



NEW KNOWLEDGE

Inspiring Civic Engagement

THE BIG PICTURE

Civic engagement has been a popular phrase lately in the education world. Schools have long incorporated civic engagement into curricula in the form of collaborative, interdisciplinary projects, but more schools are doing this now, largely because recent research suggests that civic engagement, beyond just motivating students to be more politically active and open-minded, actually contributes greatly to students' academics and development as young adults.

[Education researchers at the University of Michigan and Michigan State University](#) have found that civic engagement projects can raise student achievement. The researchers had teachers [teach project-based units](#) to second-graders at schools with high concentrations of low-income students. The projects motivated students to work toward purposes “beyond school.” For example, in the Economics unit, students created an informational flyer for a local business that the business could use to promote its goods; in the History unit, students developed postcards about the history of the local community to display in the local library. The students who participated in the project-based units scored 63 percent higher in social studies and 23 percent higher in reading.

Civic engagement seems to improve students' learning outcomes because it also contributes to the development of noncognitive factors like perseverance and social skills. As [many educators argue](#), civic engagement projects allow teachers to break down barriers between classrooms and the real world, and invite students to use noncognitive in addition to academic skills. More research has yet to be done but, empirically, civic engagement projects seem to help cultivate necessary skills for students to become motivated and confident young adults.

NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

Seventh graders from the UChicago Charter School's Woodlawn Campus (UCW) presented research projects about social and economic issues at the Changemakers Data Fair. Organized by UCW teachers and alumni of The UChicago Urban Teacher Education Program (UChicago UTEP), the fair gave students an opportunity to develop interdisciplinary, data-driven arguments. For their projects, students chose topics that ranged from the Black Lives Matter movement to immigration and health care policies. They then conducted independent research and proposed concrete steps to address the issues raised.

Seventh-grader Jayla White was interested in Laquan McDonald's shooting in 2014. She based her project on the accountability of police officers, and then went a step further – she surveyed the UCW community about interactions with police officers and intends to communicate the survey results to the Chicago Police Department. Seventh-grader Rhonni Durham observed her daily social media interactions with friends and centered her project on the negative health impacts of technology. She also aims to take her project further by making a short film on the topic to present to the UCW community.



Opportunities such as the Changemakers Data Fair contribute significantly to the education of young adults. The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's 2015 report, [Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework](#), cites three key factors of young adult success: agency, an integrated identity, and

competencies. The Changemakers Data Fair gave students the opportunity to cultivate all three of these factors.

As the UChicago Consortium's report states, agency is the ability to make choices and take an active role in managing one's life path. For the fair, students chose their own topics and research models. The second factor, an integrated identity, entails possessing a core sense of self, which includes a sense of future possibilities. The fair gave students the opportunity to recognize their collective potential in enacting change in the world. The third factor, competencies, includes the ability to adapt to the demands of different settings. The interdisciplinary character of the projects allowed the students to develop broadly applicable skills, such as those related to discretionary thinking, organization, and public speaking. Overall, the Changemakers Data Fair supported students in their efforts to become not only learners, but also successful young adults.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Schools around the country are increasingly integrating civic engagement projects into their curricula. At [Oakland Technical High School](#), for example, teachers have students think about violence, discrimination, and other issues that they face in their community. Students then collaborate to create infographics that help illustrate potential solutions to these issues and serve as tangible activism tools. This type of project requires students to collectively problem-solve, which helps cultivate social skills, adaptability, and other noncognitive factors.

We are also seeing new public-private school partnerships crop up to expose students to a greater diversity of experiences and foster civic engagement across school communities. The University of Chicago Lab Schools and UChicago Charter School recently established a partnership to “anchor students more firmly in their surrounding community, and help students at both schools learn from one another.” University of Chicago professors offer informal, noncredit classes designed to extend learning from classrooms into the real world for students from both the Lab Schools and UChicago Charter School. One course, Philosophy, Civic Knowledge, and Talking to Strangers, involved Lab Schools and UChicago Charter School students “embedding” in community arts and activism organizations including the Invisible Institute, the Renaissance Society, and the Stony Island Arts Bank. The partnership also involved establishing reading groups that discussed texts including *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*, by University of Chicago political science professor Cathy Cohen and *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is also integrating civic engagement into its curriculum by introducing a new “Reparations Won” unit that teaches 8th and 10th grade students about former police commander Jon Burge, who, with his officers, tortured more than 100 African-American citizens in police custody. As part of the unit, 8th graders will write opinion pieces about improving police-community relations and 10th graders will create a memorial to educate the public about the Burge torture cases. Janice Jackson, CPS's Chief Education Officer, notes the importance of the new unit in helping “children understand the past, the present and how they can shape the future in line with our values of tolerance, diversity and respect for each other.” By better understanding their role in society, and developing both academic and social skills along the way, students are better prepared for initiating change in the future.

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute's full New Knowledge in Public Education Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/newknowledgereport>