

## CIVIC LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND CIVIC COMMITMENTS

### **Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students' Commitment to Civic Participation**

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This research was generously supported with grants from the Spencer Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust. The authors, of course, bear full responsibility for any and all conclusions. Persons wishing further information may contact Joseph Kahne at (510) 430-3275, or [jkahne@mills.edu](mailto:jkahne@mills.edu) or Susan Spote at (773) 834-1009, [sspote@ccsr.uchicago.edu](mailto:sspote@ccsr.uchicago.edu).

### Abstract

This study of 4,057 students from 52 high schools in Chicago examines the impact of civic learning opportunities on students' commitments to civic participation. The study controls for demographic factors, pre-existing civic commitments, and academic test scores. Unlike prior large scale studies that found limited impact from school based civic education but often did not focus on what and how students were taught, we focus on a set of specific civic learning opportunities and find that they foster notable improvements in students' commitments to civic participation. Discussing civic and political issues with one's parents, extra-curricular activities other than sports, and living in a civically responsive neighborhood also appear to meaningfully support this goal. Other school characteristics appear less influential.

## Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students' Commitment to Civic Participation

Although the preparation of citizens is a stated goal of many schools' mission statements and a primary concern of many citizens, knowledge of whether schools do and how schools can actually fulfill the democratic aims of education remains quite limited (Galston, 2001; Rose & Gallup, 2000). Can high schools promote the kinds of civic commitments that would help to sustain a democratic society? In particular, can educators help support the development of such commitments among low income students and students of color? This study of 4,057 students from 52 public high schools in Chicago speaks directly to these questions. It examines and compares the impact of varied curricular and extra-curricular activities on students' commitments to civic participation. It also considers family and neighborhood influences. It does so while controlling for demographic factors and for academic test scores. Importantly, the study also controls for pre-existing civic commitments. The study finds that the provision of civic learning opportunities makes a meaningful difference when it comes to the development of students' commitments to civic participation and it identifies particularly efficacious curricular strategies. Discussing civic and political issues with one's parents, engaging in extra-curricular activities other than sports, and living in a civically responsive neighborhood also appear to meaningfully support this goal. Other school characteristics and extra-curricular sports appear less influential. Overall, our model explains 63% of the variance in eleventh graders' commitment to civic participation

### Background

Historically, the democratic aims of education have been one of the primary rationales for public schooling. This focus faded in recent decades – spurred, in part, by doubts raised in the 60’s and 70’s that what happened in high schools had a sizable impact on student civic and political commitments (most notably, Langton & Jennings, 1968) and by a growing and increasingly narrow emphasis on academic content and skills (particularly in reading and math). For example, a recently completed study by the Center on Education Policy (2006) found that 71% of districts reported cutting back time on other subjects to make more space for reading and math instruction. Social studies was the part of the curriculum that was most frequently cited as the place where these reductions occurred.

*The Need for Increased and More Equitable Levels of Civic Participation*

Though few would question the value of emphasizing academic outcomes, some reformers, scholars, and foundation leaders are now looking for ways to reassert the democratic purposes of schooling (Gibson & Levine, 2003). This focus reflects concern for the health of American democracy. Numerous studies have found that levels of civic engagement are lower than desirable, particularly among youth, and in many cases are declining (Galston, 2001; Macedo, et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000). Indeed, as a panel of experts convened by the American Political Science Association recently found, “Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge, and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equitably than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity” (Macedo, et al., 2005).

Although it currently receives less attention than data regarding declining levels of civic and political participation, data regarding the inequitable nature of civic participation and influence is also striking. Low-income and less educated citizens are often under-represented in the political process, have far less voice, and the votes of elected officials align with those of

higher income citizens to a far greater degree than with the rest of the population. As the American Political Science Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (2004) found in their survey of the literature,

The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent. Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed (p. 1).

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) found, for example, that family income was a strong predictor of voice in the political process. Not surprisingly, since those with higher incomes participate more fully across a wide range of dimensions, elected officials are more responsive to their priorities. Larry Bartels found that when it comes to the votes of US Senators, the policy preferences of constituents at the 75th percentile of the income distribution were almost three times as influential as the policy preferences of those at the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile. Indeed, the policy preferences of those in “the bottom third of the income distribution had no apparent statistical effect on their senators’ roll call votes” (2005, 1).

Clearly, educational institutions are limited in their ability to offset the many ways higher income individuals are privileged in the political system. At the same time, given the fundamental importance of working to ensure that all citizens have equal voice in a democracy, it is important to deepen our understanding of whether providing particular kinds of learning opportunities to relatively low-income students in urban public schools can help promote higher and more equitable levels of civic and political engagement.

*Can Schools Promote Civic Outcomes?*

Interest in the role schools can play in preparing students for citizenship in a democratic society has been growing over the past 10 years. Recent studies that testify to schooling's potential for impact on civic and political commitments, capacities, and activities along with indications that schools are not doing all that they could to promote the democratic purposes of education have furthered interest in schooling's potential. Specifically, Niemi and Junn's (1998) analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed that some educational practices can increase students' civic and political knowledge, and Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996) have shown that such knowledge improves the quantity and quality of civic participation. In addition, large scale studies such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) Civic Education study of 14 year olds in 28 countries found that certain curricular features were associated with various civic outcomes such as interest in politics, the ability to apply knowledge accurately, and a range of civic and political commitments such as youth willingness to vote (Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, and Richardson, 2007). These findings have been reinforced by a number of well controlled studies of particular curricular initiatives (Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2006; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2004; Metz & Youniss, 2005). Findings are not universally positive, however. Some studies that control for prior commitments find significant effects only for "high quality" service learning, for example (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Melchior, 1998).

#### *A Gap in Current Large Scale Studies of Civic Education*

Although the research noted above has spurred more interest in the potential of educational efforts to promote the kinds of civic and political commitments that would help to sustain a democracy, such findings are far from definitive. Both small and larger-scale studies have shortcomings. Most well controlled studies that link classroom practices to civic

commitments are relatively small scale in nature, focus on very specialized curricula, and therefore are not easily generalizable. Large scale surveys of high school students demonstrate that students who report having particular experiences (debating issues in class, being taught civic skills, undertaking service learning) are more likely to also report being committed to and involved in various forms of civic and political engagement (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; also see Gibson and Levine, 2003; Torney-Purta, 2002). However, the lack of random assignment to these opportunities and lack of controls for prior civic commitments and for a range of potentially relevant academic, demographic, family, and community characteristics significantly limit the ability of these larger surveys to demonstrate causal relationships. Some longitudinal data sets such as the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) can be quite helpful in this regard (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007), but these surveys do not ask about many of the classroom opportunities that civic educators believe are most important.

There are also studies that rely on retrospective accounts of educational experiences to explain the development of civic commitments and levels of engagement (Verba, et al., 1995). Adults are interviewed about their current forms of participation and about experiences they had in high school. These studies are useful in many ways, but, as in the case of the relationship between curriculum and commitments described above, it is difficult to know whether it was their participation in civic activities as students that prompted their civic participation and commitments as adults or whether those who already possessed commitments to civic participation pursued these opportunities or remembered them when they occurred.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, few empirical studies focus directly on the ways schools can and do influence the development of the civic and political commitments of low-income students and students of color. Fortunately, there are some that do (for example, Atkins & Hart, 2003; Gimpel, Lay &

Schuknecht, 2003; Torney-Purta, Barber & Wilkenfeld, 2007; Youniss & Yates, 1997). These studies, while valuable, are subject to the same concerns as those noted above.

### *The Present Study*

The present work draws on a unique and particularly rich set of data which allows us to respond to many of these concerns. First, our data all come from students enrolled in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), of whom 85% are low income and 91% are students of color (Illinois State Board of Education, 2005). Clearly, because our data all comes from Chicago and is composed primarily of urban and low-income students of color, caution is in order when generalizing findings beyond this population. Nonetheless, we believe this focus is desirable. As noted above, low income students of color often have less than equal voice in democratic processes and this group potentially has much to gain from broader civic participation, yet few large scale studies of schooling's impact on the development of civic commitments focus directly on this population.

Our data base also enables us to respond to many of the methodological concerns outlined in the prior section. It combines indicators of students' exposure to a broad range of the classroom based learning opportunities that educators associate with best practice, indicators of students' prior commitments to civic participation, and indicators of numerous other demographic and school based factors that are believed to influence the development of commitments to civic participation. As will be detailed below, prior studies indicate that these practices may well be related to civic commitments, but we do not know if students' prior interest in or commitment to civic involvement has been driving exposure to these learning opportunities. Indeed, we know of no other large-scale study that examines the impact of exposure to the broad range of classroom-based learning opportunities that civic educators

associate with “best practice” on students’ commitments to civic participation, while simultaneously controlling for students’ prior commitments.

In addition to looking at classroom-based civic learning opportunities, this study also contains indicators of individual demographics and academic characteristics, neighborhood and family civic contexts, and educational contexts and practices. As will be discussed in the section that follows, prior research has found that these factors may well influence the development of commitments to participation. By attending to these factors we gain a clearer sense of the impact of the classroom-based opportunities as well as of the relative influence of these varied factors.

Finally, since our outcome measure is of stated commitments, not behaviors, it is also important to note that studies have found that adolescents who express greater commitment to civic and political engagement are more civically and politically engaged as adults than adolescents who express less of a commitment to act. Indeed, Fishbein, Ajzen, and Hinkle (1980) identify a strong connection between political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (also see Ajzen, 2001 for a review of the links between attitudes and behaviors). Similarly, Theiss-Morse (1993) found that the way individuals define what it means to be a good citizen is a solid predictor of their civic and political activities (also see Oesterle, Johnson & Mortimer, 2004)

### Conceptual Frame

#### *Commitments to Civic Participation*

The outcome on which we focus, commitments to civic participation, reflects a concern that is at the center of discussions of the health of democracy in the United States. Many scholars have argued that robust participation in the life of the community (following community issues, working on community problems, collective engagement with government agencies) is a fundamentally important component of life in a democratic society. These practices have been

framed in a variety of related ways. Dewey (1916) labeled them, “Democracy as a way of life”, Barber (1984) described such participation as a key to building a “strong democracy”, and Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari (1996) call it “Public Work”. In addition to facilitating the kinds of dialog and action needed to accomplish meaningful tasks through a democratic process, civic participation also often promotes common understandings, trust, and collective commitments – all potential supports for a fully functioning democratic society.

Our emphasis on community-based forms of participation rather than on more formal forms of political participation (working on campaigns, voting) also stems from the indications that formal political action would be less likely for younger students and that it is important to accommodate the broader civic and political aspects of adolescents’ activities and beliefs (Flanagan & Galloway, 1995). Moreover, in most school settings teachers and principals would likely fear controversy if they emphasized the goal of direct political engagement beyond stressing the desirability of voting. In addition, there is evidence that young people and perhaps young people of color in particular, are more drawn to community based forms of participation than to more formal and traditional forms of participation such as campaigning and voting (Junn, 1999; Long, 2002; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Unfortunately, many of these participatory orientations and practices along with more traditional forms of participation are in decline (Putnam, 2000), though these claims are certainly a matter of debate (Portes, 1998).

Finally, it makes particular sense to study factors that may influence the development of commitments to civic participation during late adolescence because, from a developmental standpoint, late adolescence is considered a critical period for development of sociopolitical orientations (e.g., Erikson, 1968). As Yates and Youniss (1998) explain, adolescence is a time when youth are thinking about and trying to anticipate their lives as adults. They are working to

understand who they are and how they will relate to the broader society. This process has been detailed in a number of empirical studies. For example, Atkins and Hart (2003) present civic identity as a core construct for understanding adolescent development. They draw on the National Household Educational Survey of 1999 and demonstrate the degree to which living in poverty and in an urban context constrains the development of civic identity (also see Youniss and Yates, 1997).

*Factors influencing the development of commitments to civic participation*

Multiple factors in young people's home, school, and community have been shown to influence students' civic commitments (Beck and Jennings, 1982; Campbell, 2006; Gimpel et al, 2003; Verba, et al. 1995). These include a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities, demographic and socio-economic factors, parental involvement, and features of the local community. Below we highlight literature that examines the impact of these factors.

*Classroom civic learning opportunities.* Emerging in the past decade has been wide recognition of the potential, often not realized, of curriculum and pedagogical approaches such as the provision of an open classroom climate, service learning, and the use of simulations to promote commitments and capacities linked to the democratic purposes of education (for example, Hart et al., 2007; Torney-Purta, et al., 2001; see Gibson & Levine, 2003 for a review).

In understanding why these opportunities may foster civic outcomes, our work in this area has been heavily influenced by Jim Youniss and Miranda Yates' (1997) conceptualization of factors that promote the development of a civic identity. They identify three kinds of opportunities that can spur such development: opportunities for Agency and Industry, for Social Relatedness, and for the development of Political-Moral Understandings. Their study of youth doing work in soup kitchens as part of a course shows how community service experiences tied

to the curriculum can provide opportunities for Agency (as students respond to social problems), Social Relatedness (as students join with others to respond to a societal need) and Political-Moral Understanding (as students reflect on and discuss the relationship between what is and what should be). In addition to providing insight into the ways service learning may help foster commitments to civic participation, this framework can also help explain how the broader range of curricular experiences we examine may foster civic outcomes. For example, opportunities to learn about problems and ways to respond might be expected to foster a sense of civic agency. Experiencing an open classroom climate while discussing current events might be expected to foster political-moral understandings.

*School-based supports for students' academic and social development:* We also examine a set of supports for students' academic and social development. Specifically, we look at whether students experience a strong sense of belonging to or membership in their school community, whether teachers provide forms of caring and personalized support, whether peers are supportive of academic achievement, and whether parents encourage and support academic achievement. Currently, these attributes are most often advanced as a means of supporting scholastic goals measured, for example, in terms of engagement, academic performance, and dropout rates. Indeed, a good bit of research links these desired outcomes to students' sense of belonging to a school community, to their sense that teachers are supportive and trustworthy, and to the degree that parents and peers support academic achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Wentzel, 1997; also see Juvonen, 2006 for a broad review). These relationships are particularly strong for low income students and students of color (Zirkel, forthcoming).

Our interest in these attributes stems from two factors. First, because reformers whose primary interest is academic engagement and improvement emphasize these attributes, if these attributes turn out to also support civic outcomes to a substantial degree, then a special focus on civic learning opportunities may not be needed. Second, there is reason to believe that many of these features of the school context (particularly students' sense of belonging to the community and their sense that teachers are caring and respectful) may indeed promote students' commitments to civic participation. For example, theorists like John Dewey (1900) and reformers such as Deborah Meier (1995, 2002) have detailed the links between experiencing a sense of membership or belonging to caring and supportive school communities and the development of commitments and capacities for civic and democratic ways of living. Systematic empirical studies have also examined these links. Work by Wentzel (1997; 1998), Baumeister and Leary (1995), and Watson et al. (1997) have detailed the impact of a sense of belonging and community as well as of a caring supportive environment of peers, parents, and teachers in modeling and fostering pro-social behaviors such as helping, sharing, cooperating and pro-social conflict resolution – all behaviors that one might well expect would support desired forms of civic participation. As Kathryn Wentzel writes, “A caring classroom environment in which teachers and peers support and promote the expression of positive social behaviors appears to play a critical role in promoting students' adoption and pursuit of positive social goals” (2003, 319). In fact, students describe “caring” teachers as those who employ democratic and egalitarian communication styles (Wentzel, 1997). Perhaps most directly, Flanagan, et al., (2007a) examines the relationship between school and community climates and civic commitments. They find that students experiencing their teachers as fair and respectful and feeling a sense of belonging to the community is positively related to core civic commitments

such as helping society and helping people in need. Given these relationships between a students' experience of belonging and personal support on the one hand and pro-social and civic outcomes on the other, it makes sense to see if such reform priorities (even when promoted by reformers as a means of fostering academic outcomes) may also foster desired civic outcomes.

*Extra-curricular activities.* Some of the best evidence surrounding the relationship between high school experiences and later civic engagement exists for extra-curricular activities. This topic has long been studied and has been aided by some very powerful data bases. Indeed, for many decades now, high school students' participation in extra-curricular experiences has been linked to later civic engagement (Otto, 1976). More recently, Scott and Willits (1998) use panel data that has followed individuals from the time they were high school sophomores (in 1947) into their 60's. They find that adolescent membership in school and community clubs is related to adult membership in community organizations. Similarly, Smith's (1999) longitudinal analysis of the relationship between students' extra curricular participation and their commitment to community service and volunteer work controls for prior commitments and for changing activities over time. Students were surveyed every two years from 8<sup>th</sup> grade until two years after high school. Her study finds that extra-curricular participation along with "extensive connections to others, close familial relationships, and religious participation... are significant predictors of greater political and civic involvement in young adulthood" (p. 533; also see McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Zaff, Moore, Papillo & Williams, 2003; for related findings).

The impact of youth organizational membership is often explained in terms of its impact on social relatedness. Membership socializes young people to value and pursue social ties at the same time that it fosters exposure to organizational norms, relevant political and social skills that make maintenance of these ties more likely (Youniss & Yates, 1997, 29-31). Participation in

these organizations is generally voluntary, so access to these opportunities is often a product of one's initial orientation towards joining groups, but the opportunities extra-curricular activities provide appear able to help further commitments to joining and general civic engagement as well.

*Demographic variables and academic capacities.* A great deal of evidence indicates that educational attainment and socio-economic status are strongly related to higher levels of most forms of civic engagement (Verba et al., 1995; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Berry, 1996). In addition, gender, ethnic identity, and race are related to both civic commitments and to forms of engagement (Burns, Schlozman & Verba, 2001; Marcelo, Lopez and Kirby, 2007a), though the nature of these relationships are not uniform for younger citizens (15-25). In fact, the associations between race, ethnicity and gender vary depending on the particular civic outcome in question – girls, for example, are generally more likely to volunteer than males, but less likely to be involved in electoral activities (CIRCLE, 2007; Marcelo, Lopez & Kirby, 2007b;). Thus, although we do not necessarily expect uniform relationships between demographic characteristics and civic outcomes, we will consider and control for these factors.

*Neighborhood and family civic context.* There is widespread recognition as well as empirical evidence to support the role that neighborhood and family civic contexts play in the development of civic orientations. Young people growing up in families and communities that are civically active and financially better off tend to end up more active themselves (Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977; Nie et al., 1996; Jennings, Stoker & Bowers, 2001). Discussion between parents and youth revolving around civic and political issues has also been shown to relate to a wide range of civic outcomes (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin & Keeter, 2003; Torney-Purta, et al., 2001). And a great deal of research has focused on the role of social capital within communities

in relation to fostering norms and social networks that make democracy work more effectively (most notably, Putnam, 1993; 2000).

### Research Questions

That multiple factors may play a role in fostering desired civic outcomes does not necessarily provide clear direction – especially for educators. If family and neighborhood characteristics are highly influential, then perhaps schools should focus their energy solely on academics. Alternatively, perhaps the availability of extra-curricular activities should be increased since participation appears to promote desired outcomes. Or perhaps schools can make their contribution by focusing on providing students with a sense of belonging and personalized support as many in the small schools reform movement and others are trying to do. These reforms are often promoted as a way of reducing dropouts and spurring achievement (for example, Quint, 2006), but perhaps such reforms will also support civic outcomes.

This paper aims to help educators sort through these issues in two ways. First, by examining the potential contribution of civically oriented curriculum in an urban context serving a high percentage of low-income students of color, the paper examines the degree to which classroom based curricular experiences that directly target civic goals can, indeed, contribute to the development of commitments to civic participation among a population of largely low-income students of color. In short, we ask: Can school based curricular practices provide meaningful support for the development of adolescent civic commitments? Since some may wonder if prior commitments lead students to pursue civically oriented learning opportunities, we also ask: Does the relationship between curricular experience and adolescent civic commitment persist if one controls for prior civic commitments?

In addition, by including analysis of other factors that may also foster civic outcomes such as some demographic characteristics, participation in extra-curricular activities, features of students' neighborhoods and families, and qualities of students' classroom experience, we also ask: how do classroom based curricular opportunities compare with other factors and potential strategies in promoting students' commitments to civic participation?

## Method

### *Sample Characteristics*

Data for this study come from surveys given every two years by the Consortium on Chicago School Research as part of an agreement with the Chicago Public Schools and from CPS administrative records. The survey is part of an ongoing effort to study school contexts and practices and their relationship to varied educational policies and student outcomes. Although the survey includes some measures of classroom opportunities to develop commitments to civic participation, as well as a measure that assesses civic commitments, the prime focus of the survey is on school contexts and curricular practices that are believed to foster academic outcomes such as test scores and graduation rates.

We were mainly interested in survey and demographic data from 2005, although we also wanted to control for students' responses to selected questions in 2003. We selected students who responded to the 2005 survey as juniors and who also responded to the 2003 survey when most of them were freshmen. We only selected students who had values on our main variables of interest, which are described in the section below. Approximately 5% of our pool did not have achievement test scores. Initial analyses indicated that this variable was not linked to our outcome, so we imputed values for those students at their respective school means so as not to lose the information from all of the other data we had about them.

In addition to selecting students based on their available data, we also selected schools, based in part on whether or not they participated in the 2003 survey. Although all regular high schools are invited to participate in the survey, in each year approximately 35% of schools decline the invitation. Seventeen schools took the 2005 survey but not the 2003 survey. Each of these schools had fewer than nine students in our student pool. These juniors had attended a different school as freshmen. Because we were examining school level effects along with individual level effects, we did not want to include schools in our sample if the only students representing that school were students who had recently transferred in. This decision removed 73 students from our sample.

Our final analytic sample contained 4057 students representing 52 schools. The median number of students at each school was 43, with the middle 50% of schools having between 30 and 118 students. Our sample has higher test scores than all of CPS (scores on the reading portion of the state's standardized Prairie State Achievement Exam averaged 156 for our sample and 152 for Chicago juniors as a whole) and has more Latinos, Asian, and White students and fewer African-American students than present in the system. Overall, 78% of the students in the sample are Latino/a or African American, and 79% qualify for free or reduced price lunch (compared to 78% for juniors in Chicago as a whole). Since our goal is not to make statements about the precise level of civic learning outcomes in Chicago, but rather about the ways varied factors shape civic commitments of students in urban contexts, the differences between our analytic sample and Chicago's juniors does not strike us as a significant concern. Details regarding our analytic sample and a comparison to all juniors in the Chicago Public Schools are provided in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

*Survey Measures*

Our indicators from the survey are of two types: single items and multi-item measures. Single items were expressed on a four-point scale, ranging in some cases from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” or in other cases from “never” to “often.” Such individual items were treated as continuous after initial analyses indicated that they were linearly related to the outcome.

The multi-item measures were created using Rasch analysis (Wright & Masters, 1982). Rasch measurement overcomes two potential problems that occur when scales are created by simply summing item responses. First, the difference between score points may not be the same within any item. For example, the empirical difference between “agree” and “strongly agree” may be less than the difference between “agree” and “disagree” on any given item. Second, all items in a possible measure may not have the same importance in the overall measure, and some items may be harder for respondents to agree with than others. Instead, Rasch modeling puts all items on a hierarchical scale based on the likelihood that they were “endorsed” by respondents and puts all respondent scores on the same scale based on the likelihood that the respondent endorses each item in the suite of items (for an introductory discussion of Rasch modeling, see Bond & Fox, 2001).

This approach permits the creation of a latent variable such as “commitment to civic participation” that is conceptually and empirically cohesive. Items are assigned a “difficulty level;” persons are assigned a score indicating their position relative to all other respondents based on the probability of responding in a particular way on each item. After items are selected to meet a conceptual framework, the analysis helps uncover cases where the theory and the

empirical data disagree. In that case, the decision to omit or include an item in the measure is based a consideration of the theoretical importance of the item and on the fit statistic. The measures described below that relate to civic commitments and civic learning opportunities were developed specifically for inclusion in the Consortium's 2003 and 2005 survey analysis. The other measures used in this analysis have been part of the Consortium's survey over time. In all cases we anchored the responses of our students in this larger sample, after checking to make sure their measure statistics did not differ significantly.<sup>2</sup>

Details of all indicators, including survey measures and items can be found in Appendix A. The list of items in each measure is provided, as well as its reliability. Furthermore, the mean and frequency distribution of each individual item used as a predictor is also provided.

#### *Outcome Variable*

In order to assess students' *Commitment to Civic Participation*, we employ a five item measure that was initially developed with Joel Westheimer (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This measure aims to provide an indication of relatively robust civic participation. That is, it asks whether students agree that in the next three years they are likely to "work on a community project that involves a government agency," whether "Being actively involved in community issues is my responsibility, whether, "I have good ideas for programs or projects to help solve problems in my community," whether "being concerned about state and local issues is an important responsibility for everybody" and whether, "In the next three years, I expect to be involved in improving my community." This measure has been used in multiple studies and its psychometric properties have been independently assessed (Flanagan, Syvertsen & Stout, 2007b). We initially developed the Rasch measure for this analysis in 2003 on a sample of

students in grades 8-10. It has an individual level reliability of 0.73. We anchored our current sample on these values so the measure has the same scoring over time.

### *Predictor Variables*

We used survey responses to provide information related to classroom and school characteristics as well as information related to parent and family contexts. We used CPS administrative records to provide demographic and achievement values.

*Classroom civic learning opportunities.* First, we developed a measure of classroom based civic learning opportunities that emphasizes civic and political issues and actions. This measure was based on earlier work conducted with Joel Westheimer (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003) and drew on numerous other studies (e.g. Billig, 2000; Kahne et al., 2006; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Smith, 1999; Torney-Purta, et al, 2001; Verba et al., 1995; see Gibson & Levine, 2003 for a recent review). Specifically, many believe that learning about problems in society, learning about current events, studying issues about which one cares, and experiencing an open climate for classroom discussions of social and political topics will develop students' interest in and commitment to civic action. Similarly, providing students with opportunities to hear from civic role models, to learn about ways to improve their community or to work on service learning projects to improve their community are all expected to foster commitments to civic participation.<sup>3</sup>

Most of these curricular opportunities grouped together as a single measure. Our Rasch measure of Classroom Civic Learning Opportunities was developed in 2005. This scale has a reliability of 0.74. Our indicator of service learning experiences did not fit within the broader measure of civic learning opportunities, instead tapping into slightly different construct. For this reason it is entered on its own in models 3 and 4. In the analysis we examine the significance of

the overall measure and of the individual item asking students about their service learning projects.<sup>4</sup>

*School supports for students' academic and social development:* In addition, because we wanted to see whether the provision of opportunities associated with promoting *academic* outcomes might also foster *civic* outcomes, we included a set of indicators related to whether the school and home context provided supports for students' academic and social development that are part of the Consortium's core survey and have been used for several years. These indicators were chosen by the Consortium because of their anticipated power to predict desired academic outcomes such as higher test scores and improved graduation rates, and they have been found to do so (Allensworth, 2007; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton & Luppescu, 2006; Smiley et al., 2003). In addition, as detailed earlier, many of these contextual features have also been linked to pro-social and civic outcomes. Hence it makes sense to see if their presence is related to increases in students' commitments to civic participation. Specifically, we assessed the impact of *Peer Support for Academic Achievement*, whether students developed a *Sense of Belonging* or attachment in relation to the school, *Teacher Support*, and *Parental Press for Academic Achievement*. All have reliabilities between 0.80 and 0.85. See Appendix A for more details.

*Extra-curricular activities.* The third type of school/educational variable was an indicator of extra-curricular participation. Students were asked how often they participated in *after-school clubs*, sponsored by the school or other organizations, and how often they participated in *sports* on teams, either in or out of school. We separated out the item that asked directly about sports because several studies have found that participation in sports, unlike other extracurricular activities, is often not related or is inversely related to civic participation (Verba et al., 1995)

*Demographic and individual characteristics:* As controls for demographic and individual characteristics of the students, we included data on gender, racial and ethnic identification, and achievement test scores in reading, all of which come from district records. Our measure of achievement (*PSAE Reading Score*) is based on students' eleventh grade score on the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE), administered about a month earlier than the survey.

In addition to the above indicators, we also were interested in measures of socioeconomic status. We considered three indicators: census-based information, linking students to social and economic characteristics of the census block where they live; self reports of level of mother's education; and an individual-level variable telling whether students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. All three come with strengths and limitations. While a variable assigning the same socioeconomic value to every person in a given census block picks up indicators of the general context, it does not necessarily reflect the socioeconomic reality of an individual family. Furthermore, since the census is collected only every 10 years, there is evidence it is it may be outdated by 2005 (Kurki, Boyle & Aladjem, 2005). Student reports on their parents' educational level are often inaccurate (Adelman, 1999, p. 35). Furthermore, not all of the students in our sample replied to this question; using it would have reduced our sample size by 93 students. Finally, the free lunch has little variability, because almost of 80% of the students in our sample qualify. However, it does have the advantage of being an indicator for individual students. We did the analyses separately using the census-based and the free lunch predictors, finding no substantive difference in our results. We report here on the models using the free and reduced price lunch variable.

*Neighborhood and family civic context:* Our measure of *Neighborhood Social Capital* comes from the Consortium's core battery of items, and has been used since 1997. Consistent

with James Coleman's (1988) perspective on the forms of social capital that would matter most for children, it assesses whether adults in the neighborhood are civically engaged and socially networked, and whether they monitor and support young people.

We also include a measure of the role parents and guardians play in shaping students' commitment to civic engagement. To assess the significance of family context, we included a relatively standard item that asked how often each young person discussed current events and politics with their parents or guardians, since the role of discussion between parents and students has been found, consistently, to be related to a range of civic outcomes (Andolina et al., 2003; McIntosh, Hart & Youniss, 2006; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

*Past commitments.* Finally, in addition to all of these factors, and as noted earlier in the paper, there is also much reason to expect that a students' *Prior Commitments to Civic Participation* is related to the commitments reported in eleventh grade. Students with such prior commitments might be more likely to pursue civic opportunities noted above or to recall that they occurred. For this reason, we have included students' score on the Commitment to Civic Participation measure (described above) from the prior administration of the survey which occurred two years earlier in the spring of 2003.

#### *Analysis*

Student *Commitment to Civic Participation* is shaped by a number of individual and group experiences as described above. In particular, those students taking the same classes or attending the same school experience the same general environment, which may also be independently related to the outcome of interest. Therefore, we used Hierarchical Modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to explore the significance of both individual and group characteristics. Ideally we would have nested students within classrooms, since we are interested

in learning opportunities that occur in classrooms. However, we were unable to do so for a variety of technical and theoretical reasons. First, students likely receive these opportunities in multiple courses/classrooms during a given year (e.g English, social studies, health etc.).

Without knowing which class or classes they were reporting on, we were not able to group students in any meaningful way at the classroom level. Second, even if we had limited the responses to a particular subject, we would have had too few students in most classes to make meaningful cross-classroom comparisons.

Even though we were unable to group students in classrooms, we hypothesized that some schools might focus more on promoting civic development than others. Furthermore, because we assumed that students potentially may have experienced these opportunities in more than one class, it seemed important to see whether there was a school level effect. We computed the intra-class correlations using the fully unconditional model and discovered that only 2.2% of the variation in students' commitments to civic participation was between schools.

Even with this low variation, we decided that the nesting structure still had advantages. First, we found that 9% of the variability in civic learning opportunities was between schools. In addition, as will be discussed below, using hierarchical modeling allows us to adjust for individual level measurement error. And, as discussed below, even with this low between-school variability in civic commitments, we did find statistically significant variability in the opportunities/commitments slope.

Because our outcome is itself a measure, it is subject to measurement error. We used three level hierarchical linear modeling, where level 1 is a measurement model, level 2 is the individual student level, and level 3 is the school. The first level represents variation among the item scores within each student. Ordinarily, errors at level 1 in a hierarchical model have a

constant variance, but in this case, each person-measure can have a different amount of measurement error. To correct for this heteroscedasticity, we multiplied each side of the equation by the inverse of each person's standard error. The level 2 outcome becomes each student's individual measure score adjusted for measurement error (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002, p. 245).

At the individual student level, we adjusted for student demographics and for their current academic achievement. We also adjusted for neighborhood and family contexts, educational contexts and practices, after-school activities, and prior civic commitments.

At the school level we adjusted for the average incoming achievement of all of its students. We also tried models including the racial composition of the school and the aggregate social status and poverty level of its students based on their census block addresses. Neither the racial composition nor the socio-economic variables ever reached the level of statistical significance, so we removed them.

In most of our analytic models all individual-level variables were standardized and grand-mean centered. Furthermore, based on the assumption that the relationship between, say, being female and having commitments to civic participation, was the same across all schools in our sample, all level 2 variables were fixed. However, in the models where we included our measure of Classroom Civic Learning Opportunities, we group mean -centered that variable at level 2 and included each school's mean value at level 3. This allowed us to directly estimate the difference in mean civic commitment for schools who differed by one unit in civic learning opportunities by reading the coefficient at level 3. We allowed the coefficient of Classroom Civic Learning Opportunities at level 2 to vary across schools, assuming that some schools might be better able to implement these curricular practices than other schools. The analysis indicated that there was

significant variation between schools in the relationship between civic learning opportunities and students' commitment to civic participation ( $p=0.02$ ).

### Results

As discussed above, our study aims to identify the factors that may support the development of commitments to civic participation. We present these findings by sharing four models. Model #1 includes only individual demographic characteristics. Model #2 adds two indicators of family and neighborhood context that are not demographic in nature: an indicator assessing parental discussion with youth of politics and civic issues and an indicator of social capital in the neighborhood. Model #3 adds indicators of educational contexts and practices (those that explicitly target civic development and those that are thought to promote more standard academic outcomes) and after school activities. Model #4 includes all the variables in Model #3 and adds a measure of commitments to civic participation taken two years earlier in 2003. This measure is identical to the measure used in 2005 and acts as a control for prior commitments

We provide the results in Table 2. Because of the different grouping strategies, the intercept has a slightly different interpretation depending on the model. In models 1 and 2, the intercept is the civic commitment score for a student who is average for the sample on all predictors. For models 3 and 4, the intercept is the civic commitment for a student who is average for his/her school in civic learning opportunities and average for the system in all other respects.

To interpret the meaning of a score on a Rasch measure, one needs to look at the expected responses to each item for a person with that measure score. In this case, an average student as defined above, whose Rasch score would be at the intercept, would agree with the

four items that were easiest to endorse (“Being concerned about state and local issues is an important responsibility for everybody,” “In the next three years I expect to be involved in improving my community,” “I have good ideas for programs or projects to help solve problems in my community,” and “In the next 3 years I expect to work on at least one community project that involves a government agency.”) and disagree with the hardest item to endorse (“Being actively involved in community issues is my responsibility”).

We give the standardized coefficients for each model. For model 4 we also provide effect sizes. To calculate effect sizes we divide the standardized coefficient by the standard deviation of the outcome, computed by taking the square root of the sum of all variances in the unconditional model.

#### *Student Demographic and Academic Characteristics*

As shown in Model 1 (see Table 2), eleventh graders’ demographic characteristics do not appear to be strongly related to their level of civic commitment. In fact, when only student demographics and academic characteristics were included in the model, they explained only 1% of the total variance. In addition, the only indicator that achieved statistical significance was average achievement at the school level, showing that, on average, students attending schools with higher average achievement develop higher commitments to civic participation. However, this relationship disappeared once other variables were included in the model. In model two, white students were associated with less of a civic commitment than African-Americans, the omitted category in our analysis, although this difference disappeared when other variables were added in subsequent models. Our measure of student socioeconomic status, whether a student was eligible for free or reduced lunch, reached marginal significance in our final model. Its effect size was quite small. In short, we saw little indication that demographic and academic

characteristics were strongly related to the levels of commitments to civic participation expressed by juniors in Chicago public schools.

### *Neighborhood and Family Context*

Our measures of neighborhood and family context appeared to be strongly related to students' commitments to civic participation. As predicted, high school juniors' reports of neighborhood social capital were positively related to their overall level of commitments to civic participation. Specifically, high school juniors who report that their community is one in which adults both care about youth and work to make the community better are more likely to report high levels of commitments to civic participation. This relationship (though diminished in magnitude) remains even after controlling for different school experiences (model 3) and after additionally controlling for their level of commitments to civic participation as 9<sup>th</sup> graders (model 4).

In line with much research on the development of commitments to civic participation, we found that having parents who discussed current events and politics with their children was positively associated with students' level of commitments to civic participation. Again, this positive relationship remained after controlling for school experiences (model 3). Some might wonder if this relationship was due to prior commitments. That is, students with pre-existing civic and political interests might be more likely to have conversations related to civic and political issues with their parents. It is therefore notable that the relationships between conversations with parents and current civic commitments did not decline very much when our measure of prior commitments to civic participation was added in model 4, with a coefficient going from 0.19 in model 3 to 0.17 in model 4 when we control for prior commitments. This would seem to imply that parental conversations were related to commitments to civic

participation in ways that were not due primarily to past commitments to civic participation. It is also worth noting that separating out the impact of parents and neighborhood is difficult to do. It seems likely that when parents are active in the community that they will discuss community issues with their children and that, as a result, their children may be more likely to view their neighborhood as responsive and community members as engaged. Similarly, it may be that neighborhoods with more civic activities prompt discussions between parents and children. Given our limited measure of neighborhood qualities and our very limited measures related to the roles played by parents, we are not able to fully untangle these effects. What does seem likely is that both factors support the development of young people's civic commitments and that they do so in overlapping ways.

#### *School Supports for Academic and Social Development*

As noted earlier in the paper, in model 3 we also included several measures that are generally associated with desired academic outcomes. We were interested in seeing if such features were also associated with improved civic outcomes. We found that several of these features did promote desired commitments to civic participation, though the magnitude of these effects was generally modest. Specifically, when students experienced their peers as supportive of academic achievement by, for example, helping each other prepare for tests or do homework or, more generally, by sharing a commitment to doing well in school, they were also slightly more likely to express commitments to civic participation. And when students expressed more of a Sense of Belonging to the school, they reported higher levels of commitments to civic participation. Our measure of Teacher Support, where students were asked whether there was at least one teacher who would help with a personal or academic problem, was not associated with commitments to civic participation when controlling for the other variables. One interesting

exception to this pattern occurred with *Parental Press for Academic Achievement*. We found a small but statistically significant and *negative* relationship between student reports that their parents attended to and supported their focus on academic achievement and their reported levels of commitment to civic participation.

#### *After-School Activities*

There is much research that emphasizes the potential of after-school opportunities as a means of promoting commitments to civic participation. Our findings are generally consistent with that literature. Specifically, participation in after-school activities that included student council, ethnic/cultural clubs, newspaper, drama, and After School Matters (a district-sponsored program providing hands-on job training in arts, sports and technology), as well as participation in activities organized by groups outside of school such as programs run by Boys and Girls Club, a church group, the Park District., etc., were related to increased commitments to civic participation. Given the attention that extracurricular opportunities have gotten from those interested in strategies for promoting civic commitments, it is notable that the effect sizes of these opportunities are relatively modest compared to some classroom opportunities that more explicitly target civic and political issues. Consistent with some prior studies (Verba et al., 1995), participation on either in-school or out-of-school sports teams was not related to increased civic commitments before or after controlling for prior civic commitments.

#### *Classroom Civic Learning Opportunities*

The primary goal of this study was to see whether the provision of opportunities that are believed to be particularly effective means of supporting the development of commitments to civic participation had their desired impact. We found that it did. Indeed, the impact of experiencing service learning and of other civic learning opportunities was both sizable and

substantially larger than any other measure in our study including students' prior commitments to civic participation. For example, in model four, the effect size of opportunities to participate in classroom civic learning opportunities was 0.41 and the effect size of opportunities for service learning was 0.26 (these findings parallel findings from Torney-Purta, Amadeo, and Richardson, 2007). By comparison, the effect size of students' stated commitment to civic participation two years earlier was 0.20.

#### *Explaining Variation at the School and Individual Level*

Our use of HLM permits us to examine the amount of variation that exists at both the school and the individual level. We found that the vast bulk (almost 98%) of the variation of young people's civic commitment is at the individual level, with only 2.2% at the school level. Although few schools make unique or comprehensive efforts to alter students' civic commitment, we did find that 9% of the variance in Classroom Civic Learning Opportunities was at the school level. It is interesting to note that the mean level of civic learning opportunities at the school was a marginally significant predictor of students' commitments to civic participation in Model 4.

It is an encouraging sign for our full model that we can explain a relatively large percentage of the variation in students' commitments to civic participation. Although we can only explain 1% of the total variance with just our demographic variables (Model #1), we can explain 27% when we add information about civic dimensions of students' neighborhood and family context (Model #2). Once we add our measures of Educational Contexts and the provision of classroom and extra-curricular civic learning opportunities (Model #3), this percentage jumps to 59%. Adding prior commitments to civic participation to the model (Model

#4) boosts this number to 63%. These percentages compare quite favorably with most models that predict students' academic performance.

### Discussion and Implications

This study provides some valuable insights for those interested in better understanding factors that shape and can augment the commitments to civic participation of adolescents – particularly in urban settings.

#### *Demographics Are Not Destiny*

When it comes to students who attend public schools in Chicago, demographic factors are not the dominant predictors of individual students' commitments to civic participation. The gender, race/ethnic identification, and socio-economic status of individual students were only marginally significant in select cases, and the magnitude of the associations is smaller than other measures in our study. We are hesitant to conclude from this finding that demographic factors do not influence adolescents' commitments to civic participation. As noted in our methods section, our measures of SES come from census block data which is not always a good predictor of individual families SES or from "free lunch" status, where there is limited variation. We would be more confident about the impact of SES if we had better individual level data on SES. In addition, all our students were part of the same urban school system -- it would be very interesting to see if these findings held in a more socio-economically, geographically, racially, and ethnically diverse sample. Moreover, it seems likely that demographic factors may exert influence later on in students' lives through their impact on educational outcomes and through their impact on access to resources and networks that, as adolescents become adults, influence both individuals' interest in and likelihood of being recruited into civic and political activities (Nie et al., 1996).

For these reasons, we do not conclude that demographic factors do not matter when it comes to civic participation. Rather, we conclude that demographics are not destiny. The data indicates that multiple factors – many of which are under educators’ control can meaningfully influence high school students’ commitments to civic participation.

*Belonging to a Civically Supportive Community Helps*

Students were more likely to express higher levels of commitment to civic participation when they saw examples of neighbors dealing with community problems, when they felt adults looked after children, and when they had a general sense that their neighborhood supported young people. It appears that when youth feel attended to by their community’s adults it supports their civic commitments – a finding consistent with other recent work by Flanagan et al., (2007a). In addition, and consistent with research noted earlier, having parents who discussed current events with them contributed to students’ commitment to civic participation. In short, it appears that when students witnessed concern for the community and current events in their home, school or neighborhood, they were more likely to be committed to civic participation. Moreover, that the experience of civic and civil communities may foster commitments to civic participation among youth provides an additional argument for community development and renewal strategies that aim to engage the public in efforts to improve their neighborhoods and communities (Fung, 2004).

*School Supports for Students Academic and Social Development Appear Insufficient*

While we saw evidence that experiencing a civically supportive and engaged neighborhood was associated with growth in students’ commitments to civic participation, we saw less evidence that experiencing more general academic and social supports in school fostered this result. Indeed, focusing on teacher, student, and peer relationships associated with

academics and social development appears insufficient as a means of fostering commitments to civic and political engagement. Our study finds that some measures of these relationships (for example, a school climate in which peers support academic achievement and where students experience a sense of belonging) are modestly related to young people's commitments to civic participation. These effects are quite small (effect sizes of .05), however, when compared with the effect sizes we found in this study for service learning or for the other classroom civic learning opportunities. Thus, while there is evidence that academically supportive environment as distinct from a civically supportive community, supports students' academic motivation and performance ( Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Junoven, 2006; Wentzel, 1998) we do not find clear evidence from this study that support structures that emphasize academics deliver much in terms of students' civic commitments.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that coming from a family where students said their parents' emphasized academic achievement by doing such things as encouraging them to work hard, talking with them about their school work, or talking with them about their performance in school, is inversely related to students' commitments to civic participation. While we are not clear why this relationship exists, it would be interesting to examine whether and under what circumstances parental emphasis on academic success may crowd out attention to civics. Of course, these findings do not negate the value of academically or socially supportive relationships. Obviously, these relationships may be desirable in terms of their academic payoffs. But these results do raise important questions for those who hope that emphasizing relationships that support academic and social development will be sufficient to fulfill the democratic purposes of education. From the data collected in this study, it appears that practices

that directly target civic outcomes may be necessary in order for schools to exert a more sizable impact on students' commitments to civic participation.

Having said this, we should also note that attention to mainstream academic goals may be valuable from a civic standpoint, but not for reasons captured in this study. Specifically, democracies need citizens who are informed as well as engaged. Our study focused solely on commitments to engagement, but the ability to think carefully about civic issues requires academic capacities and these are obviously important as well. Thus, nothing presented here should be taken as an argument against the relevance of academic competence in democratic societies.

In addition, educational attainment and achievement may also spur civic engagement over time. Studies by Verba et al. (1995) and by Nie et al. (1996) indicate that education leads to occupational prominence, to income, to skill development, and to position within social networks all of which are associated with greater and more influential civic and political participation.

Studies have long demonstrated that at any given point in time, those with more education are more likely to be civic or political participants (Nie et al., 1996). What is less clear is whether changing the educational level of the population as a whole will lead to an aggregate increase in civic participation or whether the civic advantages associated with education are zero sum (those with more education may participate more than those who have less, but giving everyone more education may not raise the total volume of such participation). Indeed, the past several decades have seen marked increases in the years of formal schooling attained by citizens in the US without any aggregate increase in many forms of civic participation. Perhaps overall participation would have increased had it not been for other factors that constrained its growth. For example, increased television viewing may have helped depress civic participation (see

Putnam, 2000 for discussion). Alternatively, referencing findings from Nie et al. (1996), Verba et al., (1995) point out, “Another possibility is that when it comes to participation, it is relative position in the education hierarchy that counts” (p. 437). Thus, the nature of the relationship between the attainment of education in both the relative and absolute sense remains a matter of debate (see Galston, 2001 for discussion). Though such questions are clearly worthy of continued attention, at the very least, the data presented here indicates that learning opportunities that specifically target civic goals may be a highly efficacious strategy.

*Extra-curricular opportunities (other than sports) appear to provide only modest support for the development of civic commitments*

The potential value of extra-curricular activities as a means of developing commitments to civic participation has long been noted (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Otto, 1976; Scott & Willits, 1998; Smith, 1999; Zaff et al., 2003). Our findings are consistent with these studies in indicating benefits from participation in extra-curricular opportunities other than sports. At the same time, participation in extracurricular opportunities is voluntary and, when compared with classroom civic learning opportunities, our data suggest that their impact is more modest. We should note, however, that the relatively smaller size of this effect may be due to a lack of differentiation regarding extracurricular activity. Just as explicit attention to civic issues is key in schools when it comes to promoting commitments to civic participation, we suspect it matters in extra-curricular activities as well. Thus, we expect that extra-curricular activities that focus directly on civic and political issues and on ways to act both civically and politically would be more consequential when it comes to civic outcomes. McFarland and Thomas’ (2006) study indicates that this is the case.

*Classroom Opportunities Matter*

The most important finding from this study is that what happens in classrooms can have a meaningful impact on students' commitment to civic participation. This finding is important because early longitudinal studies (most prominently Langton & Jennings, 1968 – also see Cook, 1985 for review) have called into question the ability of schools to influence students' levels of civic participation. To a significant degree, we suspect that the failure of some large scale longitudinal studies to find that civic education exerts a meaningful impact on civic outcomes results from a generic focus on the provision of civic education courses, rather than on particular curricular opportunities.

While taking a government course may not make much of a difference, we find that particular pedagogical and curricular experiences in high school can meaningfully influence students' commitments to civic participation. Specifically, experiences that focus directly on civic and political issues and ways to act (e.g. undertaking service learning projects, following current events, discussing problems in the community and ways to respond, providing students with a classroom in which open dialog around controversial issues is common and where students study topics that matter to them, as well as exposure to civic role models) appear to be a highly efficacious means of fostering commitments to civic participation. In fact, the effect size of both service learning opportunities and the overall measure of classroom civic learning opportunities is larger than the size of any of the other factors in this study. In short, while requiring courses in American Government may help, this policy will likely be insufficient as it will not guarantee the kinds of opportunities we found to be most important. Rather, policymakers and educators need to look for ways to enable efficacious classroom practices in American Government courses and elsewhere through curriculum and professional development, for example, and by fostering a broader appreciation for the potential value of such approaches.

Since this study focused on predominantly low-income students (79% of students in our sample receive free lunches) and students of color (78% of students in the sample identify either as African American or Latino) it is also worth highlighting that these curricular approaches appear to provide significant benefits for students from groups that generally have less political voice than others (APSA Task Force, 2004; Verba et al., 1995). Moreover, a recent study (Kahne & Middaugh, in press) that draws on a statewide survey of youth in California and on a nationally representative survey of youth, indicates that students of color, those whose academic performance is less strong than others, as well as those who are part of classrooms with relatively more low-income students all receive fewer of the civic learning opportunities identified as important in the current study of Chicago youth. Thus, it appears that schools, rather than helping to lessen civic and political inequality in society, may reinforce and enlarge these inequalities. At the same time, schools could make a meaningful contribution by providing the kinds of curricular opportunities examined in this study to low-income students, students with lower academic performance, and students of color.

#### Limitations

Though the large sample size and ability to control for prior civic commitments are clear strengths of this data set, other qualities of the data present clear limitations. For example, as discussed earlier, that all youth in our sample are from the Chicago Public Schools clearly limits our ability to examine the ways demographic diversity may matter and to generalize our findings beyond large urban environments. In addition, due to space constraints on the survey, three of our measures consist of only one item (our measure of parent civic discussion with youth, of service learning experiences, and of extra-curricular sports participation). Relying on a single item is never desirable and likely presents the most significant problem when it comes to our

measure of parent civic discussion. This item assesses whether youth and parents talk together about current events and political issues. While we have much reason to believe that this is an important form of parental influence, parental contributions likely take other forms as well and this single item cannot fully capture the varied ways parents may model and support the development of civic commitments among their children. Similarly, while this study indicates that participation in extra-curricular sports is differently related to civic outcomes than participation in other extra-curricular activities, it does not help us understand why this is the case. More detailed work focusing on particular opportunities would clearly be valuable. Finally, since so many civic learning opportunities are delivered in classrooms, it is a limitation that we cannot undertake a classroom level analysis as part of our HLM. Our inability to do this stems both from the fact that students receive civic learning opportunities in a variety of subjects (e.g. English, social studies, science) and because of technical limits of the data base.

### Conclusion

At the end of their influential assessment of high school civic education, Langton and Jennings (1968) frame the challenge confronting those committed to the democratic purposes of education. “If the educational system continues to invest sizable resources in government and civics courses at the secondary level – as seems most probable – there must be a radical restructuring of these courses in order for them to have any appreciable pay-off” (867). Rather than working to specify what such a “restructuring of courses” might involve, scholar’s interests, for the most part, shifted elsewhere -- leading to what Timothy Cook (1985) described as the “Bear Market in Political Socialization.” And this situation, Neimi and Junn (1998) write, lasted well into the 1990’s. When returning to this “long-interrupted tradition of research,” William Galston (2001) argues that “unlike a generation ago, researchers cannot afford to overlook the

impact of formal civic education and related school-based experiences.” This study, like other recent research, takes up this challenge. In particular, by examining the impact of a broad range of educational opportunities that civic educators associate with best practice, while controlling for prior commitments and for other potential contributors to civic commitments, this study aims to provide a sense of what restructured courses might emphasize as well as evidence regarding the pay-off.

Specifically, imagine for a moment a student who is average for the sample with respect to demographics, aspects of schooling related to academic achievement, and after-school participation. Imagine further that this student comes from a family where his/her parents rarely discuss politics or current events and from a neighborhood where there is little social capital—in fact assume that this student is only at the 16<sup>th</sup> percentile in the sample of Chicago students in both of these variables. If the student did not experience increased exposure to desired civic learning opportunities (such as service learning, an open classroom climate, exposure to role models, and discussion of problems in the society and ways to respond) but rather experienced opportunities to learn about civics and to participate in service learning at the sample mean in this study, that student’s commitments to civic participation would be at about the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile. If, however, the student’s experience of these desired civic learning opportunities were one standard deviation above the system average, then, despite the lack of focus on these issues in the students’ neighborhood and home, those same students would be expected to develop civic commitments that would place them at about the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile. The difference between being at the 40<sup>th</sup> and the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile in commitment to civic participation appears quite meaningful. While students at the 40<sup>th</sup> and the 70<sup>th</sup> percentiles would both agree with several of the items in our measure of commitments to civic participation, students at the 40<sup>th</sup>

percentile would typically disagree that they had good ideas about how to solve community problems and that it was their responsibility to be involved in community issues, students at the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile typically agree when presented with both of these questions regarding their commitments. And indeed if these same students had the misfortune of being in classrooms with extremely weak civic learning opportunities, such students would typically disagree with all of the items in this measure.

This is the point we wish to stress as we conclude. By providing particular kinds of classroom civic learning opportunities, it appears that schools can very meaningfully support the development of students' commitments to civic participation.

Working Paper

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Consider the relationship researchers have identified between reports of discussing current events in high school and being politically engaged as an adult. It may be that such discussions prompt participation, but it may also be that those students who were already interested sought out teachers and courses where those opportunities existed or that their interest led them to notice such opportunities when they arose (See Campbell, 2005 for an alternative strategy to control for this possibility). Furthermore, such retrospective studies inherently involve issues of the fidelity and selectivity of people's memories.

<sup>2</sup> Interested readers may contact the authors for details on how these measures were constructed.

<sup>3</sup> In a prior administration of this survey we also included an item assessing classroom opportunities to participate in role-plays and simulations. Data from the 2003 survey, with controls from 2001, indicated that this opportunity promoted commitments to civic participation, but the item had to be cut from the 2005 survey due to space constraints, so is not included in this analysis. Those interested in our findings on the impact of participation in role-plays or simulations from the previous administration of the survey can contact the authors.

<sup>4</sup> We also ran a model in which we disaggregated our civic learning measure into its component items to make sure the results were not being driven by one or two of the items in the scale. We found that each individual item was significantly related to the outcome, and that, although there were minor differences in the coefficients, no individual item stood out as being particularly different from the others.

Appendix A: Indicators Used in this Analysis

Table A1

*Outcome Variable, From Survey*

Indicator	Type	Response categories	List of items
<i>Commitment to Civic Participation</i>	Measure	Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree	<i>How much do you agree with the following:</i> Being actively involved in community issues is my responsibility. In the next 3 years, I expect to work on at least one community project that involves a government agency I have good ideas for programs or projects to help solve problems in my community In the next 3 years I expect to be involved in improving my community Being concerned about state and local issues is an important responsibility for everybody
<i>Prior Commitment to Civic Participation</i>	Rel=0.73		

Table A2

*Predictor Variables, From Administrative Records*

Indicator	Type	Percent if dichomous: Mean (std dev) if continuous
<b>Demographic and academic achievement</b>		
Female	Dichotomous	59%
Latino/a	Dichotomous	42%
Asian	Dichotomous	8%
White	Dichotomous	14%
Free/reduced lunch	Dichotomous	79%
Prairie State Achievement Exam Reading Score	Continuous	156 (15.55)

Table A3

*Predictor Variables, From Survey*

	Type	Response categories	List of items if measure: Frequencies if single item
<b>Parent/Neighborhood</b>			
<i>Neighborhood Social Capital</i>	Measure Rel=0.73	Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree  (SD,D, A,SA)	<i>How much do agree with the following statements about the community in which you live?</i> If there is a problem in the community, neighbors get together to deal with it People in this neighborhood can be trusted You can count on adults in this neighborhood to see that children are safe & don't get into trouble The equipment and buildings in the neighborhood park or playground are well kept There are adults in this neighborhood children can look up to Adults in this neighborhood know who the local children are No one in this neighborhood cares much about what happens Here (reverse coded)
<i>Parent Civic Conversation</i>	Single item	SD,D, A,SA (1-4)	This year my parent/guardians have discussed current events/politics with me Mean: 2.69 Category frequencies: 1: 19% 2: 22% 3: 31% 4: 28%
<b>School context</b>			
<i>Teacher Support</i>	Measure Rel=0.80	SD,D, A,SA (1-4)	<i>In my school this year, there is at least ONE teacher who:</i> Knows who my friends are Would be willing to help me with a personal problem Really cares about how I am doing in school I could talk to if I was having problems in a class I could ask to write me a recommendation for a job, program, or college
<i>Peer Support for Academic Achievement</i>	Measure Rel=0.84	SD,D, A,SA (1-4)	<i>How much do you agree with the following:</i> My friends and I help each other prepare for tests My friends think it is important to attend every class My friends and I help each other with homework assignments My friends try hard in school My friends and I talk about what we did in class My friends think it is important to do well in school
<i>Sense of Belonging</i>	Measure Rel=0.81	SD,D, A,SA (1-4)	<i>How much do you agree with the following:</i> People at this school are like family to me I participate in a lot of activities at this school People care if I'm not at school There are people at this school I can talk to about personal matters I fit in with the students in this school There are people at this school who will help me if I need it

	Type	Response categories	List of items if measure: Frequencies if single item
<i>Parental Press for Academic Achievement</i>	Measure Rel= (0.80)	Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Frequently	<i>This year my parents/guardians have:</i> Talked to me about my homework assignments Talked to me about what I'm studying in class Talked to me about how I'm doing in my classes Encouraged me to work hard in school Encourage me to continue my education after high school
<i>Participate in after school activities sponsored by school*</i>	Single item	Never, once in a while, once a week, almost every day. (1-4)	This year how often have you participated in school clubs or after-school activities (student council, drama ethnic/cultural clubs, newspaper, After School Matters)?  Mean: 2.15 Category frequencies: 1: 39% 2: 23% 3: 22% 4:16%
<i>Participate in activities sponsored by non-school organizations*</i>	Single item	Never, once in a while, once a week, almost every day. (1-4)	This year how often have you participated in activities organized by groups OUTSIDE of school (classes or programs at Boys/Girls Club, park program, church group)  Mean: 1.88 Category frequencies: 1: 50% 2: 21% 3: 20% 4: 9%
<i>Participate in sports</i>	Single item	Never, once in a while, once a week, almost every day. (1-4)	This year how often have you participated in sports teams, either in school or out of school(while in season)  Mean: 2.18 Category frequencies: 1: 45% 2: 17% 3: 12% 4:25%
<b>Civics related</b>			
<i>Classroom Civic Learning Opportunities</i>	Measure Rel=0.74	Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree  never, rarely, sometimes, often	<i>In at least one of my classes this year:</i> I am required to keep up with politics or government, either by reading a newspaper, watching tv or going to the internet I learned about things in society that need to be changed I met people who work to make society better I learned about ways to improve my community <i>How often do teachers:</i> Focus on issues I care about Encourage students to make up their own minds about political and social topics Encourage students to discuss political and social topics on which people have different opinions
<i>Service Learning</i>	Item	Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree	In at least one of my classes this year I worked on a service learning project to improve my community  Mean: 2.54 Category frequencies: 1: 8% 2: 37% 3: 46% 4: 8%

\*these two items were arithmetically combined into a single item

Table 1:  
*Demographic Comparison Between our Analytic Sample and all CPS Juniors*

	N	African American	Latino	White	Asian	Female	Free lunch	PSAE reading
CPS	22,688	50%	34%	11%	5%	53%	78%	152
Analytic Sample	4,057	36%	42%	14%	8%	59%	79%	156

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Table 2

*Hierarchical Linear Models Predicting Eleventh Graders Commitment to Civic Participation*

Predictors	Model 1: Demographic and Academic Characteristics	Model 2: Adds Neighborhood and Family Context	Model 3: Adds curricular and extracurricular opportunities	Model 4: Adds Prior Commitments to Civic Participation
<b>Intercept</b>	5.00***	5.02**	5.02***	5.02***
<b>School Level</b>				
Mean Civic Learning Opportunities			0.06 ~	0.06~
Mean Academic Achievement.	0.11*	0.03	0.01	0.01
<b>Individual Level</b>				
<i>Demographic and Academic Characteristics</i>				
PSAE Reading Score	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.01
Gender (Female = 1)	0.01	0.01	-0.02	-0.03
Latino	-0.07	-0.02	0.00	0.00
Asian	-0.02	0.00	-0.02	-0.03 ~ (0.02)
White	-0.04	-0.07*	-0.04	-0.04
Free/Reduced Lunch	-0.07	-0.04	-0.07	-0.09 ~ (-0.06)
<i>Neighborhood and Family Context</i>				
Parents discuss current events and politics		0.40***	0.19***	0.17***(0.12)
Neighborhood Social Capital		0.53***	0.23***	0.20***(0.14)
<i>Educational Contexts and Practices</i>				
Service Learning Experiences			0.36***	0.36***(0.26)
Classroom Civic Learning Opportunities			0.62***	0.57***(0.41)
Peer Support for Academic Achievement			0.09***	0.08***(0.06)
Sense of Belonging			0.07~	0.07* (0.05)
Teacher Support			-0.03	-0.03
Parent Press for Academic Achievement			-0.08**	-0.08**(0.06)
<i>After-School Activities</i>				
School clubs			0.16***	0.14* (0.10)
Sports			0.02	0.02
<i>Prior Civic Commitments</i>				
Prior Commitments to Civic Participation (from 2003)				0.27***(0.19)
<b>% Variance Explained</b>	1%	27%	59%	63%

~ = p < 0.10 \* = p < 0.05 \*\* = p < 0.01 \*\*\* = p < 0.001

All Coefficients Standardized. Numbers in parentheses are effect sizes