

Existing and Potential Supports for Implementation of a Civics Course in Illinois

Written by: Dr. Shawn Healy, Civic Learning Scholar, Robert R. McCormick Foundation

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The potential addition of a civics course to Illinois high school graduation requirements raises the necessary question of supports for teachers, schools, and districts during implementation. What follows is an analysis of the current context, existing supports, areas of need, and the prospects for additional funding and supports towards this end.

Based on my own research, roughly six-in-ten Illinois schools already require that students pass a semester or year-long civics or government course for graduation (see “Illinois High School Civics and Government Course Survey”). The remaining schools usually offer civics or government as an elective option. It is therefore fair to assume that almost every high school in Illinois has at least one teacher qualified to teach a civics course.

Illinois boasts one of the strongest networks of civic education supports in the country covering virtually every corner of the state (see attached “Illinois Civic Education Supports”). The vast population of the Chicago metropolitan area is well served with an impressive array of organizational supports in the civic education space. Nineteen organizations are identified on the attached list. However, eight additional organizations serve teachers, schools, and districts in Eastern, Western, Central, and Southern Illinois, and twelve others operate statewide.

The Robert R. McCormick Foundation has long supported civic education providers throughout Illinois in an effort to strengthen the state’s system. In 2014 alone, the Foundation invested more than \$1.2 million in organizations that provide civics curricula, student programming, and teacher professional development. This commitment continues, and these organizations and others are poised to support implementation of a new civics course.¹

The McCormick Foundation is not alone in its support of civic education in Illinois. For the past three years, it has partnered with the MacArthur Foundation and the Spencer Foundation to fund the Global Citizenship Initiative (GCI) within Chicago Public Schools. This program is now in almost forty district high schools and includes a civics course that could serve as a model for the state. Combined, these three foundations contribute \$550,000 annually to the GCI.

The MacArthur Foundation also funds [digital media and learning](#) in the Chicago area, research and programming that is highly complementary to civic education and engagement. MacArthur

¹ In 2010, Florida mandated a new middle school civics course and has since appropriated \$400,000 annually to the [Joint Center on Citizenship](#) for teacher professional development on related curriculum and instruction in coordination with school districts throughout the state. The Joint Center contributes an additional \$375,000 of its own funding for this purpose. Florida has roughly 500 middle schools, and faced a significant challenge of transitioning 7th grade geography teachers to civics. The learning curve is not as steep in Illinois given the findings presented above, although the state does have nearly 700 public high schools.

“...supports experimentation in several types of institutions—libraries, museums, schools, community centers, afterschool programs—to demonstrate what connected learning could look like in action.”

Through its [“New Civics” initiative](#), Spencer funds research on effective civic education practices and their relationship with civic action, including a design study of the aforementioned CPS civics course.

The Chicago Community Trust has long funded work on curriculum and instruction in the social studies within Chicago Public Schools. Through this work, CPS has aligned social studies courses and content with English Language Arts Common Core State Standards and offered related ongoing professional development academies for district teachers. The Trust provides CPS with \$250,000 annually for these purposes.

The regions of Illinois outside of the Chicago metropolitan area are served less intensively, but in addition to civic education organizations with a statewide focus, the [Teaching with Primary Sources program](#) of the Library of Congress funds [eleven partners](#) affiliated primarily with colleges and universities located throughout Illinois to the tune of \$2 million annually. These partners train teachers on using the Library’s extensive collection of digitized primary sources, a practice highly complementary to civic education and related courses.

The Illinois partners convene periodically and have begun coordinating their work through Illinois State University under the leadership of director Richard Satchwell. Given partners’ affiliation with university education departments and libraries, relationships with teachers in their regions, and professional development expertise, they are ideally situated to support teachers, schools, and districts throughout Illinois with implementation of a civics course.

In sum, Illinois has one of the most vibrant networks of privately and publically funded civic education supports in the country. The Chicago region is incredibly well-served thanks to investments from the McCormick Foundation and its philanthropic peers, and these commitments are ongoing. Other Illinois regions also have access to high-quality supports, and the TPS network is ideally situated to make certain that every corner of the state is served during presumptive implementation of a high school civics course.