



Snapshots

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Data Briefs on Civics in the Classroom

The Partnership for Civic Learning | www.loufrey.org/pcl

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Student Civic Participation: Does Classroom Experience Make a Difference?

- Teachers' choices about the use of instructional practices affects more than what students know about civics and government; they also affect students' civic involvement in the community
- Overall, experiential learning and other "hands-on" instructional practices can have powerful effects on students' level of civic involvement.
- Incorporating community service/service learning as an instructional practice has strong effects on student civic engagement.
- Debates and mock trials promote higher levels of student civic participation even if they only occur occasionally during the year.
- Having community officials visit the class has a positive impact on student civic engagement, even if it occurs relatively rarely – once or twice a semester.
- Even easily implemented practices such as discussion of current events and playing computer simulation games such as those available through iCivics can have a positive effect on building civic participation.

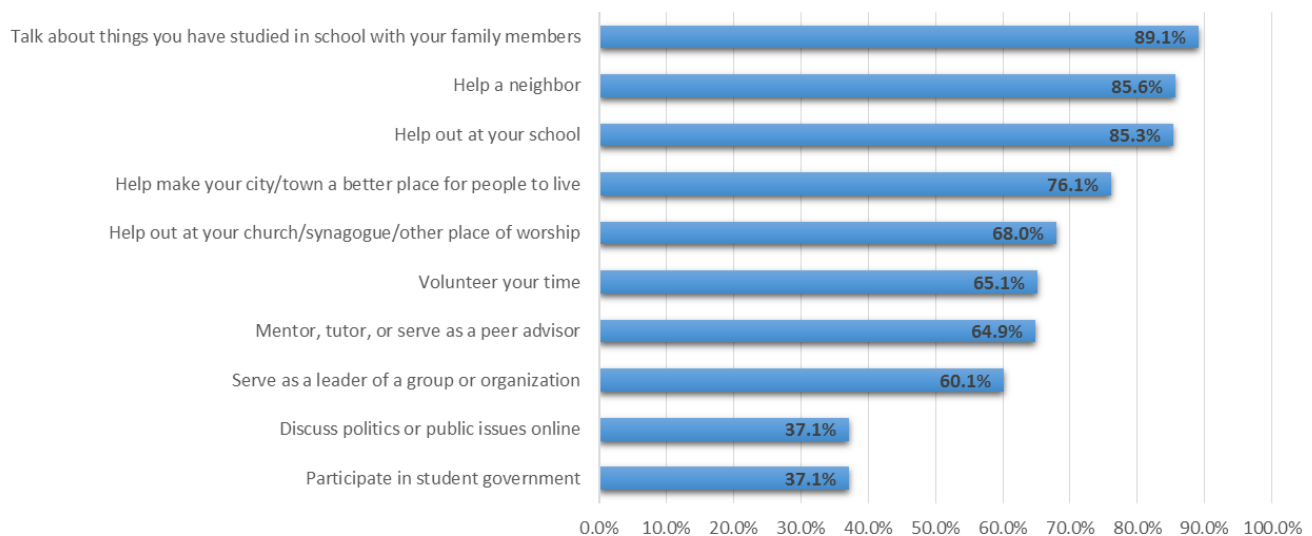
This Snapshot is one in a series highlighting results from the spring 2015 Civic Attitude and Engagement Survey. The Survey, conducted in May on behalf of the Partnership for Civic Learning, is based on the responses of more than 7,000 seventh grade students who were just completing a full year of civics instruction. Districts participating in the Survey included Miami-Dade, Clay and St. Lucie. More information on the survey may be found in the "About the Survey" at the end of this Snapshot.

Civic education is intended to prepare students for their roles as engaged and responsible citizens in a democratic society. Thus, it is intended to provide students with knowledge about the system of government and civic life and to build the skills and civic dispositions associated with democratic citizenship. The Civics End-of-Course Assessment tests student knowledge, but does not assess civic skills and dispositions. That is the goal of the Civic Attitude and Engagement Survey.

In this Snapshot we consider the extent to which classroom experiences contribute to students' civic participation in their communities both in and out of school.

Civic Participation. To measure civic participation, students were asked to respond to a series of questions that measured how often within the past year they engaged in the following activities: (1) participate in student government; (2) serve as a leader of a group/organization; (3) discuss politics or public issues online; (4) mentor or serve as a peer advisor; (5) volunteer time; (6) help out at school; (7) help a neighbor; (8) help out at a place of worship; (9) work to make their city/town a better place to live; and (10) talk about things studied in school with their family (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Civic Behavior
Percentage of Students Who Reported Doing these Activities "A few times a year or more"



Classroom Instruction. The national consensus report on civic education, *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, reviews evidence supporting the conclusion that there are six classroom practices that contribute to student civic learning. These include: (1) direct classroom instruction; (2) discussion of current events and controversial issues; (3) service learning; (4) extracurricular activities – particularly those requiring teamwork and collaboration; (5) student participation in school governance; and (6) simulations of democratic processes. To begin to understand the extent to which students experience these practices, the Survey asked students how often they (1) participated in mock trials; (2) participated in community service projects; (3) discussed current events; (4) participated in debates; (5) had visitors from community; and (6) played computer games about civics.

FIGURE 2: CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION
"INDICATE ROUGHLY HOW OFTEN YOU DID EACH OF THE
FOLLOWING IN YOUR CIVICS CLASS THIS YEAR"

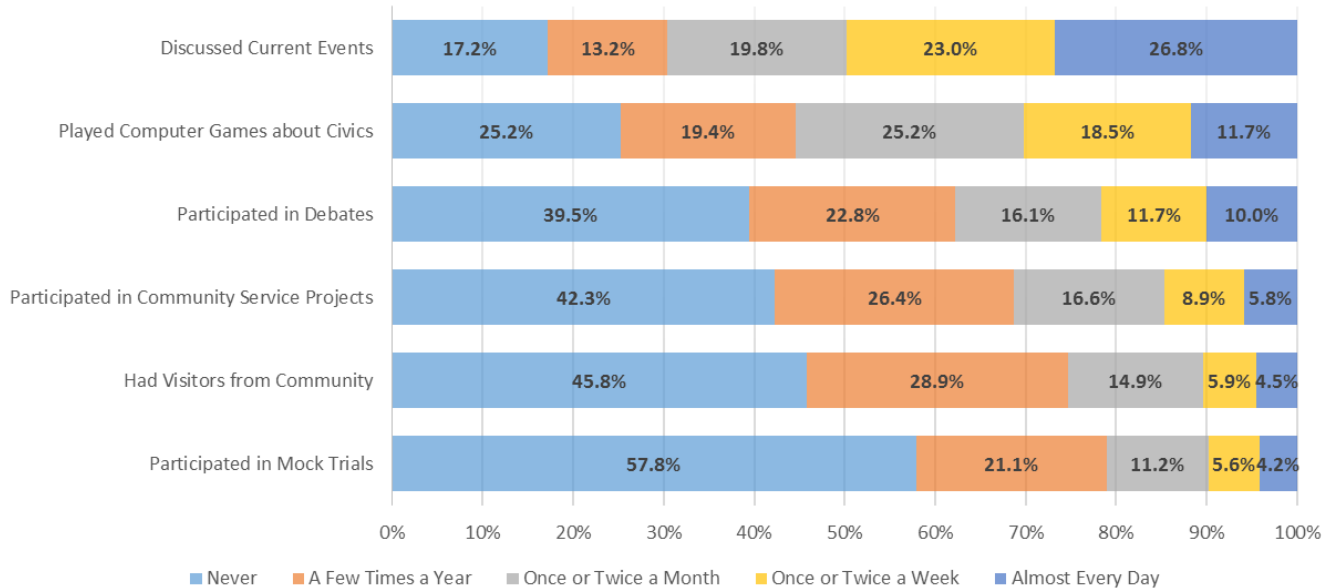
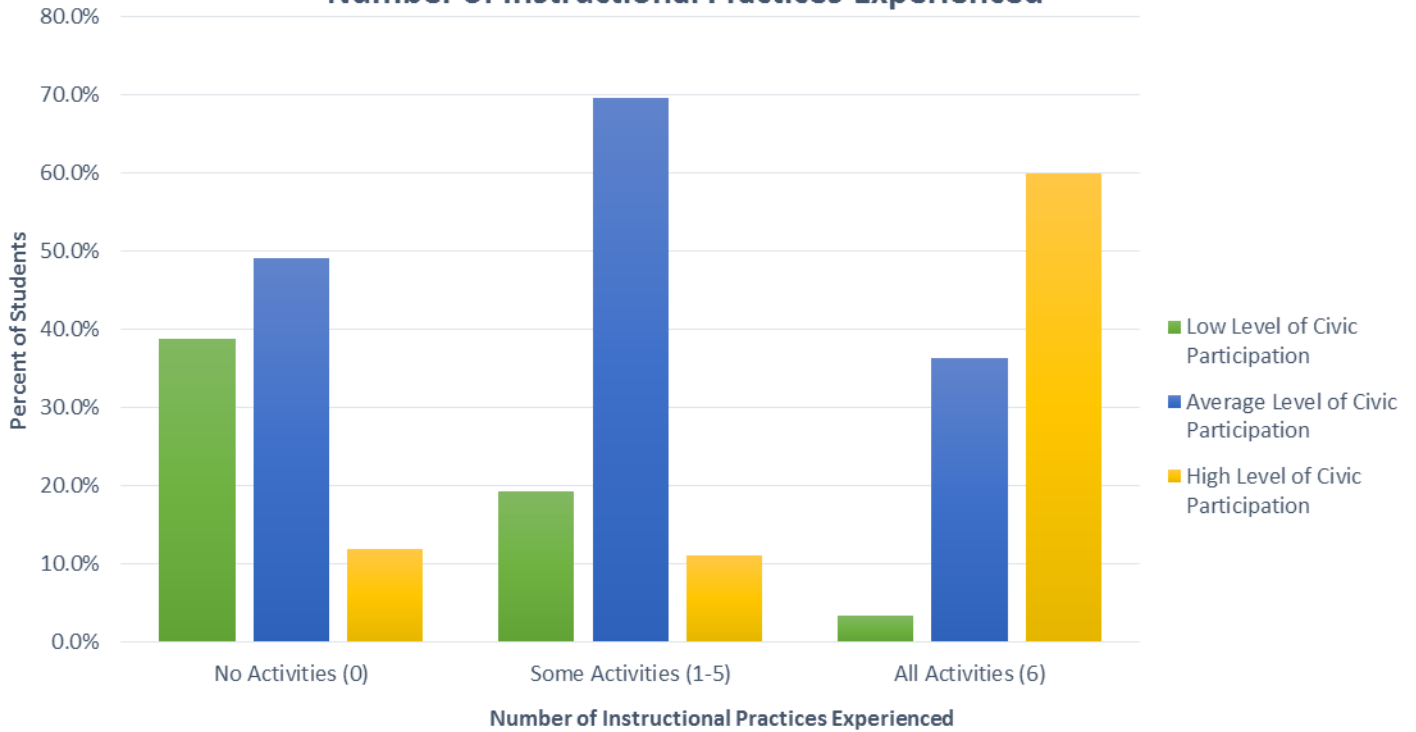


Figure 2 indicates that some effective practices are frequently implemented in Florida civics classrooms while others are less often employed. The most frequently employed was discussion of current events, with approximately half of the students reporting doing so in class at least “once or twice a week” (49.8%). Computer simulations were also often used, with almost one-third (30.2%) of students reporting using computer games at least “once or twice a week” and only 25.2% reporting that they never did so. Use of debates was also moderately widespread, with about six out of ten (60.5%) students reporting that they at least occasionally participated. Similar numbers of students reported at least some experience with community service projects (57.7%) and had at least an occasional visitor from the community (54.2%). The least reported activity was participation in mock trials; 57.8% of students reported that they “never” experienced a mock trials activity in their civics class.

Do classroom experiences matter? Analysis of classroom activities and student civic participation showed that there were significant differences in an overall civic participation scores between students who *did not experience any of these instructional practices*, students who *experienced some combination of these instructional activities*, and students who *experienced all six instructional practices*. Figure 3 shows the change in level of civic behavior based on the number of instructional activities students experienced over the course of the school year. For the purposes of this analysis, the ten civic participation questions were combined into an index to measure overall civic participation (viz., how many behaviors each student reported doing “at least a few times a year or more.”) As illustrated in Figure 3, students who experienced at least one instructional practice the classroom were more civically engaged than those who

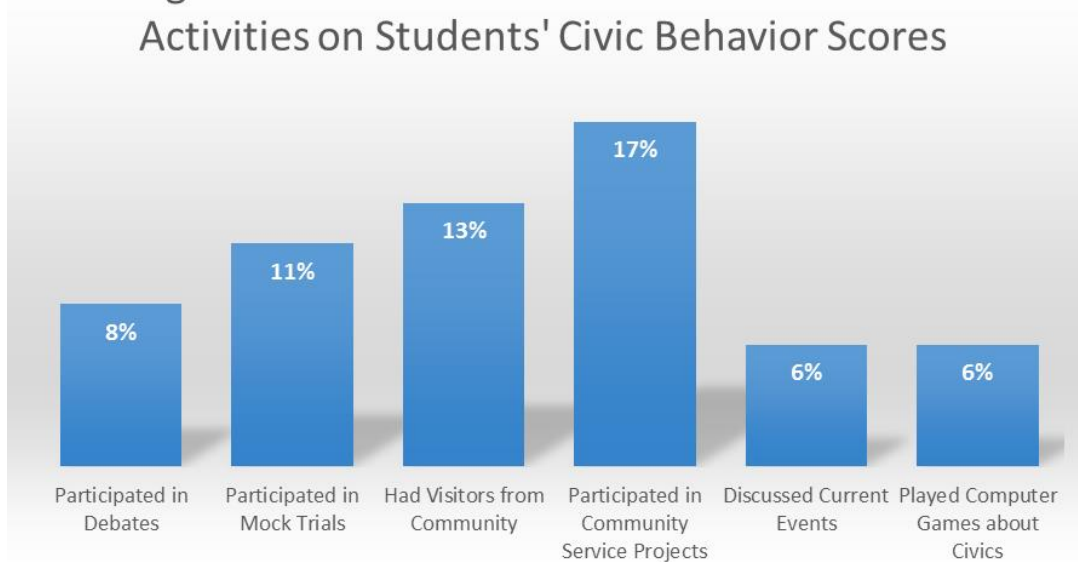
experienced none. A moderate use of these instructional practices was associated, however, with moderate levels of student civic participation. On the other hand, *students who were in classrooms in which all of these effective civic practices were used by their teachers showed sharply higher levels of civic involvement in their communities.*

Figure 3: Students' Level of Civic Participation by Number of Instructional Practices Experienced



How much of a difference do instructional practices make? Figure 4 shows the size of the effect that each instructional practice had on students' level of civic participation. The effect size measures the extent to which each instructional practice explains a change in student civic participation. The most frequently cited activities (discussing current events and playing computer games) had the smallest effect on students' overall level of civic behavior. The activity that showed the largest effect on civic behavior was "participating in community service projects" (17% effect) followed by "had visitors from the community" (13% effect) and "participated in mock trials" (11% effect). These results support the argument that that experiential learning and other "hands-on" instructional practices can have powerful effects on students' level of civic involvement.

Figure 4: Effect Size of Classroom Instruction Activities on Students' Civic Behavior Scores



About the Survey

In the spring of 2015, the Lou Frey Institute administered The Civic Attitude and Engagement Survey to 7th grade students who were currently enrolled in civics courses in the following Florida school districts: Miami-Dade County, Clay County, and St. Lucie County. 7,436 students in 75 middle schools were surveyed in total; 88% of schools were located in Miami-Dade County, 10.7% in Clay County and 1.3% in St. Lucie County. The survey was composed of 20 items or question blocks. It was intended to provide districts with a tool to measure the extent to which completion of 7th grade civics affects students' (1) civic proficiencies and readiness for future engagement as informed citizens; (2) commitment to democratic values and rights; (3) knowledge of current events; (4) efficacy/self-confidence about one's ability to contribute to society; and (5) experience with recommended pedagogies for civics.

About the Florida Partnership for Civic Learning

The Florida Partnership for Civic Learning was formed with the mission to undertake research, evaluation, and development projects intended to support continuous improvement of student civic learning outcomes in K-12 education. Partnership members include the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship (FJCC) at University of Central Florida and University of Florida, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), the Florida Association of Social Studies Supervisors (FASSS), and CIRCLE at Tufts University.