

MAINE CIVICS NETWORK

NOVEMBER 2023 LISTENING TOUR

REPORT OF FINDINGS



“Hearing from others about what they feel has worked with civics education with their students was meaningful. So much of our time as teachers is spent alone, just charging ahead without getting to stop and reflect with other professionals. Reflection time like this is invaluable in keeping us pushing towards best practices.” – Teacher, Maine Civics Network Listening Tour

PURPOSE

The Maine Civics Network hosted a “listening tour” in November 2023 consisting of three regional gatherings of frontline educators from nine different school districts to examine the nature and needs of civics education in Maine. Twenty-one teachers representing grades 5-12 and diverse content areas participated in a facilitated process in which they a) examined their own efforts to innovate; b) identified significant aspects of more effective civics learning and teaching; c) specified opportunities and challenges facing Maine schools in putting such aspects into practice; and d) discussed how a Maine Civics Network could support them and their colleagues.

WHAT WE HEARD

The educators who participated in the listening tour spoke passionately and convincingly about the importance of civic education and the need to “go deeper” than the traditional opportunities for learning civics that focus primarily on the structures and processes at the federal level and provide little space for students to develop civic skills and mindsets. While teachers felt that it was critically important to help students acquire knowledge about how the national government works as well as the skills to participate within it, they urged that comprehensive civics education should not stop there.

Teachers expressed how important it was to expand the focus to include local, state, and global government and to structure this learning around matters “drawn from real life” that students authentically value and are concerned about. Participants felt that was most powerfully done by utilizing issues and topics relevant to the local communities in which students lived.

Teachers frequently referenced the importance of “developing an understanding” of civic topics and that understanding evolves from active participation in activities and decisions that students find relevant and consequential. The “development” of understanding is a learning process that involves experiencing civic participation while building skills and conceptual comprehension across grade levels and content areas. Again, teachers felt that this active engagement was best initiated at the local level and



centered around issues and phenomena that students experience in their everyday lives.

One teacher shared an example from their own teaching experience that illustrates this concept:

Last year, a group of students in my class were upset when one of their own, who was lacking parental support and consistent housing, was unable to open a bank account after working all summer. Our students wanted to change that. They began by collecting information on limitations on banking services for minors, calling over 25 Maine banks statewide, and interviewing tellers and bank managers regarding banking regulations pertaining to minor accounts. The information they collected confirmed that while almost every bank in the state required an adult co-signer on a minor account, no one knew where the protocol originated, or who required it. Students went a step further, designing a survey on the topic distributed to over 500 high school students.

These students approached our state senator to express their concerns with regard to banking rules and minor accounts. The senator agreed to submit a bill addressing the students' concerns. The students had the opportunity to review the language of the bill as well as the path it would follow through the legislature before going on to collect and prepare testimony. They visited the State House where they watched the bill be presented to the legislature and participated in the public hearing. The bill went on to be passed by the state legislature last spring!

This story from a teacher was representative of numerous similar stories in which the teacher scaffolded the “development of civic understanding” through an inquiry process that directly engaged students in the civic world around them.

Teachers identified important prerequisites to civic participation and developing civic understanding. These might constitute a core set of “building blocks” for civic learning which Maine teachers can use as a scaffold for practices supporting deeper engagement:

1. *The skills of civil discourse.* Teachers repeatedly identified the importance of students learning skills to engage in discourse, such as respectful speaking and



listening, understanding different viewpoints, a sense of empathy as well as self-awareness, and group decision-making skills.

2. *Civic hope and a sense of agency.* The teachers we spoke with clearly identified a need for students to feel like they matter and that their participation in civic life will make a difference. This was frequently framed as providing meaningful opportunities and support for students to discover and develop their own agency through civic engagement.
3. *A sense of community and connection.* “Civics” is not an individual activity but is deeply rooted in community and the common good. However, many youth feel disconnected from their communities. Opportunities to build community connections, including volunteerism, community service, and service learning create important contexts in which to situate civic engagement.

Finally, teachers repeatedly noted the tension between the democratic outcomes of civic education and the often undemocratic environments in schools. Teachers felt it was important to structure civic learning experiences that are, themselves, democratically organized. Civics education is most authentic, they felt, when students have choice and bear responsibility for learning and for their conduct/cooperation with others. It is most challenging and effective when students must work with peers and adults who are different from themselves, in much the same way they will as citizens in our democracy.

OPPORTUNITIES & HURDLES

In all three regional sessions, teachers reported how difficult it was to teach in the manner described here, regardless of the rewards to their students. We invited them, at the conclusion of the meetings, to identify opportunities to support such teaching as well as hurdles to doing so.

Opportunities they noted were:

1. Turning to the students themselves to generate learning activities and “youth to youth” sharing of the value and importance of civic engagement;
2. Connecting with fellow educators to share ideas, activities, resources, and solutions to challenges;
3. Engaging school and district leaders who value civic learning in providing professional development for all staff around civic learning and designing the changes necessary to support teachers;



4. Using the cycles of elections as well as the accessibility of local government to spur interest and engagement.

They also identified, however, the following difficulties they encounter in practicing effective and engaging civic learning:

1. Inadequate time, energy, and support for this more complex and difficult form of teaching and learning, especially in the face of too many initiatives already filling the school day;
2. School structures, including scheduling, standards that are both too numerous and inadequate in addressing the depth of civic education, and pressures from grading and assessment systems that are not compatible with this vision of civic learning.
3. Student apathy, which many teachers felt might be the visible manifestation of students not feeling valued by adults and/or their community or a lack of belief in their own agency;
4. A polarized society in which civic life appears dangerous and teachers fear that engaging in contemporary and controversial topics can lead to conflict, reprimand, and isolation.

FUTURE LEARNING & NEXT STEPS

We heard loud and clear that educators invested in the civic education of our students desire continued connection with their colleagues in other schools and districts throughout the state. Teachers are seeking opportunities for collegial conversations, moral support and most importantly, sharing successful practices and jointly problem-solving the vital issues that arise in their work as civic educators. This connection needs to both sustain the educators and be sustainable in its scope.

When asked what they thought the most valuable part of the listening tour was, one teacher responded:

Hearing other's stories, passion, commitment. It was helpful to reflect on our current state of affairs with regards to civics education and to share out with a thoughtful group of educators and facilitators.

This comment and others like it validate the Maine Civics Network's mission: to develop a user-designed network for civic educators in Maine, creating a statewide "web" of peer support, information and access to successful practices from those deeply engaging civic learners on the ground. Teachers were highly supportive of continuing and expanding the conversations that were sparked during the Listening Tour, but also

MAINE CIVICS NETWORK

NOVEMBER 2023 LISTENING TOUR

REPORT OF FINDINGS



acknowledged that their days were already too busy for this work to be self-organizing. The Maine Civics Network's role of convening frontline educators for the design and implementation of a peer network was identified as a critically important support to the effort.

To this end, the Maine Civics Network proposes three follow-up activities in the first half of 2024:

1. Convene an online "design workshop" of 6-8 teachers who participated in the listening sessions to help us identify the *essential elements of a professional network* that will support Maine teachers enacting civics-learning experiences as described in this report. The teachers in the focus group will also identify near-term strategies to be implemented over the next 18 months for generating a network of Maine educators around these essential elements;
2. Reconvene all 21 original participants for an in-person event with the purpose of *engaging them in the sorts of collegial conversations, collaborative problem solving, and reflective practice* that is at the center of the Maine Civics Network as designed by the focus group of educators, above. The opportunity for educators to experience a pilot session and offer feedback on the near-term implementation strategies identified by the design workshop will sustain and build on the momentum of the November 2023 Listening Tour and will provide a potential springboard for a future MCN peer network for civics educators.
3. Engage key stakeholders and policy makers, including the Department of Education, Secretary of State's office, organizations with a civic education mission, and potential funders to discuss what is needed to support deeper civics learning in Maine. This conversation will be grounded in the themes generated by the listening sessions and further developed through the design workshop (Item 1) and in-person work session (Item 2) with teachers.