunteered on Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and served as an election judge in high school, and later led a voter registration drive at Spellman College that resulted in the highest registration rate among any student body in the nation.

Former Harris Fellows Cortez Hicks and Noemi Roman also spoke about their youth engagement experiences. The Harris Fellowship is a Chicago Public Schools-based student leadership program. As Fellows, Hicks traveled to Oakland to participate in a student walk-out in protest of exit exams, and Roman volunteered and remains active in the Chicago-based Albany Park Neighborhood Council.



(L) Tiffany Middleton of the American Bar Association moderates the civic empowerment gap panel. (R) McCormick Foundation CEO David Hiller poses with the civic empowerment gap panel: Chanta Williams, Cortez Hicks, Noemi Roman, Tiffany Middleton, and Lourdes Ferrer (left to right).

Lourdes Ferrer, an assessment specialist at the DuPage Regional Office of Education, completed the panel and discussed her interviews of more than 1,000 students of color in DuPage County. She asked them why they thought there is a race-based achievement gap. Responses ranged from low expectations of themselves to school being a place for “other” students. Some suggested that if they lived up to conventional standards they would be behaving “white.” Ferrer also senses a deep disconnect among the students she interviewed with civil society and government. Given this lack of attachment to community, Ferrer fears that apathy is the natural result.



(L) Lourdes Ferrer shares her research on the achievement gap among minority students in DuPage County. (R) Jill Bass of the Mikva Challenge leads the civic empowerment gap breakout group with Jim Nowlan of the University of Illinois participating in the conversation.

A civic empowerment gap breakout group led by Jill Bass of the Mikva Challenge recommended:

- engaging school administrators in conversations about the gap, its consequences, and potential solutions;

- a related focus on school climate given that our students' social and emotional development is equally critical to the civic knowledge and skills honed in the formal curriculum (Upcoming administrators' academies on [May 4](#) and [18](#) offered by the ICMC to advance the [Democracy Schools Initiative](#) stand as potential channels to achieve these ends);
- and reaching out to representatives of higher education who train school leaders to highlight these issues.

Civics across the curriculum

Civic learning opportunities abound across the curriculum and lead to higher student achievement, build 21st Century skills, help improve school climate, and reduce the persistent drop-out epidemic. Carmel Catholic social studies teacher Sharon Smogor moderated a panel that addressed this topic, which included Michelle Herczog of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, Marty Moe from Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and Don Pankuch from Metea Valley High School.

According to Herczog, the [Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy](#) (ELAL), which have been adopted by 46 states, Illinois included, are infused with civic learning opportunities. For example, there exists a reciprocal relationship between reading and content, with the social studies and civic learning standing at its nexus. Reading cannot be taught independently of content, nor can content be taught absent literary strategies. Students can learn how to decode the stories they read, but understanding is not a natural byproduct. Comprehension requires prior knowledge, and the social studies can help bring nonfiction reading to life.

Herczog led an effort to align civic learning opportunities with ELAL Common Core. This [guide](#) is organized by grade level, and emphasizes the intersection between knowledge and skills. For instance, primary sources from the American Founding Era are woven into the middle school ELAL standards.



(L) Civics across the curriculum panel moderator Sharon Smogor, a social studies teacher at Carmel Catholic High School, frames the issue, with panelist Michelle Herczog from the Los Angeles County Office of Education looking on. (R) Hayley Lotspeich, a social studies teacher at Wheaton North High School, leads the civics across the curriculum breakout group discussion.

Moe referenced a K-12 framework developed for the social studies districtwide within CPS. Supported by the Chicago Community Trust, [Social Science 2.0](#) recommends thematic units and complementary methodologies. Unit overviews contain guiding questions and the framework is infused with student-centered learning and engagement opportunities. CPS is in the midst of extensive, ongoing professional development of teachers in support of the framework, consciously infusing ELAL Common Core into the social sciences. The framework relies extensively on the support of community partners, and has set the stage for a more overt focus on civic learning, with an extensive K-12 initiative currently in development.

Pankuch led Metea Valley's successful Democracy School application process in 2011. His team recognized opportunities to infuse civics across the curriculum in a brand new high school. Civics is embedded in the school's mission statement, and Pankuch invigorated his colleagues outside of the social studies to consider how the school could collectively prepare its students for civic life. Through a schoolwide civic assessment, Metea Valley identified civic learning present across the curriculum. For example, a health class participated in a mock trial focusing on date rape. Once these examples surfaced, Pankuch found it easier to unite the faculty around a shared vision of civic learning and to be more intentional about the provision of these opportunities.

Wheaton North social studies teacher Hayley Lotspeich led the civics across the curriculum breakout group. They recommended:

- outreach to school administrators, demonstrating the civic learning opportunities in each subject area;
- inservices that advance the effectiveness of each curricular area along these same lines;
- and drawing different perspectives into the Coalition's work, including students, K-8 teachers and administrators, and the STEM community.

Policy advocacy

To date, the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition has sponsored the Democracy Schools Initiative, recognizing Illinois high schools for their exemplary commitments to high-quality civic learning. As the Democracy Schools Initiative is further institutionalized and brought to scale statewide, public policy and advocacy can support its diffusion along with the proven civic learning practices it embraces.

In this spirit, Doug Dobson of the Lou Frey Institute shared lessons learned during Florida's successful four-year push to mandate a civics course at the middle school level, require a high-stakes test at the conclusion of the course, and infuse civic-oriented nonfiction into reading courses. The [Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act of 2010](#) was a product of persistence, high profile leadership (former Senator Bob Graham and Congressman Lou Frey led the charge), an internal legislative advocate (State Representative Charles McBurney, R-Jacksonville), and external funding for implementation. The Frey Institute was awarded a state appropriation to implement the law, focusing primarily on teacher professional development.



(L) Doug Dobson of the Lou Frey Institute details Florida’s successful push for a mandatory middle school civics course. (C) Brian Brady of the Mikva Challenge asks Dobson a clarifying question. (R) Maryam Judar of the Citizen Advocacy Center leads the policy advocacy breakout group.

As the ICMC considers a parallel course to advance civic learning through public policy and advocacy, a convening workgroup led by Maryam Judar of the Citizen Advocacy Center identified strategies which may include:

- a statewide legislative hearing on civic learning;
- identifying legislative and other high-profile champions of civic learning in Illinois;
- helping to make civic learning a statewide priority for candidates for public office, newspaper editorial boards, schools leaders, and the public at large;
- and identifying one or more school districts that might adopt a mandatory civics course and assess its impact.

Statewide awards and recognition

Given the dearth of incentives for schools to offer students high-quality civic learning opportunities, it is critical that we recognize schools, teachers, and students that respectively make exemplary commitments to their civic mission, integrate proven practices into their classroom instruction, and are informed, engaged participants in civic life. While the Democracy Schools Initiative recognizes schools that are committed to their civic mission, the Coalition does not currently recognize teachers and students for outstanding achievement in civic learning and engagement. The ICMC intends to explore appropriate awards and recognition for these two groups.

A convening workgroup led by Howard Kaplan and Tiffany Middleton of the American Bar Association considered the merits of future ICMC awards. In addition to the goals established above, statewide awards could:

- raise the profile of the Coalition,
- provide opportunities for increased press coverage,
- bring rural schools into the fold,

- crystallize a common purpose for Coalition members,
- and advance the broader mission of the Coalition through impactful stories related to the awards.

The workgroup urged the Coalition to determine whether a formal awards committee should be established, consider the investments of time and money required, and name the award and brand it to align with the Democracy Schools Initiative.



(L) The statewide awards and recognition breakout group considers the Coalition's role in elevating exemplary civic learning and achievement. (R) Breakout group leader Howard Kaplan of the American Bar Association reports on his group's deliberations with Monroe-Randolph Regional Superintendent Marc Kiehna.

Summary

The 70-plus attendees of the 2012 ICMC annual convening represented a diverse assemblage of stakeholders, from students to teachers, superintendents to school board members, to representatives of higher education and civic learning organizations. They left united in a common belief in high-quality, school-based civic learning opportunities, and mobilized with potential solutions to advance these ends.