

Teaching Civics in Florida

Results from the First Annual Survey of Florida Public School Civics Teachers

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Introduction

In April and May of 2016, the Lou Frey Institute surveyed Civics teachers in Florida working in public, non-charter middle schools, K-8 schools, and K-12 schools. There were 411 civics teachers who completed the survey, each teaching an average of 4-5 sections of civics during the school year. Civics teachers answered questions about classroom instructional practices and instructional resources; classroom climate and approaches to class discussion; school climate; content coverage in preparation for the Civics End of Course Assessment; and their training, preparation, and professional development.

Some of the key findings include:

- Civics teachers in Florida make use of the six proven practices that provide high quality civic education
- Florida civics teachers use a variety of instructional resources to cover the assessed benchmarks for the End of Course Assessment, often combining several resources for instruction.
- Teachers provide an open classroom where students are encouraged to express their opinions and do not shy away from discussing controversial political and social issues in class.
- About half of Florida civics teachers are not able to adequately cover all assessed benchmarks on the Civics End of Course Assessment; roughly two-thirds find at least one of these benchmarks difficult to teach
- Teachers work in a complex environment and serve students with a wide variety of needs

Methodology

This survey asked Civics teachers to answer questions about their instructional practices and classroom environment, the resources they use to cover all assessed benchmarks on the Civics End of Course Assessment, the professional development opportunities they are afforded, and the challenges to implementing instruction and covering the civics benchmark material during the school year. Teachers were recruited through an email list provided by the Florida Department of Education and the survey was administered online. Teachers were asked to provide a name and email address if they wished to receive a certificate signed by Former Representative Lou Frey and Former Senator Bob Graham as a token of appreciation for taking the survey. For these respondents, the survey was not anonymous but answers were kept confidential. For those respondents who did not provide contact information, the survey responses are anonymous.

Survey Participants

The Teaching Civics in Florida survey was distributed to all public, non-charter middle school Civics teachers in the state of Florida (N=2088). Survey respondents included 518 non-charter public school Civics teachers in Florida (24.8% response rate). These teachers were employed during the 2015-2016 school year in regular middle schools (6th-8th grades), K-8 schools, and K-12 schools around the state. Since we were interested in examining the instructional resources available to teachers as well as the structural environment that these teachers work in and how these two factors impact student learning outcomes, Civics teachers at charter schools were not included in the study. Charter schools vary in operational requirements and accountability practices (Center for Public Education 2010). These schools enjoy a certain sense of autonomy from state and local rules that would make it difficult to include teachers from these schools alongside teachers in non-charter public schools who operate under a different administrative structure.

Cleaning the data reduced the sample down to 411 teachers. Teachers in the final sample were employed at 226 public schools across 45 districts in Florida. 70.4% of teachers were female which is consistent with the gender distribution of secondary education teachers in Florida. Each civics teacher taught an average of 4-5 sections of civics during the school year and typically were responsible for teaching about 98 students in total. The average number of years teaching was a little over 11 years but the average number of years teaching Civics was much lower, only a little over 4 years. While the typical civics teacher in Florida is an *experienced* teacher, it is apparent that this experience does not equate to years spent teaching civics.

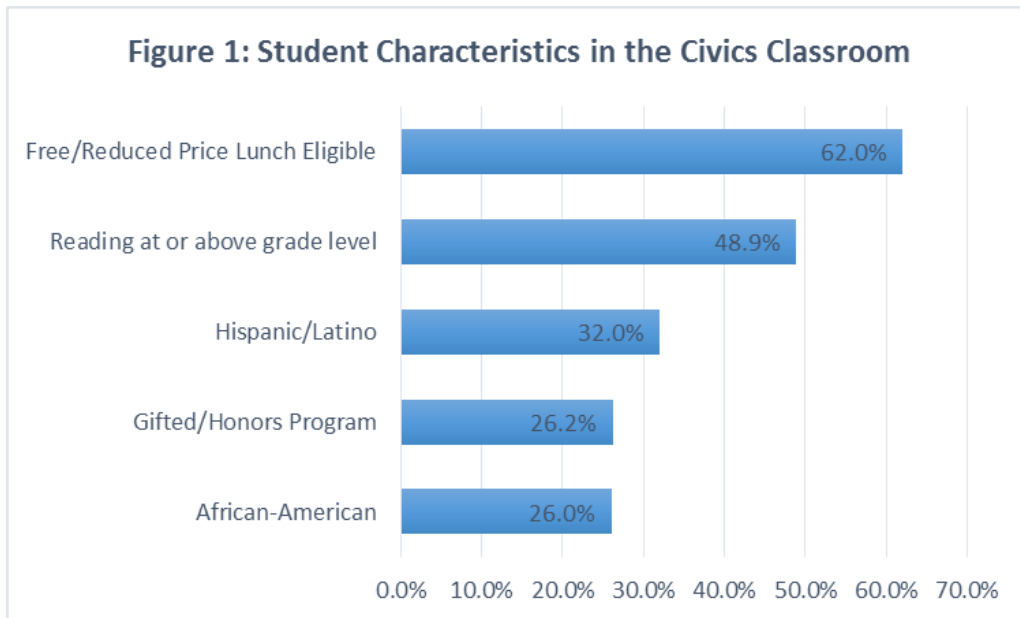
We were able to match every teacher to a school district through the IP address captured on the Qualtrics online survey. From this data, we were able to weight the data by school district in order to make inferences about the total population of teachers. All results provided are from the weighted data. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix A.

Who Gets Taught Civics?

The Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act (2010) mandates that students must achieve successful completion of at least a one semester civics education course in middle school. This civics course is capped by a Civics End of Course Assessment that constitutes 30% of the student's final course grade.

Since civics is a required course for middle school students, Florida civics teachers serve a diverse group of students in their classes. For the average civics classroom in Florida in 2015-2016, teachers estimated that about 26% of their students were African-American, 32% were Hispanic/Latino, and 62% were eligible for the Free or Reduced Price Lunch program. Teachers estimated that on average, 16% of their students had physical or developmental disabilities. Teachers were also asked to give their best estimate of what percentage of students were reading at or above grade level. Civics teachers reported that a little under half (48.9%) of their students

were reading at or above grade level. Roughly one-quarter of their students (26.2%) were enrolled in a Gifted or Honors program at their school.



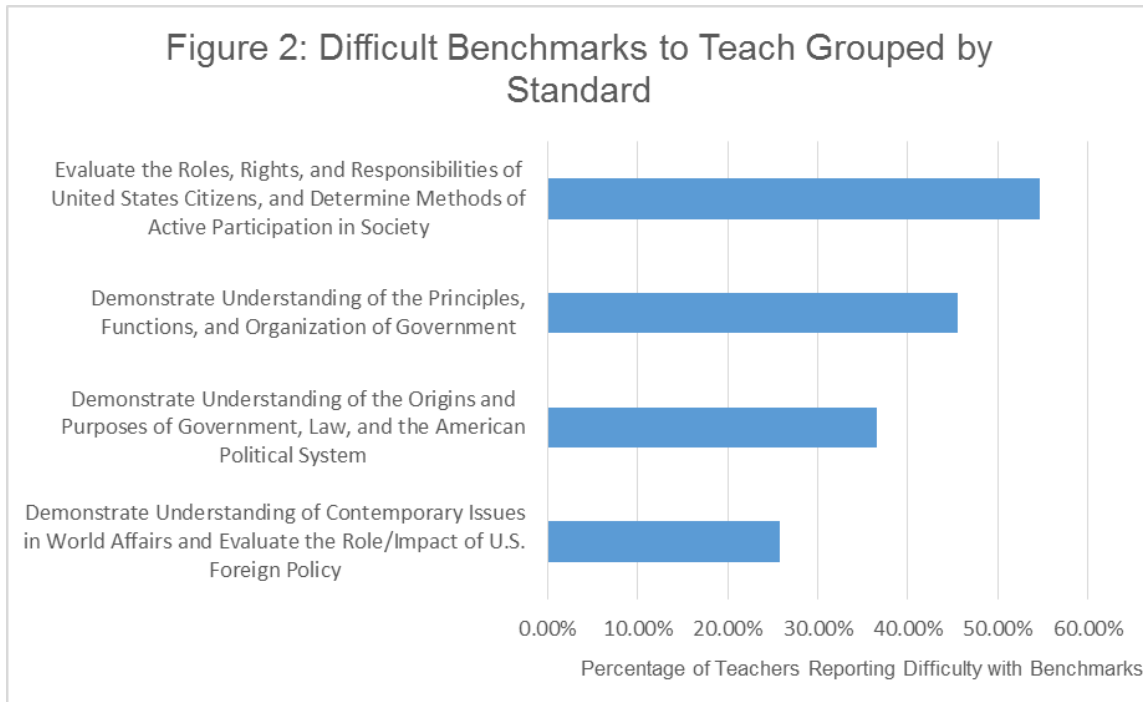
Teachers may adjust their instructional practices and topics covered to meet different levels of learning. When examining the instructional practices used at least once a year in their civics classes, teachers who had students engage in more elaborate activities like debates and mock trials were less likely to have minority students (41.9% Hispanic/Latino students in classes that did not have debates versus 20.8% Hispanic/Latino students in classes that did have debates) and Free/Reduced Price Lunch eligible students (58.3% in classes that had debates versus 76.9% in classes that did not). Classes that had visitors from the community come in to talk to students were less likely to have minority students (28.5% African-American students in classes with visitors versus 21.9% African-American students in classes without visitors) and Free/Reduced Price Lunch eligible students (58.4% in classes with visitors versus 67% in classes without visitors). There were no significant differences between student demographics or learning abilities when it came to discussing current events in class or playing computer games about civics in class.

What Gets Taught in the Civics Classroom?

There are 35 directly assessed benchmarks in the Florida Civics curriculum that are tested on the End of Course Assessment. These benchmarks are grouped into 4 standards that require students be able to: 1) demonstrate understanding of the origins and purposes of government, law, and the American political system ; 2) evaluate the roles, rights, and responsibilities of U.S. citizens and determine methods of active participation in society; 3) demonstrate understanding of the

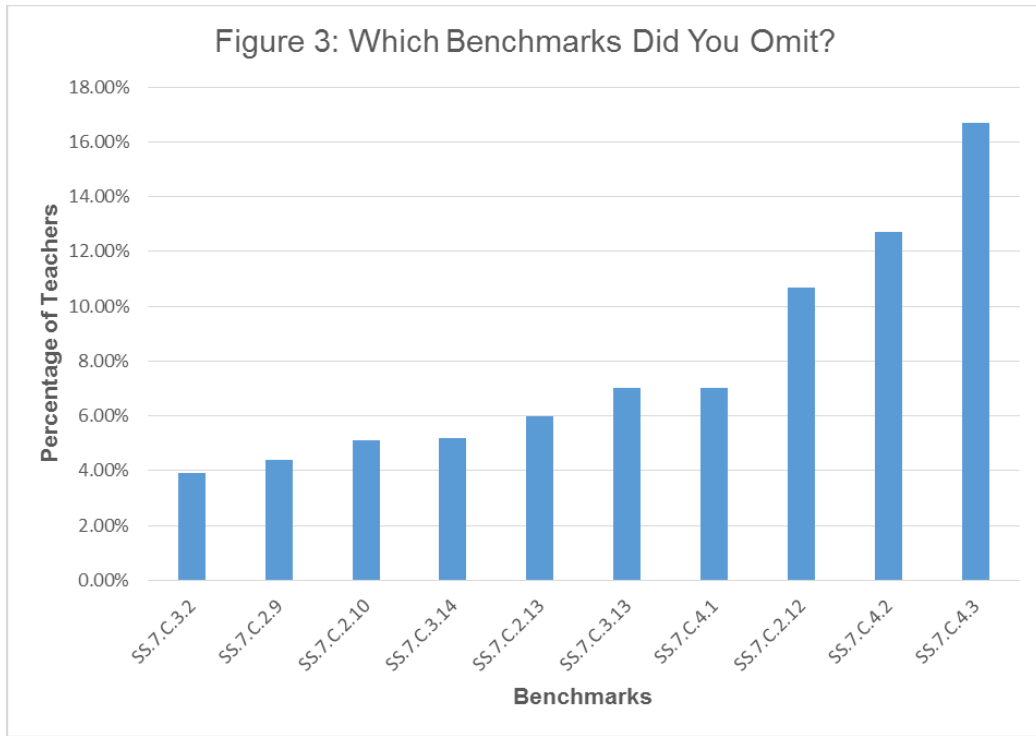
principles, functions, and organization of government; and 4) demonstrate understanding of contemporary issues in world affairs and evaluate the role/impact of U.S. foreign policy.

About half (48.6%) of Florida civics teachers said that they were not able to adequately cover all assessed benchmarks in their civics class this school year and over two-thirds of teachers (68.1%) said that there were benchmarks they found difficult to teach. The number of benchmarks that teachers said they omitted during the year ranged from 1 to 27; the average number of omitted benchmarks was 3.



The most frequently cited benchmark that proved difficult to teach was SS.7.C.2.12 which required students be able to develop a plan to resolve a state or local problem by researching public policy alternatives. This particular benchmark was also one that was often omitted during the year. Benchmarks like this one that required moving past basic comprehension to application skills were frequently listed as “difficult to teach” or “omitted.” It was also clear that benchmarks related to evaluating the role/impact of U.S. foreign policy were often listed as “omitted” although not difficult to teach; more than likely this was due to the timing of these benchmarks which fall near the end of the year when students are preparing for standardized testing and the End of Course Assessment.

There were only minimal differences in benchmark coverage by teacher educational background. Teachers who majored in Political Science versus Education or History did not differ significantly in the number of benchmarks they were able to cover during the year or the number of benchmarks they found difficult to teach.



Benchmarks	
SS.7.C.3.2	Compare parliamentary, federal, confederal, and unitary systems of government
SS.7.C.2.9	Evaluate candidates for office by analyzing their qualifications, experience, platforms, debates and political ads
SS.7.C.2.10	Evaluate the impact of media, individuals, and interest groups on monitoring and influencing government
SS.7.C.3.14	Differentiate between local, state, and federal governments' obligations and services
SS.7.C.2.13	Examine multiple perspectives on public and current issues
SS.7.C.3.13	Compare the constitutions of the United States and Florida
SS.7.C.4.1	Differentiate concepts related to United States domestic and foreign policy
SS.7.C.2.12	Develop a plan to resolve a state or local problem by researching public policy alternatives
SS.7.C.4.2	Recognize government and citizen participation in international organizations
SS.7.C.4.3	Describe examples of how the United States has dealt with international conflicts

When asked to describe why certain benchmarks were difficult to teach or why certain benchmarks were omitted during the year, 216 civics teachers offered detailed responses that could be grouped into three main categories: 1) Student Responsibility; 2) Teacher Responsibility; and 3) Structural Constraints. A majority of responses (64%) focused on student responsibility when it came to why certain benchmarks were difficult to teach. Within each main category, several sub-codes or sub-themes were parsed out in order to better understand the main causes of difficulty in the classroom. For the main category of Student Responsibility, the sub-themes of “trouble understanding the material,” “lack of interest,” and “lack of background knowledge” were prominent.

Examples of each sub-theme include:

“These benchmarks are difficult to grasp at the sixth and seventh grade level”

“Vocabulary is over the top for our students. Concepts are just irrelevant to children at this age.”

“It is very hard to teach students about the ideas of the Enlightenment because they are so foreign to students. They have no background knowledge of the time period so you have to backtrack.”

“The lessons were boring to the students and therefore they did not apply themselves as much as they could have.”

In comparison with the main theme of “Student Responsibility,” there were 4 teachers (about 2%) who responded that benchmarks were difficult to teach due to their own confusion or appropriate lack of content knowledge. 3 out of these 4 teachers responded that their level of understanding was an obstacle to adequately covering certain benchmarks:

“SS.7.C.2.5 and 3.6 are difficult for me to teach because I don’t have a firm grasp on the concepts.”¹

“My level of understanding and the ability to tie it in to the curriculum at the point in which it is taught in the pacing guide.”

“I am unclear exactly what I should be focusing on.”

The fourth civics teacher in this category felt that studying documents like the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights was irrelevant to a 7th grade government class. In this case there was more of an emphasis on the teacher’s opinion about the material rather than their ability to teach the required material.

The third main theme, “Structural Constraints,” encompassed feelings related to lack of time, lack of resources, and an overall feeling that there was just too much information to cover in the given time-frame:

“There is NOT ENOUGH TIME. The Civics EOC window is open starting in April and ends in May. We have to teach all of this content in 6-7 months if we want to have ANY kind of time to review.”

“It was difficult to find good materials especially with respect to state and local government.”

“Difficult concepts with a multitude of information that students are expected to know.”

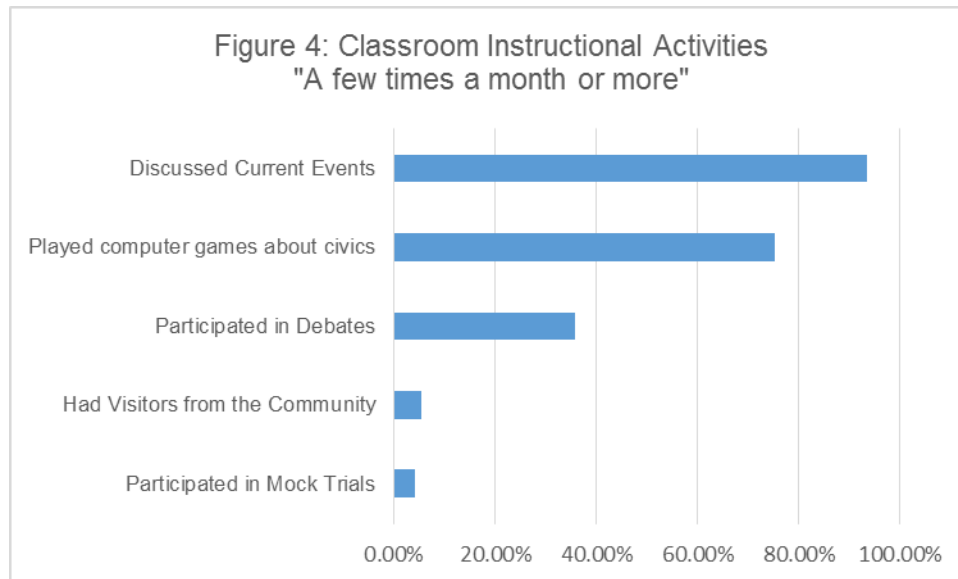
¹ SS.7.C.2.5 states that students should be able to distinguish how the Constitution safeguards and limits individual rights. SS.7.C.3.6 states that students should be able to evaluate Constitutional rights and their impacts on individuals and societies.

“These benchmarks are too broad and time consuming. I covered all but 2 this year, but just because I covered them doesn’t mean the students learned the material.”

The main sub-theme for “Structural Constraints” that emerged in the analysis was the feeling that there was just not enough time to cover everything adequately during the school year and still have time to review before the End of Course Assessment.

What Pedagogical Approaches and Instructional Resources do Civics Teachers Use?

In the report *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, there are six proven practices outlined that serve to provide high quality civic education. These are: 1) Classroom instruction; 2) Discussion of current events and controversial issues; 3) Service-learning; 4) Extracurricular activities; 5) School governance; and 6) Simulations of democratic processes.² All of these practices can be found in many of Florida’s civics classrooms. Civics teachers use a variety of instructional practices to deliver the benchmark content as well as develop students’ civic skills and interest in future community engagement.



Almost all teachers said that they discuss current events at least once or twice a month (93.6%). 75.6% of teachers stated that they did this on a weekly basis. Playing computer games about civics was also another popular instructional activity; 3 out of 4 teachers indicated that they had their students do this at least once or twice a month. Activities that take longer to plan and organize had a lower frequency of use in the classroom. However, 37.7% of civics teachers said that they had their students participate in debates at least once or twice a month. Participation in mock trials was the least frequently performed activity with only 4% of teachers stating that they did this in class at least once or twice a month. Nevertheless 61.2% of teachers responded that

² Jonathan Gould, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Philadelphia: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, 2011, available at: <http://carnegie.org/publications/search-publications/pub/405>.

they had students participate in mock trials once or twice a year and only 34.6% of civics teachers said that they never did this activity in class.

29.3% of civics teachers said that they had their students participate in a service-learning project in their class this year. While participation in service-learning was low, the quality of the service-learning projects that were undertaken was quite high. Teachers who did have students engage in a service-learning project were also very likely to give students time to reflect and talk about their project in class (76.5%) as well as investigate the causes and solutions to the social problems they encountered (51.4%).

Civics teachers used a number of different instructional resources in their civics classes during the year. It was clear from the data that most civics teachers mix and match a variety of instructional resources depending on the topic or benchmark they are covering. The most popular instructional resource was iCivics (70.5% of teachers reported using this) followed by the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship (FJCC) website and resources (53.2% of teachers). Given the answer choice of “other” for this particular question, 42.3% of teachers said that they relied on some other resource besides the ones listed. Table 1 provides a good illustration of the wide variety of resources used in the civics classroom.

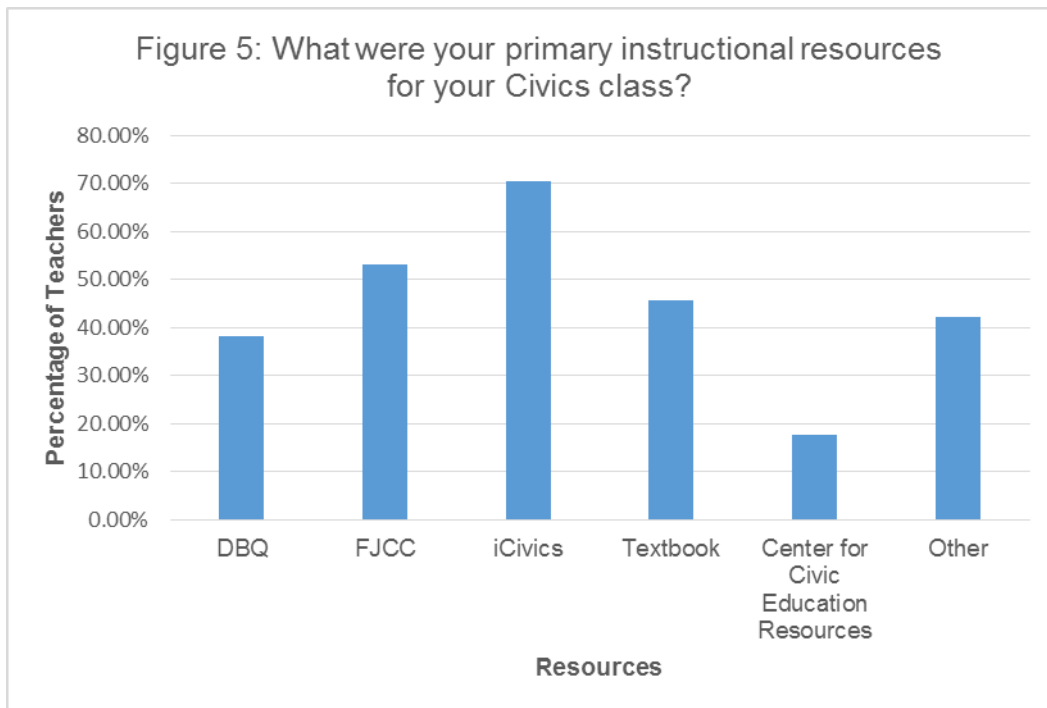


Table 1: Other Instructional Resources

Multiple resources (online and teacher-created)	Gateway to American Government book	Escambia Site	YouTube and other video resources
Florida Law Related Education	CNN Student News and other news websites	BrainPop	District-provided resources
Kahoot	Cpalms	Study Island for Civics	CrashCourse
Bill of Rights Institute	USA TestPrep	Annenberg Classroom	Zinn Education Project

For civics teachers who used FJCC resources, they used FJCC Content background reading and videos to cover approximately 56% of benchmarks. FJCC lesson plans were used to cover an average of 62% of benchmarks and FJCC test items were used to cover approximately 74% of benchmarks. It is important to also state that these instructional resources were not used in isolation from each other. Correlation analyses showed that there was a strong association between use of FJCC resources, the textbook, iCivics, and DBQ materials, indicating that many civics teachers use these resources in combination to adequately cover the benchmark material. It also indicates that there are positive interactions in content and planning that these instructional resources provide.

Discussion in the Classroom

As illustrated in the preceding section, most teachers indicated that they discussed current events in class at least once or twice a week; 32.8% of civics teachers responded that they discussed current events in class almost every day. Nearly all civics teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they try to present several sides of an issue when explaining it in class, allowing for multiple perspectives in class discussion. 9 out of 10 civics teachers agreed or strongly agreed that everyone student in their class has the responsibility to contribute to class discussions at least occasionally while around 3 out of 10 (36.9%) teachers felt that contributing to class discussion was a personal choice.

Table 2: Teacher Views on Classroom Discussion

	Probably Important	Definitely Important	Total
People should consider everyone’s side of the argument before they make a decision.	22.4%	76.8%	99.2%
People should be knowledgeable about the subject they are talking about.	16.0%	83.3%	99.3%
There should be lots of different opinions.	43.1%	48.3%	91.4%
People should not be criticized for having different points of view.	15.1%	82.6%	97.7%
Teachers should not voice their opinions.	31.1%	37.3%	68.4%
Discussion should be short.	27.2%	5.9%	33.1%

Teachers also incorporated discussion of controversial issues in their civics classes. 84.4% of civics teachers had students debate or discuss controversial political and social issues in class. 38.4% of those teachers said that they did this in class on a weekly basis; 80% of these civics teachers had students debate these types of issues at least once or twice a month. For the 15.6% of civics teachers who did not have students debate or discuss controversial issues, the largest reported obstacle was time constraints. It is promising that time constraints were the main obstacle to discussing controversial issues in the classroom; only 15.6% of teachers said that they worried about parent or administration response to this activity. Almost all teachers believed that people should not be criticized for having different points of view and 68.4% of teachers believed that it was important to keep their own opinions to themselves so to not influence student debate and discussion.

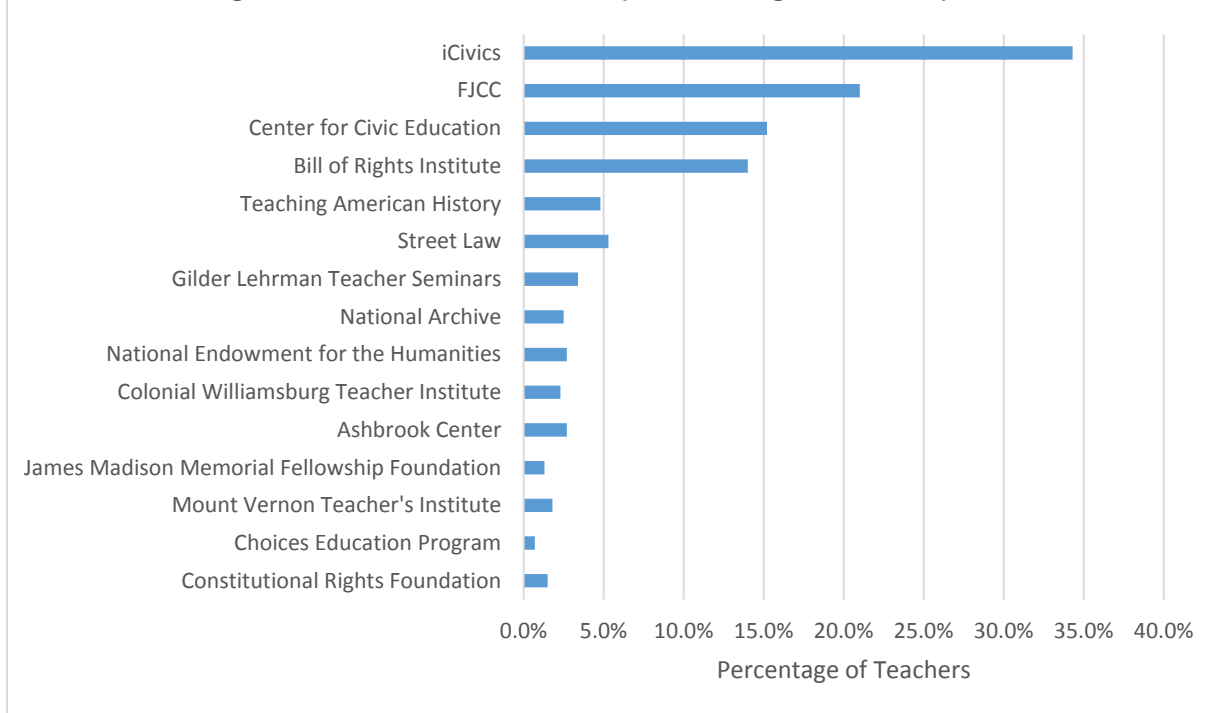
Overall, the civics classroom in Florida has an open climate where students are allowed to disagree with each other as well as with the teacher, as long as they are respectful. 95.2% of teachers said that they encourage students to express their opinions in class and 76.8% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that students have a voice in what happens in the classroom. Almost all teachers said that students are allowed to disagree with them and with each other in the classroom as well. The open classroom environment, emphasis on discussion, and coverage of controversial issues are all promising indicators of an environment that would develop non-cognitive outcomes like political engagement, civic values, and community engagement in students as well as support success on the End of Course Assessment.

What Supports and Challenges are there for Civics Teachers in Florida?

Many factors influence a teachers' ability to deliver high quality civics instruction. Educational background (pre-service training) as well as professional development quality and opportunities (in-service training) are two examples of supports and/or challenges that teachers might face. A little over one-third of civics teachers had been Education majors in college (37.6%) and roughly one-quarter (25.9%) had been History majors compared to only 14.8% of civics teachers who had majored in Political Science or Government. Even though a small percentage of civics teachers had majored in Political Science, 49.6% of teachers reported taking a course in political science that covered American politics and elections. Almost half of civics teachers (46.1%) also reported that they had taken a social studies teaching methods course. Only 40% of civics teachers indicated that they had taken a course in which they discussed or debated current issues and a small percentage (15.5%) of teachers indicated that they had participated in an extracurricular group that was involved in politics, campaigns, or current events.

Professional development opportunities tended to vary in availability and quality over the course of the year. Only 32.5% of civics teachers reported receiving coaching or mentoring by a specialist, administrator, or expert while 38.5% reported receiving coaching or mentoring by another teacher. 87.7% of teachers did report participating in at least one half or full day training session and 61.1% of civics teachers reported that they participated in a training to help teachers effectively use technology in the classroom. Overall, however, there was inconsistent access to professional development training opportunities with roughly half of teachers reporting access to three or fewer training opportunities.

Figure 6: Professional Development Program Participation



The emphasis of professional development opportunities tended to be placed on state content standards, alignment of instruction to curriculum, and instructional approaches. In-depth study of civics, working with experts and other civic learning community resources, and meeting the learning needs of special populations of students were less emphasized in these trainings.

Table 3: Emphasis of Professional Development Activities

	A lot	A great deal	Total
State content standards	36.2%	24.0%	60.2%
Alignment of instruction to curriculum	38.4%	23.6%	62.0%
Instructional approaches	34.9%	14.3%	49.2%
In-depth study of civics/content related to civic education	25.8%	14.3%	40.1%
Working with experts and other external civic learning community resources	19.0%	6.1%	25.1%
Meeting the learning needs of special populations of students (e.g. ELL)	16.3%	3.8%	20.1%
Integrating civic action/service learning into the classroom	12.9%	4.4%	17.3%
Technology to support student learning in civic education	26.1%	14.2%	40.3%

In addition to their time in the classroom, many civics teachers hold multiple responsibilities outside of class, either coaching a sports team or sponsoring a club that requires time outside of the classroom. A little over one-third of civics teachers (34.9%) serve as an advisor for an organized school group or club; 52% of these civics teachers said that these school groups are concerned with social or political issues. Not only do civics teachers spend classroom time devoted to politics and government, they also serve as advisors to school groups concerned with these same issues.

Another important support to teachers is the ability to have autonomy over their classroom and the pacing of instruction in their classroom. Opinion was mixed on this issue as 20.3% of civics teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they do not have enough autonomy over their classroom and 21.2% neither agreed nor disagreed. It appears that a little over half of civics teachers believe they have autonomy over their classroom while roughly 40% do not.

Civics teachers in Florida largely felt that they were supported by school administrators. About 6 in 10 teachers (61.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that school administrators supported them when they needed it. However, communication between school administrators and teachers appears to be one area that could be improved; only 44.7% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that school administrators and staff communicate effectively with each other and only 42.5% of civics teachers agreed or strongly agreed that school administrators involved teachers in decision-making and problem solving.

Conclusions

Civics teachers face competing demands in the classroom (adequately covering all assessed benchmarks and preparing students for the EOC) in complex environments. Teachers serve a highly diverse student body with varying learning abilities and needs that require them to tailor lessons in ways they might not know how to do. While teachers attend professional development trainings, these sessions tend to focus on state content standards and alignment of instruction to curriculum. New opportunities in meeting the needs of special populations and incorporating more active-learning techniques in the classroom could be beneficial in promoting teacher growth. These teachers play an important role in introducing young students to the responsibilities of citizens, the structure of the American government, and the foundations of our democracy. To increase effective teaching in the classroom, administrators and professional development training groups could start to emphasize more service-learning and community-based projects in civics classes to not only reinforce several of the assessed benchmarks, but also to build civic engagement skills and other non-cognitive outcomes that we would hope to see develop over the course of the year. There should also be more of an emphasis on meeting the needs of special populations and an in-depth study of civics content in professional development training sessions. Since many teachers responded that reading/language ability was a major obstacle to teaching some of the benchmarks, this is definitely an area where teachers could benefit from different training opportunities. Also, since a small percentage of civics teachers come from a political science/government background, additional in-depth training in civics content would prove beneficial.