

**Equity and Innovation in Action Civics Projects for New York State's Civic Readiness Initiative**

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## **Summary Recommendation**

New York State’s Department of Education is introducing a new Seal of Civic Readiness high school diploma badge in an exciting and multipronged initiative to make civics education more engaging and effective for secondary school students throughout the state. A cornerstone of this initiative, led by the New York State Civic Readiness Task Force convened in 2018, is to expand opportunities for middle and high school students to complete a “Civic Capstone” project based on “action civics,” a widely-used, evidence-based best practice in civic education pedagogy.

This paper outlines a proposal to the Task Force to collaborate with New York City’s Department of Education and other government agencies, nongovernmental education and civic organizations, and youth, to design and test new types and delivery modalities for action civics projects that will be relevant, accessible and rewarding for diverse, urban students, especially those who face educational challenges. A culminating output of the initiative proposed here is a comprehensive plan to make action civics projects universally and equitably available to all high school students in New York City, one that would be implemented here in the city, and serve as a model for other urban districts in New York State.

### **Civic education and engagement: New York State’s schools and youth in crisis**

A fundamental purpose of public schools in the United States is to prepare and inspire all children to be knowledgeable, judicious and active citizens<sup>1</sup> in a democratic society. Indeed, some of the first and foundational efforts to establish free, “universal” schooling for all boys and

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, unless otherwise specified, I use the term “citizen” broadly to include all children and adults living in New York City, including those with and without documentation, in keeping with the arguments of lead civic education organizations advocacy for the term citizen to be “reclaimed.” Generation Citizen, “Returning to Our Roots: Educating for Democracy” (Generation Citizen, 2015) p. 3.

girls were premised on their future role as voters and thus decisionmakers in a new and emerging democracy.<sup>2</sup> Yet by many measures, schools throughout the United States are currently failing to fulfil this essential, existential purpose. According to a broad range of studies conducted in the past decade by scholars, civil society and education organizations, civic knowledge and engagement levels among all Americans, measured across a wide range of indicators, are alarmingly low, and disproportionately so amongst our youth.<sup>3</sup> Since 1980, the youngest eligible voters, those ages 18-30 have persistently been the least likely of any age cohort to participate in national elections, with an average participation rate of 40-50% of participation.<sup>4</sup> Here in New York State, only 34% of 18-24 year-olds voted in the 2018 midterm elections.<sup>5</sup> On the National Assessment of Education Progress civics exam, in 2018 only 24% of eighth graders scored at a level of “proficient” or above.<sup>6</sup> Beneath these discouraging overall national patterns lie further and urgent issues of educational and civic equity. According to the most widely-used measures such as voting levels, young people of color and those from lower-income communities show even lower levels of civic engagement than their white and more affluent counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Only 10% of Black students and 13% of Latinx students scored at or above a rate of “proficient” on the NAEP civics assessment test cited above.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Horace Mann, *Lecture on Education* (Marsh, Capen, Lyon and Webb, 1840).

<sup>3</sup> “All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement: The Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge” (Medford, MA: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013), [www.civicyouth.org/about-circle/commission-on-youth-voting-civic-knowledge/](http://www.civicyouth.org/about-circle/commission-on-youth-voting-civic-knowledge/); Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, “The State of Civics Education” (Washington, DC: The Center for American Progress, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> US Census Bureau, “Voting Rates by Age,” [Census.gov](https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2017/comm/voting-rates-age.html), accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2017/comm/voting-rates-age.html>; “National-1789-Present - United States Elections Project,” accessed December 17, 2021, <http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present>.

<sup>5</sup> Shapiro and Brown, “The State of Civics Education.”

<sup>6</sup> “NAEP Civics: Achievement-Level Results,” accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/results/achievement/>.

<sup>7</sup> Elena Gustafson, Alison K. Cohen, and Sarah Andes, “Youth Civic Action Across the United States: Projects, Priorities, and Approaches,” *Youth & Society* 53, no. 4 (May 2021): 655, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X19883737>.

<sup>8</sup> “NAEP Civics: Achievement-Level Results.”

The hope that schools can effectively and positively meet these challenges by shaping students' future civic engagement is supported by evidence; high rates of youth civic engagement are correlated with more courses and rigorous standards in state-level education offerings and requirements.<sup>9</sup> New York State's constitution guarantees "preparation for civic preparation" as an element of children's civil right to education. Yet until recently, our State Education Department, like most throughout the nation, have invested less funding and effort into civics education than other subjects.<sup>10</sup> The racial and economic inequities in civic engagement described above are mirrored in schools, and in a 2013 report on civics education in the United States, the advocacy group Center for Information and Research on Civic Engagement and Learning (CIRCLE) summarized the situation in broad strokes: "Youth who miss out on civic learning opportunities are more likely to be students of color and low-income young people."<sup>11</sup> Throughout the United States, young people of color in low-income urban centers have actively protested the dearth of civics education in their curricula as a violation of their civil rights, as in a 2018 class action suit filed by fourteen students and their parents against the Governor of Rhode Island. While the federal judge who ruled in that case determined that there is no Constitutional right to equitable civics education, he also praised the students and parents who brought the case for issuing "a cry for help from a generation of young people who are destined to inherit a country which we — the generation currently in charge — are not stewarding well."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Shapiro and Brown, "The State of Civics Education," 5.

<sup>10</sup> Shapiro and Brown, 4.

<sup>11</sup> "CIRCLE » Civic Education," accessed May 18, 2019, <https://civicyouth.org/quick-facts/quick-facts-civic-education/>.

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Strauss, "Federal Judge Rules Students Have No Constitutional Right to Civics Education — but Warns That 'American Democracy Is in Peril,'" *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2020.

There is broad agreement among civic education researchers and advocates that to address these gaps, schools must not only change *what* they teach in civics and social studies classes, but also *how* they teach. Students who experience active and participatory learning methodologies such as discussion, debate, and service learning in their classrooms show measurable increases in positive civic attitudes and behaviors.<sup>13</sup> Opportunities in and beyond the classroom may have durable effects on young people’s future behaviors as adults; adults who were civically engaged as adolescents are also more likely to be civically engaged than others, and also to enjoy healthy family relationships, strong community ties and higher educational attainments.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, participatory methodologies may be especially culturally relevant, and thus effective, for young people of color; a study of predominantly African American and Latinx young people from low income backgrounds found that their participation in civic and service learning opportunities in and beyond school was more strongly correlated with their positive civic engagement indicators than demographic background, neighborhood context, supportive school climate, and involvement in other types of extra-curricular activities.<sup>15</sup> Experiences in school with democratic practices, such as open dialogue in classrooms and participation in debates and mock trials are positively and disproportionately correlated with civic engagement for African American and Latinx youth relative to Whites.<sup>16</sup> Yet nationally, young people from marginalized racial groups and low-income backgrounds, relative to White, affluent youth, are

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph E. Kahne and Susan E. Sporte, “Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation,” *American Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 3 (September 2008): 19, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208316951>.

<sup>14</sup> Wing Yi Chan, Suh-Ruu Ou, and Arthur J. Reynolds, “Adolescent Civic Engagement and Adult Outcomes: An Examination Among Urban Racial Minorities,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 43, no. 11 (November 2014): 1829, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0136-5>.

<sup>15</sup> Kahne and Sporte, “Developing Citizens,” 17–18.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Littenberg-Tobias and Alison K. Cohen, “Diverging Paths: Understanding Racial Differences in Civic Engagement Among White, African American, and Latina/o Adolescents Using Structural Equation Modeling,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 57, no. 1–2 (March 2016): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12027>.

less likely to have the opportunity in their classrooms to study social problems, current events and issues (especially those they identify and choose), participating in open classroom discussions and debates, hearing from civic role models, learning about ways to improve the community, and working on service learning projects.<sup>17</sup> A study of schools in New York State found that schools serving low income communities and communities of color offered students fewer opportunities to prepare for civic engagement in the digital age, such as class discussions about internet safety and civility and access to library media centers or specialists than schools serving primarily white and affluent students.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Action Civics: A promising and tested pedagogy***

To strengthen civics education in secondary schools, civic education scholars and advocates are increasingly promoting and practicing “action civics” a culturally relevant and effective pedagogy. In an “action civics” project, students, with guidance from a teacher or facilitator, identify a civic issue of concern and interest, usually at the local level, then collaborate with each other and community leaders to take action to make a positive change. In a typical action civics project, students:

- Identify an issue (problem) facing them, their school, or their community;
- Analyze a civic issue (problem), evaluate alternative solutions,
- Design and/or execute a solution for this problem.
- Take informed action to implement or advocate for the solution the proposed
- Reflect on what they have learned, also documenting and sharing findings from their project in a written report, a presentation to an audience, or both.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Littenberg-Tobias and Cohen, “Diverging Paths.”

<sup>18</sup> Jessica R. Wolf, Ann LoBue, and Michael A. Rebell, “Developing Digital Citizens: Media Literacy Education for ALL Students” (Center for Educational Equity, Teachers College, Columbia University, n.d.), 5.

<sup>19</sup> New York Civic Readiness Task Force, “Civic Readiness Initiative.”

Throughout the country, middle and high school teachers of civics and related courses have designed and integrated a range of different types of action civics projects into their curricula, including by using digital platforms and game-based methodologies, interdisciplinary collaborations, and by supporting students in forming and leading youth organizations.<sup>20</sup> In New York City and State, independent, nonprofit organizations Generation Citizen and the Justice Center provide direct support to teachers and schools in implementing action civics projects through professional development and curriculum resources, and by partnering teachers with action civics coaches to collaborate in classroom instruction. (Both organizations have been key actors in the new New York State civic education initiatives, discussed below).

Beyond the classroom, civic and community organizations throughout also collaborate with youth through processes that correspond with the framework, steps and principles of “action civics” pedagogy, offering rich possibilities for the kinds of projects that interest and engage diverse young people, as well as modalities to reach them. New York City’s organizations and government agencies have been lead innovators in this regard. For example, the Coro New York Leadership Center supports a Participatory Budgeting Youth Fellowship through which high school students collaborate directly with City Council members to develop and implement funding plans for local initiatives.<sup>21</sup> The Center for Court Innovation operates “youth courts” in which teenage volunteers, following an intensive training program, hear and issue rulings on cases involving misdemeanor charges against other young people (who opt to participate in the

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<sup>20</sup> Keri Doggett, Damon Huss, and Judy Smith, “Civics in the Digital Age: Civic Action Project,” *Social Studies Review: Journal of the California Council for the Social Studies* 57 (2018): 37–43; Seán G. Arthurs, “Now More Than Ever: Why Youth Organizing Work Belongs in Schools and What That Means in Theory and Practice,” *The High School Journal* 102, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 46–71; Karon LeCompte and Brooke Blevins, “Building Civic Bridges: Community-Centered Action Civics,” *The Social Studies* 106, no. 5 (September 3, 2015): 209–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2015.1059792>.

<sup>21</sup> “Participatory Budgeting Youth Fellowship | Coro New York,” accessed December 24, 2021, <https://coronewyork.org/coro-programs/pbyf/>.

youth court rather than a mainstream court).<sup>22</sup> The immigrant and justice advocacy organizations Make the Road New York’s Youth Power Project and School Programs involves teenagers in organizing campaigns to transform school discipline policies, community policing and educational justice for undocumented youth.<sup>23</sup> New York’s teenagers have also led their own action civics projects independently, forming and leading youth organizations such as Teens Take Charge and Integrate NYC, both of which advocate for educational equity in New York’s public schools.<sup>24</sup>

As extensive as is the work underway with youth here in New York City, they are only the tip of the iceberg of action civics project possibilities, and the modalities in use nationally and internationally. Within the academy, the extensive body of Youth Participatory Action Research (“YPAR,” or simply “PAR”) work carried out by scholars over the past 20 years has generated extensive of the positive impact for young people of collaborating on action-oriented projects, including to to their civic learning and attitudes, social and emotional wellbeing, contributions to policy-informing research, and production of educational resources for others.<sup>25</sup> From the south Bronx to northern Newfoundland’s Inuit communities to Nairobi’s largest slum, young people have collaborated with scholars and educators in projects to map risks and resources in their communities, research and document local history, and advocate for services

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<sup>22</sup> “Youth Court | Center for Court Innovation,” accessed December 24, 2021, <https://www.courtinnovation.org/programs/youth-court>.

<sup>23</sup> “Youth Power Project and School Programs with Make the Road NY,” Make the Road New York, accessed December 24, 2021, <https://maketheroadny.org/program/youth-and-school-programs/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Teens Take Charge — Hecht-Calandra,” Teens Take Charge, accessed December 24, 2021, <https://www.teenstakecharge.com/hecht-calandra>; “IntegrateNYC,” IntegrateNYC, accessed December 24, 2021, <https://integrateNYC.org>.

<sup>25</sup> Katharyne Mitchell and Sarah Elwood, “Engaging Students through Mapping Local History,” *Journal of Geography* 111, no. 4 (July 2012): 148–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221341.2011.624189>; Joanna Petrusek MacDonald et al., “Youth-Led Participatory Video as a Strategy to Enhance Inuit Youth Adaptive Capacities for Dealing with Climate Change,” *ARCTIC* 68, no. 4 (December 3, 2015): 486, <https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic4527>; Ching-Chiu Lin and Bertram C. Bruce, “Engaging Youth in Underserved Communities through Digital-Mediated Arts Learning Experiences for Community Inquiry,” *Studies in Art Education* 54, no. 4 (July 2013): 335–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2013.11518907>.



and legislative changes from their representatives and leaders.<sup>26</sup> With its curriculum toolkit the “Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation,” the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has integrated youth-led community action projects into humanitarian response and peacebuilding programs, reaching more than 360,000 adolescents in 22 conflict-affected and fragile countries.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps of special interest and relevance in the new era of remote and hybrid instruction are examples of strategies using interactive technologies and platforms in action civics and YPAR initiatives. These include “ePAR,” which emerged in the 2000’s as an approach to using social media and communication tools to engage youth in social inquiry and action, and later “YPAR 2.0” a framework for integrating the use of interactive digital technology into research methods and processes to “democratize” the gathering, analysis and sharing of data, and to link the findings from research directly to platforms for social organization and action.<sup>28</sup>

With our rich and dynamic infrastructure of community-based organizations, many of which are already collaborating with youth, and with local government leaders and institutions experimenting with dynamic new ways to engage with adolescents and youth, New York City is uniquely positioned to innovate strategies to bring action civics to all high school students, and

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<sup>26</sup> MacDonald et al., “Youth-Led Participatory Video as a Strategy to Enhance Inuit Youth Adaptive Capacities for Dealing with Climate Change”; Jamie Lundine, Primož Kovačič, and Lisa Poggiali, “Youth and Digital Mapping in Urban Informal Settlements: Lessons Learned from Participatory Mapping Processes in Mathare in Nairobi, Kenya,” *Children, Youth and Environments* 22, no. 2 (2012): 214, <https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.22.2.0214>; Antwi Akom et al., “Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) 2.0: How Technological Innovation and Digital Organizing Sparked a Food Revolution in East Oakland,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 10 (November 25, 2016): 1287–1307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1201609>; Svetlana Jović and Jennifer M Pipitone, “Out of Bounds: Mapping Uptown Youth’s Everyday Mobility through Geo-Tagged Photo Making,” 2019, 10.

<sup>27</sup> The United Nations Children’s Fund, “The Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation,” 2019, <http://www.adolescentkit.org>. (To be added: Updated source with the above data on global use of the kit.)

<sup>28</sup> Akom et al., “Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) 2.0.”

especially to our historically educationally underserved and vulnerable young people who may stand to benefit - and contribute - the most from such opportunities.

***Civics education in New York State: Old promises, new progress***

In New York State, promising new initiatives are already underway to expand and strengthen the quality of civics education in all public high schools, buttressing and scaling up the action civics partnerships and projects that are already being offered throughout the state.

Imparting children and youth with the knowledge, skills and motivations to actively engage as informed citizens in our democratic institutions has long been an explicit purpose of public, secondary social studies education in New York State. For at least the past 25 years, the New York State Education Department’s Social Studies official curricula and frameworks have included learning standards and indicators in relation to students’ knowledge of our local, national and federal government systems institutions, the history and underlying principles of our democracy. In the most recent state Social Studies framework for Grades 9-12, updated in 2017, civics-related information and concepts are addressed all core social studies courses. “Power, Authority and Governance” and “Civic Ideals and Practices” are cross-cutting themes, in Global History and Geography 1 and 2, the two year-long, required courses for 9th and 10th graders, and US History and Government, the year-long required course for 11th graders. In all three courses, students examine and explore of the origins and different types of government systems, as well as the cultural, social, economic and other dynamics that influenced their development.<sup>29</sup> The two Global History and Geography courses culminate in one Regents Examination, as does the United States History and Government course, and according to the current state-wide

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<sup>29</sup> The State Education Department of New York, “New York State Grades 9-12 Social Studies Framework” (The University of the State of New York, 2017).

requirements, students must pass one of these two examinations to graduate with a Regents diploma.

The New York State curriculum also includes one course dedicated entirely to civics, “Participation in Government,” (often referred to by the awkward acronym “PiG”), a required, semester-long course for 12th graders for which there is no Regents examination. The lack of a formalized and standard assessment for Participation in Government offers possibilities for project-based pedagogies and other creative teaching practices, including those supported through partnerships with external organizations. For example, the action civics projects that Generation Citizen leads in partnership with New York State social studies teachers, mentioned above, are typically implemented in Participation in Government classes. However, as there is no standardized assessment, no state-wide data is generated and available to measure students’ learning and engagement in the course, nor across the likely variations in how it may be taught from one classroom to another. School by school, some students may also take other civics-related, elective social studies, including the Advanced Placement course in United States Government and Politics.

In its report, “The State of Civics Education,” the Center for American Progress argues that none of the 50 states “currently provides sufficient and comprehensive civic education,” and New York State’s offerings, at least as of the implementation of the 2017 Social Studies Framework fall even shorter than those of other states. While New York, like the majority of states, requires only one semester of civics, eight others have moved to require a year-long course. The 2017 framework, with its emphasis on students’ acquisition of civic knowledge through history courses does little to promote participatory and action-oriented pedagogies for civic skill-building and attitude transformation, and New York State has not followed almost half

of other states in offering high school graduation credit for students' completion of service-learning activities.<sup>30</sup>

### ***New York State's Civic Readiness Task Force***

In an exciting and promising move to address these deficiencies, for the past six years the New York State Education Department (NYSED) has been undertaking a statewide initiative to strengthen civic education in public schools throughout the state. In 2018 the New York State Board of Regents convened the Civic Engagement Task Force, composed of 33 representatives from public educational institutions and civil society throughout the State, charged with making recommendations to strengthen education for “civic readiness.”<sup>31</sup> In January 2020, the Task Force presented a proposal to the Board of Regents for a three-pronged initiative that included 1) establishing a state-wide definition of “civic readiness,” 2) establishing a “Seal of Civic Readiness,” which students may earn as a supplementary badge for their high school diplomas, and 3) creating guidelines and curricula for a Civic Capstone Project, a core requirement to earn the Seal of Civic Readiness.<sup>32</sup>

The Seal of Civic Readiness is modeled on the “Bilingual Seal,” another recent initiative of the New York State Education Department to promote and accredit students' acquisition of a battery of skills within a specific subject area in addition to meeting core graduation requirements. Both seals are presented as a literal badge that appears on the high school diploma of those who earn it. The Task Force's proposal also includes a recommendation that by fulfilling the core requirements for the Seal of Civic Readiness students may also fulfill those for

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<sup>30</sup> Shapiro and Brown, “The State of Civics Education,” 1–5.

<sup>31</sup> Kimberly Young Wilkins, “Proposed Amendment to Section 100.5 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education Relating to the Civic Readiness Pathway to Graduation and the New York State Seal of Civic Readiness,” April 29, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> New York Civic Readiness Task Force, “Civic Readiness Initiative.”

the Humanities Pathway, one of six subject-specific pathways through which students may earn a Regents diploma, and/or that a new, seventh Civic Readiness pathway might be created.<sup>33</sup>

The Civic Capstone Project, in turn, is an action civics project high school students will carry out toward in their 11th or 12th grade years, or in earlier years if appropriate instructional support is available, to earn credits toward the Seal of Civic Readiness. It is intended especially for implementation in Participation in Government classes, but the proposal suggests that it could also be included in other courses.<sup>34</sup> Civic Capstone Projects that satisfy the requirements for earning points toward the Seal of Civic Readiness are defined by “essential elements” that include the key steps of all action civics projects outlined above. In November 2020, the Task Force took further steps toward the implementation and scale up of its recommendations through a workshop for educators preparing to pilot the new Seal of Civic Readiness, including by disseminating of new curricula for Civic Capstone Projects that can be implemented through remote instruction.<sup>35</sup> In this 2021-2022 academic year, the Seal of Civic Readiness, with the Civic Capstone Project, is being piloted in 110 New York State 110 high schools, including 38 throughout New York City’s five boroughs.<sup>36</sup>

***Ensuring equitable, relevant action civics projects for all high school students: Risks and opportunities in the current plans***

The new Seal of Civic Readiness and Civics Capstone Project initiatives show great promise in expanding the opportunities for action civics to young people New York City, and especially for the benefits to reach young people of color from low-income backgrounds with

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<sup>33</sup> New York Civic Readiness Task Force.

<sup>34</sup> Kimberly Young Wilkins, “Progress Update on the Civic Readiness Task Force” (Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, January 2, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Christine Radez and Lisa Kissinger, “The Civic Capstone Project in the NYSED Civic Readiness Initiative.”

<sup>36</sup> New York Civic Readiness Task Force, “Civic Readiness Initiative.”

relevant sustaining pedagogies. As New York State’s Education Department is poised to bring these programs fully to scale, this is a key moment to invest in the potential of this policy, while also mitigating equity risks presented in its current design. The model of offering the Seal of Civic Readiness Seal and Civic Capstone Project as one of several options for a “pathway” to graduation presents the specific risk that under-resourced schools serving marginalized communities may not choose to offer it, or may not offer models that are relevant and accessible for students from educationally vulnerable populations. For example, schools serving youth from low-income communities may lack the discretionary funds needed to implement Civics Capstone Projects at a level of quality available to those serving more affluent populations, such as through collaborations with educational NGOs specializing in Action Civics. Without evidence-based, effective project models, and the technical support to implement them, schools and teachers are likely to struggle to offer action civics opportunities that are relevant accessible for students who face challenges and barriers in their educational pursuits, including those with mobility, sensory or cognitive disabilities; newcomers, English Language Learners (ELLs) and Multilingual Learners; students in foster care and/or in temporary housing; and those from low-income households and communities.

As steps to pilot test the Seal of Civic Readiness in New York City and State are already underway, this is an optimal moment for innovation. New action civics projects could be designed and adapted, drawing ideas and evidence from the community-based youth initiatives already underway throughout New York City, and from further YPAR and other related work described above. For example, action civics projects could be offered through extracurricular programs implemented by or with community-based organizations, local governments and even universities and other research institutions, thus diversifying the types of civic projects available

to youth with different interests. Such a model also has the potential to amplify the impact of young people’s voices and actions as they work even more closely with leaders and organizations positioned to influence policies and other changes. Especially during this pilot phase, new models can also be designed with and for the most at risk high school students in our schools, and tested comprehensively, informing a long-term strategy to guarantee meaningful, relevant, engaging and equitable action civics projects learning opportunities for all young people.

***New York, New York: It’s up to us (to create new models for equity)***

New York City’s public school educators have long been national and global leaders in innovating, advocating for and institutionalizing student-led learning, and in creating curricula and structures adapted to the needs, interests and goals of our diverse young people. Working in collaboration, our city’s educators and community organizations are uniquely and exceptionally resourced and positioned to take the lead in designing and testing new models for action civics projects *in and beyond schools*, in an equitable approach that universally reaches and engages all youth, including and especially the young people living and growing in New York State’s urban contexts.

**Policy Recommendation**

Beginning in 2022, New York City’s Department of Education should collaborate with local educational and community organizations (referred to below as nongovernmental organizations or NGOs), government officials, and students themselves to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based, city-wide plan to provide all New York City high school students with opportunities to participate in a meaningful civic action civics project. The initiative to develop this plan should bring together a team of representatives from each of these

groups to collaborate in the innovation and testing of new action civics projects and delivery modalities, while liaising with the New York State Civic Readiness Task Force. The comprehensive plan this team eventually produces should provide diverse and differentiated, inclusive and relevant possibilities for action civics project opportunities for high school students of all abilities and circumstances in our city. That plan, and the types of action civics projects it outlines and promotes, should reflect and leverage the rich, dynamic capacities of New York City's schools, government agencies and community-based organizations, and our youth. It should serve as a road map for the implementation of action civics projects for all New York City students, and a model for other school districts, especially those in urban centers throughout our State. The plan should be ready in July 2023 for review by the New York City Department of Education, the New York State Civic Readiness Task Force and any other New York State and City education officials, at which point it should be adopted for implementation, or further revised and developed, as determined by the relevant State and City civic and educational leaders and stakeholders.

### ***Convening a city-based innovation and planning team***

To develop this plan, a team of lead social studies and civics educators from the New York City's Department of Education should collaborate directly with a team of education, youth-oriented and other community-based organizations, local government agencies, teachers and high school students to design new possibilities for relevant, engaging civic action projects, and modalities for making those projects available to students in and beyond the classroom. A working title for this team proposed here is the "New York City Action Civics Innovation and Planning Team (NYCACIPT)." The NYCACIPT should work in close collaboration with the



existing New York State Civic Readiness Task Force, possibly as a sub-committee of that group, and with some of the same members that represent agencies and organizations based or operating in New York City. The NYCACIPT might also include representatives from other schools, organizations and agencies based or operating in the city including those mentioned above (e.g. Generation Citizen, the Justice Center, Coro Leadership Center, the Center for Court Innovation, Make the Road NYC and others). The NYCACIPT should also include high school social studies teachers, as well as instructional coaches.

A strong recommendation is that the NYCACIPT should also include high school students as members, especially those representing the diversity of abilities and circumstances that the comprehensive plan for action projects should reach. Those include:

- Students with disabilities (including those with cognitive, sensory and mobility disabilities)
- Newcomers, English Language and Multilingual Learners and undocumented youth
- Students in foster care and/or homeless shelters
- Students in contact with the law
- Students from low-income families or communities

The NYCACIPT's collaboration with its high school student members should itself serve as a model of an action civics projects, and should draw from best practices such as those described in the examples above. In this regard, high school student who are part of the NYCACIPT should receive stipends as interns or fellows, a practice which promotes economic equity, and/or should receive credit for Civic Capstone Projects for their contributions to team activities.

### ***Innovating new civic action project design and delivery modalities***

A first task of the NYCACIPT should be to lead the development and testing of action civics projects and delivery modalities to reach and engage our city's diverse high school

students in communities throughout our city. This should include mapping and reviewing action civics activities already underway in New York City’s classrooms extracurricular programs, community organizations and universities. The NYCACIPT, leveraging the expertise and creativity of its members, should also lead the innovation of new designs for action civics projects and delivery possibilities. Some possibilities to explore are:

- Integrating action civics projects into summer schools, through Participation in Government and/or other core or elective social studies courses;
- Integrating action civics projects into school governance, such as through the school leadership committee;
- New collaborations to involve youth in shaping decisions made by and with city government agencies, following the example of “youth participatory budgeting”
- Project designs linked with youth-created media, journalism, theater and arts programs
- Projects utilizing assistive technologies other interactive digital platforms and pedagogies, including social media, digital gaming and digital mapping, especially through modalities that are effective in remote and hybrid instruction.

Again, action civics project concepts explored during this phase must be designed specifically for educationally vulnerable students such as those with different abilities, those learning and learning in different languages, and those in challenging family, housing and economic circumstances, and centered in their needs, interests, situations, assets and capacities. New and old action civics projects and delivery modalities should be pilot tested throughout the city, and appraised and evaluated by external evaluators. The evaluation process should include steps to measure feasibility of project delivery in different modalities (including success strategies, resources needed and obstacles encountered by the different organizations implementing the models), the extent to which the different models were accessible and engaging for adolescents in different circumstances, and the impact on students’ learning in relation to civic knowledge and skills (and specifically, any learning outcomes and indicators

already developed for the Civics Capstone Project). Findings from the pilot test should also be made available to the NYSED Civic Readiness Task Force to share with other school districts and education organizations throughout the State.

***A comprehensive plan for action civics projects for all New York City High School students***

As a culminating activity in preparation for a next, city-wide initiative, the NYCACIPT should develop a comprehensive plan to provide equitable, meaningful, engaging action civics project opportunities for all New York City High School students. The comprehensive plan should be based on findings from evaluations and appraisals of the pilot tests, and the NYCACIPT's analysis and recommendations of action project models that should be used, scaled up adapted or discontinued.

The comprehensive plan should serve as a road map for New York City's schools, education and community organizations and government agencies implementation action civics projects that are available, and accessible to all high school students, each enabling participating students to fulfil the requirements for a Civic Capstone Project. It should detail strategies and resources required for to schools and education organizations offering action civics learning opportunities, especially those needed to address and eliminate barriers for educationally vulnerable high schools, and also to implement projects using evidence-based best practices for quality and impact (which may include professional development, new curriculum materials, partnerships and linkages with extracurricular programs). In keeping with the principles and purposes of educational quality and equity underpinning this policy proposal, the plan should offer all high school students a reasonable degree of choice in the type and topic of the action project they carry out, as a key principle of effective action civics pedagogy is for students to

explore and pursue their own interests. Ensuring choice for high school students is also a mechanism to ensuring that no student is tracked or restricted to action projects based on their abilities or disabilities, language, or other circumstances. The comprehensive plan should include the following:

- A geographic plan for where and how action civics projects will be made available to high school students throughout the city. The plan will include strategies to make action civics projects available for the preponderance of students who attend school outside their home districts (for example, with school-specific and neighborhood-based extracurricular options). It will include specific steps and strategies to ensure relevant, accessible action civics projects to all students, including those in the educationally vulnerable categories listed above.
- An outline of further steps required to build and support the capacity of schools and other organizations and agencies to implement action civics projects at scale to youth throughout the city, such as the development of curriculum manuals and resources, and professional development workshops.
- An outline of the staffing structure required to institutionalize and support the delivery action civics projects at scale to youth throughout the city. This might include recommendations instructional coaches situated at the DoE (and/or changes to the existing job descriptions of social studies coaches), and recommendations for an accreditation system that enables students who participate in action civics projects outside the classroom receive Civic Capstone Project credit toward their Seal of Civic Readiness.

- A detailed budget indicating the itemized expenses and funds required to institutionalize and support the delivery action civics projects at scale to youth throughout the city, including funding needed by community-based organizations and government agencies, for additional professional development, teaching material and staffing costs above.

A suggested outline for the timeline and steps for the development of the comprehensive plan is attached as Annex 1.

### **Budget requirements and funding possibilities**

As this proposal is for a short-term (approximately 2-year) initiative to produce sustainable, institutionalized approaches to strengthen civic education for use in the long term, a recommendation is to seek funding from one of the many private national or local foundations currently supporting civic engagement, civics education, educational equity, and/or other relevant issues (such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, or the William T. Grant Foundation), or from federal, state or city-based foundations and programs (such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as the U.S. Department of Education). In this regard, a further recommendation is that one of the educational nonprofit organizations represented on the NYCACIPT should manage the monies and budget of this organization, and any personnel hired (i.e. Project Coordinator, Project Officer/Assistant, and any consultants) should work directly for that organization.

As a very rough estimate, the overall funding required for this 2-year initiative is approximately \$500,000. The main category of expenditures will be compensation for work hours for the teachers, staff of educational NGOs, and high school student interns or fellows who

contribute to the development and testing of new Civic Action Capstone project models, as well as dedicated staff or consultants hired to coordinate or contribute directly to this initiative. In this regard, one full-time Project Coordinator, and one Project Officer or Assistant should be hired for a fixed-term contract of 2 years, to coordinate the proposed activities. The activities proposed may also entail engaging at least two consultants (or consulting firms), short-term, specific activities such as mapping, documentation and reporting, and most importantly, evaluation of the pilot tests.

The NGOs that contribute to this initiative will be encouraged to develop pilot models for Civic Capstone Projects based on the youth programs they are already implementing, with any adaptations required to reach and engage new populations or fulfill requirements for the Seal of Civic Readiness. To the extent feasible they should develop models that staff can lead through their ongoing work on the organizations' programs, without adding substantial tasks or hours to their existing responsibilities. However, recognizing that NGOs' participation in this initiative will entail some additional staff time, a suggestion is that funding should be provided for 10 NGOs for 0.5 of one yearly staff salary (at their respective standard rates) for a project coach facilitator to contribute to this initiative.

Teachers contributing to this initiative may be compensated through professional development payment modalities for the time they spend participating in workshops, developing new curriculum materials, writing reports, or for any other specific contributions to this initiative. If high school students are engaged as fellows or interns, stipends should be provided for any work they do outside school hours that contributes to this initiative (and does not contribute directly to their own accrual of academic credit).

Annex 2 outlines specific, itemized expenses that may be anticipated with the activities outlined in Annex 1.

### **Arguments Against Policy Solution, including negative consequences**

This section of of this paper addresses anticipated arguments against the policy recommendations detailed above.

*Argument 1:* Some parents (or other community groups) may view this initiative to engage high school students in action civics projects, or in the work of community-based organizations, as an effort to influence their children’s political views, or to advance a specific political agenda.

*Counter argument 1:* First, it should be stated explicitly here that this initiative is not designed to advance a specific political agenda, nor to sway high school students’ political beliefs toward a specific orientation (left, right, center or otherwise). Rather, action civics pedagogy is designed to be student-centered and directed, providing students with opportunities to choose, examine, and formulate their own solutions to problems or issues that interest them. As members of the NYCACIPT collaborate to develop new models for Civic Capstone Projects, they should also actively foster the (accurate) understanding and support of parents, teachers, and other community stakeholders in this initiative. For example, this might include developing and disseminating communication and advocacy materials directed to parents and other community stakeholders.

Second, the initiative proposed here is intended to contribute to a long-term goal of expanding the pathways available to diverse New York City high school students as they work on civic capstone projects. With more well-tested models for action projects, and the expansion

of city schools and organizations' capacity to collaborate in the delivery and accreditation of Civic Capstone Projects, high school students will have more choice not only in their project topics, but in the modality for working on a ther projects. For example, this might include the option to work on a civic capstone project as part of their Participation in Government class, or outside school hours with a community-based organization.

Third, this initiative draws on the ample experience of education organizations and public educators that have been leaders in action civics. Those educators have developed and practiced strategies to promote understanding and buy-in among parents and other stakeholders, which can be further developed through the pilot test process, and utilized as the Seal of Civic Readiness and Civic Capstone Projects are scaled up and institutionalized.

***Argument 2:*** Delivering educational programs through approaches that require collaboration between schools and other organizations will be costly.

***Counterargument 2:*** The two-year initiative proposed here will not rely primarily on New York City or State resources. It is designed for funding by private and public foundations and funding programs, especially those with explicit commitments to promoting youth civic education and engagement.

Furthermore, through the design and testing of new models for partnerships between public schools and NGOs, this initiative will contribute new, well-tested strategies for efficiently and effectively utilizing both public and private sources to expand and enrich educational opportunities for New York high school students. These strategies will be useful in future phases as the Seal of Civic Readiness and Civic Capstone Project programs are scaled up and institutionalized.



*Argument 3:* Participating in action civics projects may present risks to adolescents, such as: disappointment or frustration if their projects do not have the anticipated results, or if adult stakeholders are not receptive to the voices, views and potential of youth.

*Counterargument 3:* These risks are well studied by scholars and practitioners of action civics and related youth-led participatory approaches to research, scholarship and learning, and there are ample lessons learned and available in existing research and guidance to mitigate these risks. For example, curriculum guidance developed by leading action civics education organizations include steps that teachers can take throughout the action project learning cycle. Guidance for teachers and education program managers also includes specific recommendations for how educators can and should work directly with adult community leaders to prepare them to meet with youth who are advocating for or proposing policy changes or projects.

A corresponding consideration is that many of the risks high school students may face when engaging in action civics projects are the same as the risks and frustrations that adults face in their civic actions. Preparing youth for such experiences through well-structured and tested experiential learning activities in a supportive learning environment may help them to develop resilience and motivation to meet the frustrations and challenges they will face as engaged citizens in their future lives.

## **I. Approval and Implementation Process including policy supporters**

As suggested above, a first step to implement this policy initiative would be to convene the NYCACIPT. Ideally this step should be approved and announced by both the New York State Education Department P-12 Education Committee (which oversees the work of the New

York State Civic Readiness Task Force) and the Chancellor of New York City Schools or his/her/their appointed deputies or officers, such as the Chief Academic Officer.

The NYCACIPT might carry out all activities outlined above under the auspices of the NYCDoE Chief Academic Officer, with specific responsibilities to meet regularly with the New York State Civic Readiness Task Force to report on their activities.

The product of the policy initiative outlined in this proposal would be the comprehensive plan for the provision of action civics learning opportunities for all New York City high school students. An assumption is that the draft comprehensive plan would be presented to the New York State Education Department and the New York City Department of Education for review, possible revision, and adoption by 31 July 2022. The adoption of the comprehensive plan would initiate its implementation, and the plan itself would outline steps for its implementation at scale.

## **Annex 1: Timeline and indicative steps**

### ***Phase 1: Preparation for innovation and testing***

***Time frame:*** March 31 2022-July 31 2022

***Activities:***

- 1.1 Convene the NYCACIPT with required support and approval from the NYSED, the NYCDoE and especially the New York State Civic Readiness Task Force. (All steps that follow would be carried out or led by the NYCACIPT, in collaboration with the New York State Civic Readiness Task Force and any other agencies).
- 1.2 Conduct a preliminary mapping or survey of New York City middle and high schools, organizations and agencies throughout the city that are already implementing action civics projects with and for youth either in or beyond schools.
- 1.3 Identify and select organizations, agencies and schools that will participate in the design and pilot testing process.
- 1.4 Develop indicators for pilot testing pre-tests and evaluations.

### ***Phase 2: Innovation and pilot testing***

***Time frame:*** 15 August 2022 – 30 April 2023

***Activities:***

- 1.1 Design action civics project models for pilot testing through a collaborative process led by the NYCACIPT.
- 1.2 Conduct pre-delivery baselines for impact assessments.
- 1.3 Implement/pilot test new civic action project models in schools and extracurricular settings.

### ***Phase 3: Pilot test evaluations, analysis, and comprehensive planning***

***Time frame:*** 1 May 2023-31 July 2023

*Activities:*

3.1 Finalize evaluations and appraisals of pilot-tested projects.

3.2 Review and analyze findings from the pilot test evaluations and appraisals, and develop a management response to the evaluation, with recommendations for the comprehensive city-wide model, addressing implications from the findings. The recommendations might include:

- Types of projects to include, modify or discontinue
- Additional steps to prepare to deliver action projects at scale, including capacity/professional development needs and strategies for educators, community-based organizations and government agencies and curriculum materials
- Other recommendations for the comprehensive plan.

3.3 Develop of the comprehensive plan for delivery of action civics project opportunities to all high school students

3.4 Present the comprehensive to the New York City Department of Education, the New York State Civic Readiness Task Force and any other New York State and City education officials for review and agreement and planning toward next steps for implementation.

## **Annex 2: Itemized expenses for budget development**

### ***Phase 1: Preparation for innovation and testing March 31 2022-July 31 2022***

- Salary or consultant fees for 1 full time project coordinator (x 4 months)
- Salary or consultant fee for 1 full-time project officer or assistant (x 4 months)
- Per session, salary costs for release time for workshop and meeting time for NYCACIPT members (x 30 work days x number of adult team members)
- Stipends for high school student NYCACIPT interns or fellows (x 30 work days x number of student team members)

### ***Phase 2: Innovation and pilot testing 15 August 2022 – 30 April 2022***

- Salary or consultant fees for 1 full time project coordinator (x 8.5 months)
- Salary or consultant fee for 1 full-time project officer (x 8.5 months)
- Salary for CBO staff implementing pilot projects with youth in nonformal education settings (x 8.5 months). *CBOs will be encouraged to pilot project models that can be integrated into their ongoing activities and implemented by existing staff without adding substantial work hours; some funds may be levied for this project to support contributing CBOs in supplementing work hours for additional work required for projects.*
- Per session, salary costs for release time for workshop and meeting time for NYCACIPT members (x 30 work days/team)
- Per session, salary costs for release time for workshop and meeting time for additional teachers or CBO staff (x 30 work days/team)
- Stipends for high school student NYCACIPT interns or fellows (x 30 work days x number of student team members)
- Consultant fees for external evaluators

### ***Phase 3: Pilot test evaluations, analysis, and comprehensive planning 1 May 2022-31 July 2022***

- Salary or consultant fees for 1 full time project coordinator (x 3 months)
- Salary or consultant fee for 1 full-time project officer (x 3 months)
- Per session, salary costs for release time for workshop and meeting time for NYCACIPT members (x 30 work days/team)
- Per session, salary costs for release time for workshop and meeting time for additional teachers or CBO staff (x 30 work days/team)
- Stipends for high school student NYCACIPT interns or fellows (x 30 work days x number of student team members)
- Consultant fees for external evaluators

- Travel costs for team representatives presenting finding and plans in New York City and Albany (if conducted in person)

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