# Delaware Summit on Civics Education

## *2019 Summary Report*

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
BIDEN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY & ADMINISTRATION

INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION | IPA

# SUMMIT ON CIVICS EDUCATION

**Earlier this year, the Democracy Project (DP) of the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA) convened Delaware's first Summit on Civics Education. The following report provides the background leading to the summit; a review of the summit activities; critical findings; and a potential path forward.**

# BACKGROUND

For 22 years the Democracy Project (see Appendix A) has sponsored a summer institute for teachers designed to improve the teaching of civics and democracy in Delaware. Shortly after the its 2018 Summer Institute, the project's team initiated discussions around the need for a statewide conversation about civics education in the state of Delaware.

The team made the decision to convene a summit on civics education in 2019 and issued a call to teachers, school administrators, community leaders, and community stakeholders. Registration reached capacity within two weeks. The rapid response signaled a sense of urgency in addressing issues related to civics education.

Why did the summit make sense, and why at this point in time?

## "Civic Knowledge is... at an all time low"

Several major reports have offered evidence of a crisis in civics education and knowledge in recent years. A widely cited survey of American adults conducted by the Annenberg Foundation in 2018 found that "Americans know surprisingly little about their government." Only 32 percent of those surveyed could name all three branches of government, while an equally disappointing 33 percent could not name a single branch.

Similarly bleak data on student achievement from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the "nation's report card"—revealed that a mere 24 percent of eighth grade students in the United States scored at levels deemed "proficient" or above. In its report on "The State of Civics Education," the Center for American Progress asserted that "Civic knowledge and public engagement is at an all-time low."

The report card may be telling only part of the story. Anecdotal information, corroborated by educators attending the summit, suggests that civic knowledge and understanding diminishes dramatically as the focus moves from federal to state to local government.

This "crisis narrative," however, has been challenged. Those questioning it argue that the civic knowledge and achievement associated with the current generation of citizens are not much different than previous generations. The findings in these studies and assessments, they point out, reflect a long-term pattern as data from recent studies are statistically no worse than before.

Still, given the low levels of civic knowledge and achievement, as well as the current political climate within the United States, "no worse" is not good enough to sustain the kind of healthy republic envisioned by our Founders.

*"A republic, if you can keep it."*

Source: Portrait of Benjamin Franklin, by Joseph Siffred Duplessis, c. 1785. National Portrait Gallery.

## Civic Attitudes and Dispositions

Those questioning the crisis narrative also fail to consider other indicators of an unhealthy republic. The attitudes and dispositions of those given significant responsibility for their own governance are equal in importance to sustaining the nation's political health.

In February of 2017, CQ Researcher published an article titled, "Civics Education: Are students learning how to be good citizens?" The article noted that only 16 percent of millennials trust government and political institutions, while only 37 percent of adults said it was very important to keep informed about public issues.

## The Spread of Misinformation: "where truth goes to die"

Although fake news is not new, its resurgence has given rise to unprecedented levels of confusion around the distinctions between credible and incredible information. A confused or ill-informed electorate bodes poorly for a healthy democracy. Regrettably, the environment of uncertainty is forecasted to worsen. CNN Business reported recently that the Pentagon is in a "race against deep fake videos." Deep fakes superimpose real images (e.g., faces of political leaders) onto fake video or audio that intentionally fabricates actions or statements. Deep fakes are designed to undermine and divide by harming or embarrassing the video subjects. Victims are likely to include candidates for office, political leaders, entire institutions, or whole systems (e.g., democracies). In a recent article, The Guardian posed and answered a deeply disconcerting question. It asked, "You think fake news was bad?" Its response was, "Deep fakes are where truth goes to die." The appearance of deep fakes as election season unfolds represents a development that may "take the war of disinformation" as well as the threats they pose "to a whole new level."

We now live in an age when more students and other citizens are seeking and receiving information via social media. As we think about how civics education in the twenty-first century may require reimagining, greater attention to information literacy has to be part of the discussion/plan.

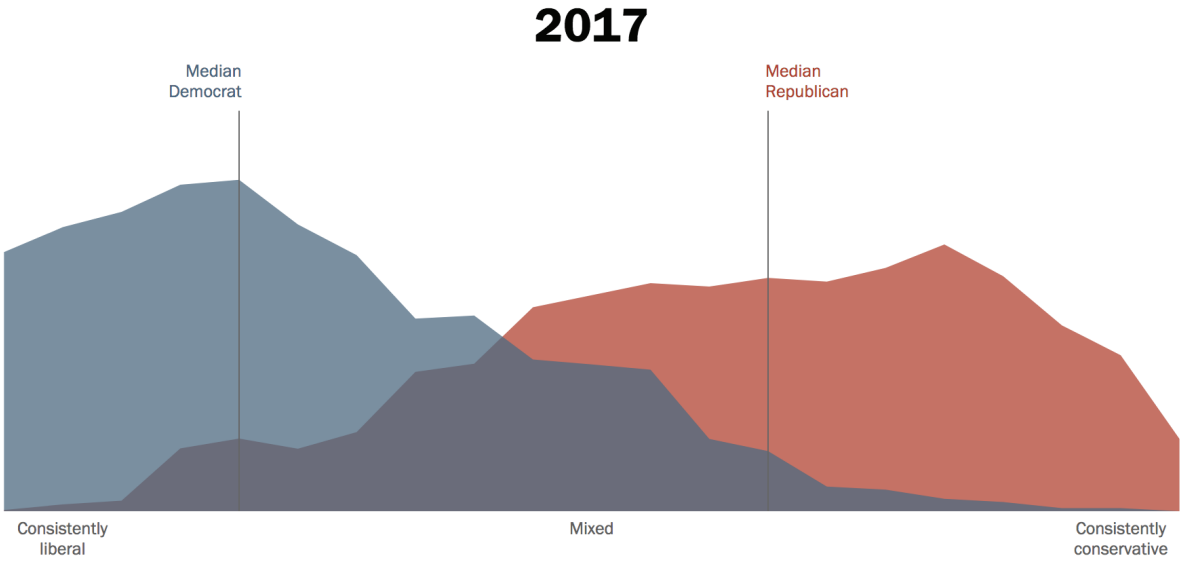
*From the perspective of politics, we seem to be witnessing the evolution of two Americas and two parties that are moving farther apart.*

## American Electorate Growing More Polarized

One effect of fake news and deep fakes is the widening polarization of the American electorate. In 2014, the Pew Research Center reported that "Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines—and partisan acrimony is deeper and more extensive—than at any point in recent history" (Pew, 2014). Pew has been collecting longitudinal data on political polarization since 1994, and the data show that divisions between the left and right are actually growing. Between 1994 and 2017, "The share of Americans with ideologically consistent values has increased over this time and these political values also have become more strongly associated with partisanship. Notably, these shifts are particularly pronounced among politically engaged Americans." (Pew, 2017)

From the perspective of politics, we seem to be witnessing the evolution of two Americas and two parties that are moving farther apart. In deeply alarming language, The Washington Post ran a story this past spring bearing the headline, "In America, talk turns to something not spoken of for 150 years: Civil war." While most may be justified in characterizing the headline as extreme rhetoric, the tragic events in Charlottesville in August of 2017 serve as a warning to anyone underestimating the potential risks of ignoring the current state of political affairs in the United States.

## Political Polarization of the American Public, 2017




Source: Pew Research Center, 2019. Survey conducted in 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.people-press.org/interactives/political-polarization-1994-2017/

When one considers the national context, as well as the dawn of the 2020 election season, there are plenty of indicators pointing to the need for reimagining civics education in ways aiming toward the development of a future generation of citizens who are sufficiently well informed and equipped to address twenty-first century challenges and who, inspired by "the better angels of our nature," remind the American people that "we are not enemies, but friends."

# THE LOCAL CONTEXT: CIVICS EDUCATION IN DELAWARE

## New State Social Studies Test and Accountability

Important developments relating to civics education in Delaware add to the sense of urgency around reimagining civics education. This past spring, Delaware's Department of Education (DDOE) administered a new social studies assessment in grades four, seven, and eleven under the Delaware System of Student Assessment (DeSSA). The tests assess student understanding of the Delaware social studies standards, including those for civics. Scores from the assessment will eventually count five percent in the formulaa for determining school ratings.

Those contributing to the development of the new assessment, as well as classroom educators who have had opportunities to view and administer DeSSA practice assessments, agree that the test, while appropriately designed to prepare Delaware's students for college, career, and civic life, are quite challenging. Test questions require students to apply higher-ordered thinking skills as they analyze and evaluate multiple rigorous texts. The assessment also requires students to demonstrate considerable grit as they read and re-read multiple, varied, and complex sets of texts. Moving forward, students and teachers will need additional support.

## Existing Support Falls Short

DDOE has been working collaboratively with the Social Studies Coalition of Delaware (SSCD) and affiliates at the University of Delaware to develop a range of supports for Delaware's social studies teachers.

Those supports include:

- Public access to nearly 70 practice assessments that mirror the DeSSA test through the DDOE website.
- Standards-aligned lessons, units, and syllabi comprising the Delaware-recommended curriculum.
- Professional learning offered through SSCD that is designed to deepen teachers' understanding of standards and the new assessments, while also raising awareness of available instructional resources.
- Coaching for teachers that offers guidance in developing high-quality DeSSA-aligned assessments.
- Ongoing curriculum development yielding resources that deepen teachers' understandings of the Delaware civics standards (e.g., learning progressions, updated clarification documents).

Efforts to provide Delaware's educators with standards-aligned resources and professional learning have been ongoing. However, creation of Delaware Recommended Curriculum (DRC) units and lessons pre-date the development of the new state assessment. Consequently, a number of units and lessons need to be updated to prepare students for the rigors of DeSSA. Most notably, when compared to the DeSSA test, DRC lessons and units are text deficient. That is, while some units or lessons engage students with texts (e.g., historic documents, detailed charts) and do it well, others are largely void of texts or feature texts written for lower grade levels.

Additionally, the DeSSA social studies assessment integrates literacy standards that, in some cases, had not yet been developed when DRC lessons and units were written. DRC units will need updates that include more rigorous texts and new types of questions. Once the updates are made, civics teachers will benefit from additional professional learning that offers guidance in ways to support comprehension of rigorous texts through reading strategies traditionally left to English language arts teachers.

In sum, developments at both the national and state levels argue in compelling ways for initiatives in civics education that aim toward overcoming challenges for which the current system is inadequately designed.

# SUMMIT ON CIVICS EDUCATION

Earlier this year, IPA hosted the Summit on Civics Education at the University of Delaware's Clayton Hall. One hundred and twenty-five participants representing teachers, community leaders, and many other stakeholders received an overview of civics education at the national level from Dr. Peter Levine of Tufts University and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), the keynote speaker. Dr. Fran O'Malley, director of the Democracy Project, provided an overview of civics education in Delaware. Governor John Carney closed the summit with a reflection on the impact of civics education on his own life and career.

Those attending the summit broke into small mixed groups to discuss three questions, including:

1. What are challenges/needs relating to civics education in Delaware?
2. What might we do in Delaware to improve the quality of civics education?
3. What does your group recommend as a top priority for improving civics education in Delaware?

Participants reported out from their small groups and shared a range of ideas that might inform a path forward. IPA staff members analyzed and collated responses, identifying those mentioned most frequently. That feedback formed the basis for the findings that follow.

# THE SUMMIT'S CRITICAL FINDINGS

## Social Studies Is Marginalized, Civics Even More

National data and educators' acknowledgments support the claim that social studies is marginalized, primarily at the elementary level. A major cause is the fact that social studies has not been tested or included as part of our state's accountability regime in recent years. In an environment where what is tested is what is taught, curriculum time is consumed by attention to the tested areas of English language arts and math. This, itself, is a problem. But being one of four core subjects within the social studies, the impact of this marginalization on civics is more significant as it has to share scant curriculum time with three other "core" social studies subjects (economics, geography, and history). Moreover, an analysis of the number of civics standards assigned to grades K–12 under the DRC reveals that in over half of the grades in which a child is educated, zero or one unit of civics is taught. A single unit that can last as few as three days is entirely inadequate for any system aspiring to develop effective citizens. Moreover, the amount of time that elapses between those units (up to a year), creates ample opportunity for learning to fade.

Many of the ideas discussed to address this challenge of marginalization focused on the amount of time committed to the teaching of civics and social studies. For example, one participant suggested that 45 minutes per day be allocated to social studies, equally divided among the four core social studies subjects (civics, economics, geography, and history). The call for 45 minutes per day is also gaining national traction. A second popular suggestion called for a full year of civics to be required at the high school level.

## Update the Delaware Recommended Curriculum

DDOE has done an excellent job of working with SSCD and affiliates at the University of Delaware to develop the DRC's instructional resources for those who teach civics in Delaware. Most DRC lessons and units, however, were written prior to the new state assessment when expectations differed. Consequently, the DRC lacks important features of DeSSA (e.g., rigorous texts and text-dependent and literacy questions) that are needed to prepare students well for DeSSA as well as civic life.

Participants discussed various ways to approach curriculum revision, most of which called for a review and update of the current lessons and units within the DRC. A preliminary activity would involve conducting an instructional gap analysis to identify standards for which there are no lessons or units on the DRC.

## Need for a "One-Stop Shopping" Civics Website

Summit attendees highlighted the challenge of locating instructional resources, particularly in light of job-related responsibilities that include but are not limited to planning lessons for as many as four to seven subjects per day, five days per week. Having to search multiple websites including the websites of DDOE, Schoology, SSCD, and IPA is highly inefficient and may actually discourage even those eager to try. Moreover, at least one of the major websites housing civics resources requires an access code as well as administrator approval.

Participants expressed the need for more efficient access to information. This could be accomplished by the creation of a "one-stop shopping" site or through better coordination and shared access among the various sites that currently provide information.

## Limited Attention Is Paid to Civics in Preservice Education

Another major challenge raised by educators attending the summit focuses on teacher preparation. An analysis of course requirements listed for preservice elementary education majors on Delaware's Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) websites raises questions about their adequacy for developing the level of specialized content knowledge needed to effectively teach civics. In the case of one IHE, a student can enter the teaching profession without having taken a single course related to political science or civics. In another instance, students can enter with only one-half of a semester focusing on civics instruction. Only one IHE requires a three-credit course relating specifically to political science, but the extent to which that course aligns to civics standards is unclear. The fourth IHE requires 1.5- and 3-credit "social studies" courses but the extent to which those courses focus on political science or civics, much less standards associated with those subjects, is unclear.

Much of the decision making in the area of preservice education rests with the various IHEs. Any changes, such as specific course requirements, need to apply to both the preparation of elementary and secondary social studies education majors and involve attention to both content and pedagogy.

## Minimal Resources and Attention to Teaching State and Local Government

The most commonly discussed concern for those attending the Summit on Civics Education was the scant attention to state and local government in Delaware's classrooms. Participants noted that, in comparison to the federal government, state and local governments often have a greater impact on citizens' lives. Ironically, knowledge about state and local government is poor, in part, because the resources available to teach about them are either unknown or non-existent. Moreover, with the exception of their own school boards, classroom teachers and their students have little or no interaction with their local governments.

Participants discussed the need for instructional resources that will deepen knowledge of state and local government. The resources might include projects and programming that engage Delaware students with local government. The potential to partner with local governments and organizations, such as the Delaware

League of Local Governments, in the development of civics education resources is worth exploring.

## NEXT STEPS

A review of the findings discussed above as well as other ideas emanating from summit discussions clearly argue for a commitment of staff and resources on several levels including the state, universities, and other supporting organizations.

The findings also point to four areas of focus: greater awareness, resources, advocacy, and coordination.

1. **Awareness:** Establishing a powerful voice highlighting the importance of civics education as well as the needs of Delaware's civics educators.
2. **Resources:** Developing or updating resources needed by Delaware teachers to promote mastery of Delaware's civics standards and better prepare students for the challenges of twenty-first century civic life.
3. **Advocacy:** Engaging those who attended the summit as champions for more and better resources (e.g., lessons, coaches, professional development), as well as for systemic changes that would include but not be limited to enhancements of preservice education requirements and state- or district-level requirements around instructional and professional development time.
4. **Coordination:** Coordinating the efforts of groups in Delaware such as the Democracy Project, Delaware Law-Related Education Center, YMCA, and museums that offer civics education resources, activities, and professional learning.

Addressing these needs will require the collaborative efforts of several entities including DDOE, Democracy Project, SSCD, school boards and districts, and individual teachers.

Delaware's Summit on Civics Education should be viewed as the first step in a strategic and sustained process of aligning civics education to evolving needs. The challenges and recommendations presented in this summary are condensed in ways that prioritize and make tasks manageable in the short term. Others, some of which are identified in the sections describing the national and state contexts above, invite attention in the path forward.

## A SPUTNIK MOMENT

In the fall of 2016, the Atlantic Monthly published an article in which the author suggested that "...schools are failing at what the nation's founders saw as education's most basic purpose," that is, "preparing young people to be reflective citizens who would value liberty and democracy." The authors argued that this "should be a Sputnik moment for civics education."

Fortunately, Delaware's Summit on Civics Education tapped into a surge of energy to take action and continue the work begun at the gathering. Many of those in attendance noted the need to "meet again" for purposes of formalizing plans and transforming recommendations into action. The Institute for Public Administration is poised to lead this effort.

# APPENDIX A

# IPA'S LEADERSHIP IN CIVICS EDUCATION

The University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA) is proud to offer leadership in civics education for the First State, and its role has grown significantly over the past 20 years. IPA's Democracy Project staff works closely with the Office of the Secretary of State and the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) to support grades K–12 teachers with lessons and units that make up a portion of the Delaware Recommended Curriculum (DRC) and professional development programs that advance teachers' understanding of civics standards and abilities to teach those standards. The Democracy Project's summer institute, its signature civics education program for educators, has a 21-year legacy of delivering professional development to approximately 400 Delaware teachers. The institute engages teachers with officials at every level of government, includes field trips to centers of political activity such as Dover and Washington, D.C., and exposes educators to the cutting-edge work of political science and civics education experts.

THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

IPA also supports DDOE in the areas of curriculum and assessment development. The Democracy Project works with DDOE to develop and update civics standards and other standards-based curricular materials, review assessment items for the new Delaware System of Student Assessment (DeSSA) social studies state test, and facilitate teacher reviews of DeSSA questions. IPA partners with schools and districts throughout the state to align curriculum to standards, provide embedded coaching for teachers, facilitate professional learning, and develop local assessments providing educators with interim measures of student progress toward mastering civics standards.

During the last school year, the Democracy Project added a series of author nights to its menu of professional development offerings. Four times per year, IPA brings authors from around the country to deepen Delaware educators' understanding of standards, current political issues, and approaches to teaching. The authors share summaries of their work. Those attending receive copies of the featured book. The author events sustain the momentum of learning that begins with our summer institute.

Additionally, IPA plays an important role in preparing future teachers at the University of Delaware by offering multiple sections of a three-credit Civics and Economics for Educators course to undergraduate education majors every semester.

Due to the quality of its work, IPA plays a leading role in advancing civics education at the national level. The Democracy Project's director serves as the advisor for the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Social Studies Collaborative. Members of CCSSO's Social Studies Collaborative are state social studies supervisors. This year, the collaborative has been addressing issues specifically related to civics education.

Finally, IPA collaborates with external partners such as the Delaware Department of Elections and the Delaware Law-Related Education Project to co-sponsor or support statewide mock elections, the statewide Project Citizen showcase, and a very special educational experience that brings teachers and students to Dover for the convening of Delaware's Electoral College. It is reasonable to suggest that IPA's work in civics education casts a long and influential net across the First State and beyond.

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