The Civic Empowerment Gap: Defining the Problem and Locating Solutions
Meira Levinson
Harvard Graduate School of Education

FINAL Submission for Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth, Lonnie Sherrod, Constance Flanagan, Judith Torney-Purta, eds.
August 6, 2009

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that there is a profound civic empowerment gap in the United States—as large and as disturbing as the reading and math achievement gaps that have received significant national attention in recent years—and to argue that schools can and should help address this gap. There is widespread recognition that political power is distributed in vastly unequal ways among American citizens. As the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy memorably put it, “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” (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004, p. 651). Less poetically, but equally powerfully, Larry Bartels recently demonstrated that “political influence seems to be limited entirely to affluent and middle-class people. The opinions of millions of ordinary citizens in the bottom third of the income distribution have no discernible impact on the behavior of their elected representatives” (Bartels, 2008, p. 5). But both scholars and educators can do much more to clarify the role of schools in potentially contributing to and ameliorating this problem. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the ways in which schools, understood both as contextually-located civic institutions and as primary deliverers of civic education, can and must help address this unjust civic empowerment gap especially among historically disenfranchised populations.
Section I begins by defining good citizenship, and by extension the aims of good civic education. I then demonstrate the existence of a broad and deep civic empowerment gap across all dimensions of good citizenship—civic and political knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors—and argue that this gap challenges the stability, legitimacy, and quality of our democratic republic. In Section II, I suggest that we focus on *de facto* segregated urban schools as crucial sites for addressing the civic empowerment gap. Section III then recommends five specific approaches that could improve access to high-quality civic education and experiences especially among historically disenfranchised youth. These include reducing the dropout rate, improving the quantity and distribution of civic education across K-12 education, engaging students in co-constructing empowering civic historical narratives, infusing experiential civic education throughout the curriculum, and providing powerful civic learning and engagement opportunities for urban teachers.

1. **Citizenship and the Civic Empowerment Gap**

   What are the components of citizenship, and what does it mean to be a good citizen? These questions necessarily must be answered prior to any discussion about the aims or content of civic education. Can you be a good citizen if you don’t vote? What if you vote, but are uninformed about most of the issues and candidates, or vote solely on the basis of a single issue? How important is it to be law-abiding? Is being economically self-sufficient a hallmark (or even a precondition) of good citizenship? Is never being a burden on others enough to make one a good citizen? How should we judge the act of protesting injustice via civil disobedience against the act of sacrificing oneself on the battlefield for the good of country? Depending on how one
answers these questions, of course, one’s judgment about what makes for good civic education will be radically different.

For the purposes of this chapter, I shall adopt the definition of good civic education and citizenship set forth in *The Civic Mission of Schools*. This definition integrates many disparate strands of belief and ideology about citizenship:

Civic education should help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. Competent and responsible citizens:

1. are informed and thoughtful; have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy; have an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; and have the ability to obtain information, think critically, and enter into dialogue among others with different perspectives.

2. participate in their communities through membership in or contributions to organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.

3. act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes, such as group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting.

4. have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference. (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003, p. 4)
One virtue of this characterization of good citizenship, and hence of good civic education, is that it is capacious without being simplistic. Within this definition, good citizens may be those who vote, protest, boycott, run for office, join political parties, join civic organizations, commit acts of civil disobedience, circulate e-mail petitions, write influential political blogs, “tweet” or text message about political events being kept under a news blackout, and attend neighborhood council meetings. Good citizens may not, however, merely keep to themselves; simply not being a burden to others is not sufficient for good citizenship. In this respect, this definition rejects the ideal of the “personally responsible citizen,” as Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne describe in their influential article, “What Kind of Citizen” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 239), but encompasses their ideals of both “participatory” and “justice-oriented” citizens. Participatory citizens believe that “to solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures,” while justice-oriented citizens believe that one must “question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240–Table 1). Participatory and justice-oriented citizens may thus frequently disagree about the most fruitful acts to take as citizens – and hence also would disagree about the best approaches to citizenship education – but they both embrace the importance of knowledgeable, skillful, active involvement in (or in response/opposition to, or creation of) civic and political institutions in order to improve society. The definition of good citizenship given above clearly would recognize both kinds of citizens as good citizens, which I believe is appropriate.

On the downside, this definition arguably privileges traditional modes of civic action that are both increasingly outdated and unrepresentative of a range of actions and behaviors that have
historically been important civic tools of members of disadvantaged, oppressed, and/or marginalized groups. For example, various Web 2.0 activities such as uploading a video to YouTube and interacting through social networking sites such as Facebook or Ning do not obviously fit into the categories and actions described above, despite their increasingly evident civic importance.¹ This definition also seems to exclude artistic production and expression including hiphop music and video, poetry slams, and graffiti—all of which have arguably been used especially by young, often poor, people of color in the United States and elsewhere to critique contemporary power structures and civic institutions. Furthermore, it fails to credit the civic intentionality and implications of “everyday…forms of resistance” by “relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on” (Scott, 1985, p. xvi). Finally, emphasis on public and collective forms of engagement likely overlooks the ways in which especially members of historically disadvantaged groups may be “pillars of their community” without participating collectively in public activities. A well-known community elder, say, may exert considerable civic influence by modeling rectitude, advising youngsters about how to behave and “do right,” and serving as an informal but final arbiter of community disputes, even though he or she takes part in no obvious “public” activities. These are all arguably significant civic roles, actions, and dimensions of influence that are not obviously included in the definition above.

I argue that it is nonetheless worth proceeding with this definition—and with the measures of civic engagement that follow from the definition—for a couple of reasons. First,

¹ I am writing this paragraph in July 2009; my guess is that by the time this essay gets published, these examples will seem quaint and hopelessly out of date. Right now, however, the importance of will.i.am’s music video “Yes We Can” to Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign (will.i.am, 2008), and of Twitter to the protests in Iran against President Ahmadinejad’s putative June 2009 election victory (see, e.g., Grossman, 2009), remain both fascinating and new. The “tweets” sent from Iran and re-tweeted around the world clearly satisfy the criteria of the definition of good citizenship given above. But virally-spread videos, Facebook “fan” groups, and other forms of social networking that blur the lines between private and public speech and action are much harder to characterize.
frankly, we don’t have good quantitative measures of most of the forms of civic engagement listed in the above paragraph. Scholars who study civic engagement in the United States have relatively good quantitative measures of rates of voting, government contact, political discussion in the home, boycotts, and even protest participation (among many others). But they don’t have good measures of use of social networking tools for civic engagement, say—the technologies are just too new—nor of how civic engagement is expressed and enacted through art or music, hiphop culture, informal neighborhood leadership, or calculated subversion. If I were to operate off of a more expansive definition, this would incorrectly suggest that my analysis of demographic measures of civic empowerment was capable similarly of being more expansive, which it is not.2 Second, traditional forms of engagement still matter with respect to empowerment. People who vote regularly, contact politicians and other government officials, speak up in public meetings, join civic organizations, and donate money to both candidates and civic causes almost invariably have more civic and political power in the United States in the early twenty-first century than those who do not. Since this chapter is about civic empowerment, we need to take these traditional measures of civic engagement into careful account, even at the cost of privileging them over other modes that are more accessible to and more frequently employed by members of historically disadvantaged groups. I realize that this risks creating a circular and apparently deficit-oriented argument in which I place certain groups at the “bottom” of a civic empowerment gap precisely because I discount forms of civic engagement in which they are particularly involved. But gaps need not imply deficits—and it does no one any good to ignore the specific harms suffered by those who cannot or do not deploy traditional levers of civic and political power. Thus, I will rely upon this definition of good citizenship—and

2 Qualitative data and research are obviously also crucial to documenting and understanding the multiple dimensions and patterns of civic engagement and empowerment. I do not mean to suggest that quantitative research in this area is superior to qualitative research—just that it is also useful, despite the limitations it imposes.
correlatively, of the desirable outcomes of good civic education—despite its acknowledged limitations.

One crucial thing to highlight is the centrality to this definition of civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Good citizens need to be knowledgeable about politics, history, government, and current events; they need to be skilled communicators, thinkers, deliberators, and actors; they need to be concerned about the common good in addition to their own self-interest, and to believe it is possible and worth trying to make a difference through public action; and they need to become involved in public or community affairs, through some combination of voting, protesting, contacting public officials, mobilizing others, contributing time or money to causes or campaigns, participating in community groups, and other appropriate actions. No matter where one lands on the participatory/justice-oriented continuum (or on the civic/political continuum, which I am also eliding in this chapter (Lopez, et al., 2006; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006)), these four attributes are necessary to be a good citizen.

On all of these measures, there is evidence of a profound gap between many non-white, immigrant, and especially low-income youth and adults, on the one hand, and white, native-born, and especially middle-class or wealthy youth and adults, on the other:

**Knowledge and skills.** As early as fourth grade and continuing into the eighth and twelfth grades, African-American, Hispanic, and poor students perform significantly worse on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ (NAEP) test of civic knowledge than white, Asian, and middle-class students (Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, & National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2007). On the 2006 NAEP Civics Assessment, for example, white fourth and eighth graders who were poor (i.e., eligible for
free or reduced-price lunch) performed as well as middle-class and wealthy (ineligible for free or reduced-price lunch) African-American and Hispanic students – and significantly better than poor African-American and Hispanic students. (Asian students performed equivalently to white students in eighth grade; results were more mixed in fourth grade.) Within each racial/ethnic group, poor students earned significantly lower scores than middle-class and wealthier students (computed using data from IES: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Similar disparities appear in American ninth graders’ scores on the 1999 IEA test of civic knowledge and skills (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001, p. Tables 4.1 and 4.5; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007). Immigration status also seems to influence students’ mastery of civic knowledge and skills. Students who haven’t lived in the United States their whole lives performed significantly worse on the 1998 NAEP Civics Assessment (2006 data are not available) than students who have always lived in the U.S., with scores directly related to the number of years living in the United States (IES: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007); similar results hold, again, for ninth graders’ performance on the IEA test (Torney-Purta, et al., 2007). This shouldn’t be surprising, or even potentially worrisome, since it is predictable and appropriate that students will learn more about American government, democracy, etc., the longer they live in the United States. But it does potentially set the stage for civic and political participation gaps between native-born and naturalized citizens that I discuss below.

These results for youth are, unsurprisingly, echoed in studies of adults, as well. In a comprehensive study of adults’ civic and political knowledge, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter conclusively demonstrate that “men are more informed than women; whites are more informed than blacks; those with higher incomes are more informed than those with lower incomes; and older citizens are more informed than younger ones.” These disparities are not
small: out of the 68 questions asked in the 1989 Survey of Political Knowledge, for example, “in no case was the percentage correct for blacks as high as for whites or for low-income citizens as high as that for upper-income ones.” Similarly, three-quarters of black Americans scored below all but the bottom quarter of white Americans; more than three-quarters of poor respondents scored below the top three-quarters of their middle-class counterparts (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 157, also Tables 4.8 and 4.9, Figure 4.1; see also Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p. Table 12.14 for independent corroborating data). These patterns continue unabated in contemporary surveys (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007), and can manifest themselves in startling ways: in 2004, for example, when I was teaching eighth grade in a Boston public school that served predominantly low-income, first- and second-generation immigrant students of color, none of my twenty-seven homeroom students knew that July 4th celebrates the signing and publication of the Declaration of Independence (see Hart & Atkins, 2002, p. for a similar story).

It is of course undoubtedly true that these surveys and tests of political and civic knowledge and skills are both limited and biased in a number of ways. They are created—and hence relevant political and civic knowledge is defined—overwhelmingly by middle-class, native born, white scholars, educators, and policy makers who tend to care about federal and especially electoral politics. They incontrovertibly privilege both modes and content of civic knowledge that are familiar to and valued by such groups. Thus, the 1989 and 2007 Pew Surveys of Political Knowledge cited above ask respondents to identify the Speaker of the House and other public officials, answer specific questions about impending federal legislation and policies, name foreign leaders, and answer questions about domestic and foreign affairs (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007). Other political knowledge and skills
are arguably of far greater relevance to many low-income youth of color, say, living in urban neighborhoods. My eighth grade students, for example, eloquently made the case that I—a white, middle class woman living in a middle class Boston neighborhood—would have a hard time understanding and negotiating the politics of “the ‘hood” in which they lived. I certainly would have flunked a test that asked me to identify members of the locally-relevant power structure: who controlled what block; which housing projects I could safely enter as a resident of another project; or which social workers, police officers, and housing authority representatives could be trusted and who were to be avoided (see, e.g., Ayers & Ford, 1996).

Even independent of a race-, class-, or context-based analysis of what kinds of political knowledge matter, there is demonstrably little agreement between those who design tests of students and those who design adult surveys what kinds of civic knowledge “count.” As Richard Niemi and Mitchell Sanders point out, “NAEP quizzes students almost exclusively about political structures and institutions, whereas adult ‘tests’ focus mostly on contemporary politics (personalities and policies)…raising questions about the meaningfulness of the items on which students are tested.” They go on to conclude that “the kind of information routinely sought from students is simply not essential for them to have as adults” (Niemi & Sanders, 2004, pp. 327, 337). In this spirit, one might ask how much it matters that my students didn’t know what July 4 celebrates; does it actually make them worse citizens not to know the meaning of Independence Day?

Even if these measures of civic knowledge for adults or children are incomplete, skewed, capricious, and/or poorly justified, I nonetheless suggest that both the sheer lack of knowledge as well as the consistency of the differences matter and should be troubling. Traditionally-measured civic knowledge is clearly and directly correlated with higher levels of political
participation, expression of democratic values including toleration, stable political attitudes, and adoption of “enlightened self-interest” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001). One’s capacity for civic empowerment is simply greater if one knows both about political structures and institutions and about contemporary politics than if one doesn’t. It is easy to imagine how people who don’t know who their elected representatives are, what the White House’s position is on various high-profile policy disputes, or how a bill becomes a law—or even what July 4 stands for—may find it harder to influence civic life than those who do (Hart & Atkins, 2002). This isn’t to say that these domains of knowledge are all that matter. But it would be hard to claim that they are irrelevant to the distribution of power in society. Thus, demographically-predictable patterns in the distribution of these domains of knowledge presage a disturbing civic empowerment gap.

People who are poor and non-white are also demonstrably less likely to develop traditional civic skills via education, the workplace, or participation in voluntary associations—three of the primary venues in which individuals have the opportunity to develop and practice communication, analysis, organization, and leadership skills relevant to civic and political participation. This is because they are likely to leave school sooner and be less educated, to have attended poorer quality schools, to have lower-status jobs, and to participate in voluntary associations less. Poor Protestants and African Americans partially make up for this gap by developing civic skills within their churches. But Latinos and other poor Catholics and non-church-going poor and minority individuals suffer the civic skill gap acutely (Verba, et al., 1995, p. Ch. 11). Again, I contended almost daily with this gap during my eight years as an urban middle school teacher. My eighth grade students, for example, frequently struggled to negotiate conflicts without getting into fights; they interacted ineffectually with authority figures and get
themselves into trouble despite their best intentions not to; and in at least one case a few years ago (in 2006), they relied on me to teach them how to use a phone book to call up career exemplars to shadow for career day because they had never seen or used a telephone book before. Similarly, I frequently watched in frustration (and assisted when I could) as deeply committed and caring parents failed to advocate effectively for their child in meetings because they didn’t have the communication skills (for a compelling account of this problem, see Lareau, 2000, 2003). This gap in civic knowledge and skills thus impacts not just individuals’ interactions with government officials or politicians but their everyday experiences at school and in the community as well.

**Behavior/Participation.** There has been a fair amount of media coverage of the voting gap based on race, ethnicity, income, and education level. In the presidential election of 2004, for example, Hispanic and Asian voting-age citizens voted at a rate only two-thirds that of eligible whites (approximately 45 versus 67 percent, respectively) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, p. Table 4a), while people living in families with incomes under $15,000 voted at barely half the rate of those living in families with incomes over $75,000 (45 versus 80 percent, respectively) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, p. Table 9). Naturalized citizens, too, vote at significantly lower rates than native born citizens – 54 versus 65 percent in the 2004 presidential election – which is an important cause for concern since twenty percent of the U.S. population is first- or second-generation immigrant (see also DeSipio, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, p. Table 13).

Despite widespread excitement about Barack Obama’s candidacy and media coverage suggesting huge increases in youth and minority turn-out, 2008 presidential election voting rates almost exactly replicated the disparities seen in 2004. While 65 to 66 percent of white and black voting-age citizens voted in the 2008 presidential election, for example, barely half of Hispanics
or other (Asian, Native American, other) voting-age citizens did so (McDonald, 2009). The voting gap between native born and naturalized citizens in 2008 also exactly replicated the results in 2004 (65 versus 54 percent). Similarly, in both 2004 and 2008, voting rates of citizens with less than a high school diploma stubbornly persisted at less than 40 percent, compared with a little over half of citizens’ with a high school diploma choosing to cast their ballot, participation by almost three-quarters of citizens who had attended college, and voting rates of over 80 percent of those with post-graduate education (McDonald, 2009). And finally, voting disparities by income remained gigantic: half of those with an income under $15,000 voted, versus 79 percent of those with an income over $100,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Again, it is worth remembering that these voting rate disparities persisted despite the extreme competitiveness of the Democratic primary election and the historic nature of the 2008 presidential campaign.

Significant behavior disparities also persist beyond voting. Reliable analyses of political participation, as measured by membership in political parties, campaign donations, campaign volunteering, participation in protests, contacting an elected official, and so forth, show vast disparities linked with class, education, and race. People who earn over $75,000 annually are politically active at up to six times the rate of people who earn under $15,000, whether measured by working for a campaign, serving on the board of an organization, or even such relatively low-cost actions as participating in protests or contacting officials (Verba, et al., 1995, pp. 190, Figure 197.192). Broader measures of civic participation—belonging to any group or organization, working on a community problem, volunteering, attending a community meeting, or even just wearing a campaign button or putting a political bumper sticker on one’s car—also seem to be highly unequally distributed by educational attainment. The 2008 Civic Health
Index, for example, found that 81 percent of young adults with no college experience were “not very engaged” civically according to these and similar measures, as compared to 41 percent of young adults with some college experience (National Conference on Citizenship, 2008).

Latinos, too, are far less involved in all of these activities than whites or blacks, and blacks are more likely to participate in “outsider” activities such as protests rather than “insider” activities such as campaign donations or direct contact with officials (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Verba, et al., 1995, p. Ch. 8; see also Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Hispanic young adults (ages 18-24) in particular have much lower rates of voter registration and community involvement than their white and black peers (Lopez, 2003; Lopez, et al., 2006, p. 20; Verba, et al., 1995).

It is important to note that the forecast is not entirely grim. Immigration reform efforts over the past three years, including rallies, marches, and protests surrounding support for the DREAM Act and opposition to the 2006 proposed congressional immigration bill, mobilized significant numbers of Hispanic and first- and second-generation immigrant youth and adults. Most likely as a result of these protests, more youth who were immigrants and children of immigrants reported participating in protests in 2006 than native-born youth (Lopez, et al., 2006). In addition, African American youth and to a lesser extent Asian-American youth ages 18-29 are in many ways more politically or civically engaged than their white counterparts as measured by the 2006 and 2008 Civic Health surveys (Lopez, et al., 2006; see also Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007; National Conference on Citizenship, 2008). This may indicate that the civic participation gap is actually lessening among youth, or at least emphasize that race and ethnicity contribute less than income and education to the civic empowerment gap. This is all
promising news, certainly, but the data are all too recent and context-specific to foster confidence about long-term reductions in the civic behavior gap.

Furthermore, even if the promising trends continue, the civic participation gap remains enormous in the United States as compared to other developed (and even many less-developed) democracies. There is a tendency in the U.S., I believe, to normalize the demographic differences in participation rates by explaining it away in the same way so many did with reference to the reading or math achievement gap a decade ago: “But of course poor people [or Hispanics, etc.] participate less. They don’t have the time or financial resources (or education, knowledge, …) to participate as wealthier people do.” This argument just doesn’t make sense when one considers, for example, the protests in Argentina a few years ago, when hundreds of thousands of poor and middle class Argentines alike took to the streets banging pots and pans and ended up forcing the resignations of their political leaders; they were actually following the example set by piqueteros (picketers) – unemployed workers who started a nationwide movement for social change in the 1990s and have sustained it for over a decade. If unemployed and uneducated citizens in Argentina can demonstrate such high levels of civic and political engagement, certainly poor people in the United States could do the same. Recent populist demonstrations and electoral involvement in Brazil and Venezuela, leading to the elections (and re-elections) of Lula and Hugo Chavez also suggest that the American civic participation gap is in no way inevitable. This is not to argue that socioeconomic differences in political participation are negligible: studies of European, Canadian, and Central American voter turn-out rates in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate that those democracies have an average 10-12 percentage point difference in voter turn-out between the most- and least-educated citizens—but this is far eclipsed by the United States’ 35 percent gap (Lijphart, 1997, p. 3; Powell Jr., 1986)
Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the participation gap has not always been a major feature even of American civic and political life (see Montgomery, 1993). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrant incorporation groups, trade unions, fraternal organizations, and political parties regularly mobilized poor, working-class, non-white, and newly immigrant Americans (Freeman, 2002; Montgomery, 2001, p. 1268ff; Sachar, 1993, pp. 175-176; Skocpol, 1999), and participation in civic organizations especially was extremely widespread (Skocpol, Ganz, & Munson, 2000).

**Attitudes.** People’s decisions to participate in civic life are at least partly determined by their civic attitudes: whether they believe that individuals can influence government (political efficacy), that they themselves can influence government (individual efficacy), that one has a duty to participate (civic duty), and/or that one is part of a civic community (civic identity). All of these pro-civic attitudes are disproportionately correlated with both race/ethnicity and class.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady show, for example, that individuals’ political efficacy increases in direct relationship to their income, with the poorest individuals expressing attitudes almost a full standard deviation lower than the wealthiest; it is also significantly correlated with race/ethnicity, with Latinos at the bottom, African Americans in the middle, and white respondents at the top (Verba, et al., 1995, p. Table 12.14). Similarly, a study specifically of young Latinos, African Americans, and whites (ages 15 to 25) shows equivalent significant individual efficacy differences in their confidence that “I can make a difference in solving the problems of my community” (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003; Lake Snell Perry & Associates & The Tarrance Group, 2002).³ These efficacy disparities are further

---
³ There is, however, evidence elsewhere that this gap may be neither so great nor so predictable as I claim. In contrast to the data presented above, for example, one survey found that an equal percentage of Latinos, whites, and African Americans (about 60 percent) agreed with the statement that “political leaders do not care much what people like me think”; similarly, half of whites and African Americans (but 60 percent of Latinos) agreed that they couldn’t
reflected in individuals’ competing interpretations of controversial political events. In response to the 2000 presidential election voting irregularities in Florida, for example, 17 percent of African American survey respondents interpreted the “problems with the ballots or voting machines” as being “a deliberate attempt to reduce the political power of minorities.” Barely one to three percent of white, Asian, and Hispanic survey respondents felt the same way (Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, & Harvard University, 2001, p. 24). More recently, a *Newsweek* poll following Hurricane Katrina showed that twice as many African Americans versus white Americans (65 versus 31 percent) thought the government responded slowly to the disaster because most of the affected people were African-American (Huddy & Feldman, 2006).

It may be that President Obama’s election and administration will narrow the efficacy gap, although I would be stunned if it eliminated it—if for no other reason than that the efficacy gap is descriptively accurate and hence utterly rational. White, middle class or wealthy, college-educated, and native English-speaking citizens living in relatively high social capital neighborhoods undeniably *do* have greater opportunities to and likelihood of influencing government or public policy than do non-white, educationally underserved, economically disadvantaged, often limited English proficient youth and adults living in neighborhoods with limited social and political capital (Bartels, 2008; Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). Although unjust, inegalitarian, and profoundly antidemocratic, this fact remains equally true even in the “age of Obama.” The problem, however, is that the efficacy gap may be viciously self-reinforcing, if

understand politics and government because they are too complicated. These figures suggest that lack of political efficacy is equally distributed across the board. A 1996 poll entitled “The State of Disunion: Survey of American Political Culture” also concluded that African Americans and whites are equally committed to the American dream, civic minded, supportive of the political system, pessimistic (or optimistic) about American institutions, and disaffected from American government and leaders; data from the international IEA study of ninth graders are similarly ambiguous. (See Washington Post et al. 2000: 10; Hunter and Bowman 1996; Baldi et al. 2001: .)
those who correctly view themselves as more able to make a difference get ever more involved while those who question their efficacy withdraw from public civic engagement.

Two other attitudinal components seem to contribute significantly to the civic empowerment gap: namely, individuals’ senses of civic identity and civic duty. Michael Dawson has demonstrated in considerable quantitative and qualitative detail the ways in which African Americans’ senses of civic membership and responsibility are distinct from non-African Americans’ in being focused on the “linked fate” of African Americans as a group; these considerations become especially important to poor African Americans (Dawson, 1994, 2001). Immigrant citizens’ sense of civic identity is similarly ambiguous. Although their sense of patriotism tends to be as high or higher than native-born citizens, their sense of themselves as Americans is more tenuous. In interviews I conducted in April 2004 with first- and second-generation Arab-American students, parents, teachers, and community leaders in Dearborn, MI, for example, my interlocutors (most of whom were citizens) consistently referred to “Americans” as “they.” When questioned, one high school student responded as follows:

Interviewer: Three of you are American citizens, born in the United States. But you have consistently throughout the interview . . . used the term “Americans” not to refer to yourselves but to refer to others. . . . [Y]ou talked about Americans as other people. So I’m curious why.
Student: I see what you’re trying to get us to say -- like we were born here, like, why shouldn’t we consider ourselves as regular American people. But I think that we’re different because we have to fall back on our parents’ background because our parents -- that’s what they teach us. That’s what our culture is. Like our background from our old country and stuff like that.

This echoes other scholars’ findings about second-generation immigrants in New York City. These second-generation Americans “used the term American in two different ways. One was to describe themselves as American compared to the culture, values, and behaviors of their parents. . . . But they also used ‘American’ to refer to the native white Americans that they encountered at
school, the office, or in public places, but whom they knew far better from television and the movies. They saw those ‘Americans’ as part of a different world that would never include them because of their race/ethnicity. Many respondents sidestepped this ambivalent understanding of the meaning of being American by describing themselves as ‘New Yorkers’” (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, & Waters, 2002; see also Stepick & Stepick, 2002). Beth Rubin and Thea Abu El-Haj have documented similarly ambivalent attitudes and experiences of civic “disjuncture” among poor, non-white, and immigrant youth (Abu El-Haj, 2008; Rubin, 2007).

Why do these data matter? Even if they do demonstrate, as I claim, a significant civic empowerment gap along all four dimensions of civic engagement (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors) between non-white, immigrant, and especially low-income citizens, on the one hand, and white, native-born, and especially middle- and high-income citizens, on the other, why should we care? I suggest that anyone who believes in the value of democratic governance should recognize how crucial it is to narrow the gap. Individuals’ civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes profoundly influence their civic and political behavior, and civic and political engagement, concomitantly, are central to the strength, stability and legitimacy of democracy. We saw above that civic knowledge is clearly and directly correlated with higher levels of political participation, expression of democratic values, stable political attitudes, and adoption of “enlightened self-interest” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001). Individuals’ mastery of civic skills is also tied to both their likelihood of civic participation and especially their effectiveness. “[T]hose who possess civic skills, the set of specific competencies germane to citizen political activity, are more likely to feel confident about exercising those skills in politics and to be effective—or, to use the economist’s term, productive—when they do” (Verba, et al., 1995, p. 305).
Participation, of course, matters because democratic governance relies on participatory citizens. The legitimacy, stability, and quality of democratic regimes are all directly dependent on the robust participation of a representative and large cross-section of citizens. Governments that appear to (and/or do) serve the interests of only a narrow segment of the population cease to be viewed as democratic, and cease to inspire the loyalty and commitment of those who feel excluded or ignored. This poses a direct threat to both their legitimacy and stability. Political violence by citizens is also tightly linked to feelings of disaffection and alienation (Kinder, 1998, pp. 831-832). Furthermore, democratic deliberations and decisions are likely to be of lower quality if people representing only a fairly narrow range of experiences, interests, and backgrounds are involved. Part of the beauty of democracy, when it functions effectively and inclusively, is its ability to create aggregate wisdom and good judgment from individual citizens’ necessarily limited knowledge, skills, and viewpoints. To exclude citizens from this process is to diminish the wisdom that the collectivity may create.

Attitudes matter because they constitute the motivational preconditions for civic engagement. Whether one knows nothing about current events or has a Ph.D. in political science, whether one is a shy follower or a brilliant orator and leader, if one doesn’t believe that civic and political participation in general can make a difference or that one’s own participation matters, then one is not going to participate. Political efficacy is crucial for motivating civic and political engagement. Attitudes of civic duty or obligation are also important motivators; the effect of citizen duty “is not enormous, but it is unmistakable: citizens with a strong sense of civic duty are about 6 percentage points more likely to turn out to vote in recent presidential elections than are their otherwise comparable counterparts who do not recognize voting as an obligation of citizenship” (Kinder, 1998, p. 832). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady also found that
civic obligation was the most important attitudinal predictor for civic activism (Verba, et al., 1995, p. Ch. 4). And finally, identity seems to figure importantly in influencing the character and quality of civic engagement, as political psychologists, philosophers, and others have shown (Damon, 2001, pp. 127, 135; Feinberg, 1998, p. 47). 4

Above all else, the gaps in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and participation matter because they profoundly diminish the democratic character and quality of the United States.

Generations of Americans have worked to equalize citizen voice across lines of income, race, and gender. Today, however, the voices of American citizens are raised and heard unequally. 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 less affluent. The voices of citizens with lower or moderate incomes are lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow. (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005, p. 1)

Not all of these unequal levels of influence can be attributed to differences in individual levels of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or participation, of course. There are powerful institutional, political, and other factors at work that would likely contribute to the persistence of inegalitarian and undemocratic outcomes even if the gaps explored above were eliminated. The exploding cost of political campaigns and politicians’ corresponding dependence upon and attention to wealthy donors provide only one obvious example of the multiple barriers to equal civic empowerment. But it is clear that the civic empowerment gap among individuals is a significant and documentable threat to democratic ideals and practice. I suggest that it is important for both the civic and political empowerment of poor, minority, and immigrant individuals, and for the health of the polity as a whole, that we develop means for closing the gap.

4 Melissa Williams powerfully challenges this emphasis on identity, arguing instead in favor of replacing “citizenship-as-identity” with a model of “citizenship as membership in a community of shared fate.” But even her model of “shared fate” requires that students see themselves and their future as being “enmeshed in relationships” with others. (Williams, 2003)
2. *DE FACTO SEGREGATED MINORITY SCHOOLS*

One important battleground for attacking the civic empowerment gap is the network of mostly urban schools that serve a *de facto* segregated, poor and minority student population. Fully one-third of black and Latino students in the United States, and over half of the black students in the Northeast, attend schools that have a 90-100 percent minority student population (Orfield, 2001: Tables 14 and 18; see also Orfield, Eaton, & Desegregation, 1996; Orfield & Lee, 2006). The overwhelming majority of these schools are in urban areas, often central cities. Over half of all schools in the hundred largest school districts were 81-100% non-white in 2005-2006, and one-fifth of these districts had a non-white student population above 90 percent (Garofano & Sable, 2008, pp. Table A-8). In practice, therefore, most schools in these districts had a virtually 100 percent minority population. Furthermore, in many of these districts, the “minority” group is actually a single race or ethnicity: Detroit, Baltimore, Atlanta, Memphis, and Washington, D.C. have over 80 percent black student enrollment; Brownsville (TX), Santa Ana (CA), San Antonio, El Paso, and of course Puerto Rico are more than 80 percent Latino; and Los Angeles is almost three-quarters Latino while San Francisco is more than half Asian (Garofano & Sable, 2008, pp. Table A-9). The students in these schools and districts are also generally poor. Half of all students in the 100 largest school districts are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and in 21 of these districts, which together serve close to four million students, more than seven out of every ten students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (Garofano & Sable, 2008, pp. Table A-9 and A-1). Many of these students thus face “double segregation” by both race/ethnicity and class (Orfield & Lee, 2007, p. 5).

The number of these schools serving poor, urban, *de facto* segregated ethnically or racially minority schools is likely to increase in upcoming decades. Gary Orfield and his
colleagues have exhaustively documented that schools and school districts in the United States are resegregating, not desegregating (Orfield, 2001; Orfield, et al., 1996; Orfield & Lee, 2007). This trend will likely accelerate thanks to the Supreme Court’s decision in Parents Involved v. Seattle (“Parents Involved in Community Schools,” 2007) invalidating race-conscious school assignment policies in Seattle and Louisville, Kentucky, which were designed to promote integrated schools. Furthermore, public pressure for integrated schools has diminished considerably. In a 1998 survey, for example, African American survey respondents joined white respondents in ranking racial diversity second from the bottom of their preferred characteristics for a good school (Public Agenda Foundation, 1998); this stands in stark contrast at least to blacks’ attitudes in the 1970s and 1980s, when integration was a high priority not only in principle but also in practice. Integration is viewed by many as “yesterday’s struggle” (Loury, 1997), with greater importance being placed on students’ obtaining an “equal opportunity to learn” (Ladson-Billings, 2004) whether in integrated or segregated settings (Horsford & McKenzie, 2008; Shujaa, 1996; Walker & Archung, 2003). African American and Latino political leaders have similarly shifted their focus from integration to equality of opportunity. Leaders of the NAACP, for instance, have held “a formal debate over the virtues of nonsegregated versus black-run schools for black students” (Patterson, 2001, p. 192) and released statements minimizing desegregation concerns (although they did file an amicus brief in support of Seattle’s and Louisville’s school integration policies). Black mayors in Seattle, Denver, St. Louis, and Cleveland have also led efforts to dismantle desegregation practices (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, pp. 48-49; see also Massey & Denton, 1993), while a leader of La Raza recently asserted, “Having 100% of one ethnicity is not a bad thing” (Bracey, 2009, p. 691). As Justice Clarence Thomas wrote in his concurring opinion in the Seattle and Louisville
cases, rejecting the constitutionality of school integration policies, “it is far from apparent that coerced racial mixing has any educational benefits, much less that integration is necessary to black achievement” ("Parents Involved in Community Schools," 2007, p. 15). Some prominent scholars have also questioned the desirability of school integration (see, e.g. Bell, 2004, 1980); in Gloria Ladson-Billings’ words, “it would be better to have a ‘real Plessy’ than to continue with a ‘fake Brown’” (Ladson-Billings, 2009). With scholarly, public, and Supreme Court opinions like this, segregated schools will clearly remain a fact of twenty-first century American life.

These schools matter for two other reasons beyond their mere prevalence and staying power. First, Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh have documented a clear civic opportunity gap between these schools and those that serve wealthier and/or whiter students:

[A] student’s race and academic track, and a school’s average socioeconomic status (SES) determines the availability of the school-based civic learning opportunities that promote voting and broader forms of civic engagement. High school students attending higher SES schools, those who are college-bound, and white students get more of these opportunities than low-income students, those not heading to college, and students of color. (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, p. 3)

In practice, this means that students in average versus high SES classes are half as likely to report studying how laws are made, barely half as likely to report participating in service activities, and 30 percent less likely to report having experiences with debates or panel discussions in their social studies classes (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, p. 16). Since these figures derive from a study only of “average” versus high SES classes, they most likely understate the degree of the disparity between truly impoverished schools and students and those that serve a more privileged student body. But Kahne and Middaugh certainly provide more than enough evidence to demonstrate that poor and non-white students are receiving demonstrably less and worse civic education than middle class and wealthy, white students, and that school-level differences are partly to blame.
Second, the civic learning opportunity gap suffered by poor and non-white students especially attending *de facto* segregated urban schools compounds the civic opportunity gaps they face outside of school. Considerable evidence demonstrates that people living in areas of concentrated poverty are significantly less likely to be engaged civically, and to have opportunities for such civic engagement, than those living in more mixed or affluent communities (Alex-Assensoh, 1997; Cohen & Dawson, 1993; Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004). Youth in particular face significant impediments in developing “civic identities” (Atkins & Hart, 2003) or acquiring civic knowledge and skills (Hart & Atkins, 2002) when they grow up in high-poverty urban communities. Since youth who are being educated in *de facto* segregated, non-white, poor urban schools are also almost surely living in *de facto* segregated, poor urban neighborhoods, this means that students attending these schools are facing a civic opportunity gap in their neighborhoods as well as in their schools.

One can conclude, then, that a large number of poor, ethnically and/or racially segregated public schools exist; they educate a substantial percentage of ethnic and racial minority students in the United States; if anything their numbers are likely to increase rather than decrease over the coming years, especially as the minority population in the United States also grows (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2008); and they provide significantly fewer and lower-quality civic learning opportunities than schools that serve a whiter and wealthier student population. If we care about political stability, democratic legitimacy, and civic equality then we must care about what gets taught and learned in these schools — not just for the students’ sakes but for our own, as well. This is consistent with condemning the phenomenon of *de facto* segregated schooling as harmful to the students who attend these schools, to the students who don’t attend these schools (and who hence are often educated in relatively segregated settings themselves), and to the nation as a
whole. There is substantial evidence that the best education for students in a liberal democratic society requires schools that are integrated—integrated ethnically and racially, but also by class, religion, immigration status, and other aspects of family background (American Educational Research Association, 2006; Blum, 2002; Brighouse, 2000; Callan, 1997; Feinberg, 1998; but see Foster, 1997 for an important competing view.; Gutmann, 1987, 1995; Levinson, 1999; Levinson & Levinson, 2003; Macedo, 1990; Orfield & Lee, 2007; Parents Involved in Community Schools," 2007 [Stevens., J, dissenting]; Reich, 2002). But these arguments are irrelevant as regards the current existence and likely future expansion of de facto segregated minority schools. These schools pose challenges to American democratic politics today, and the students who attend them hence merit attention and services now, including an appropriate civic education.

3. **WHAT WE CAN DO**

Thus far, I have established two things. First, there is a profound civic empowerment gap in the United States that disproportionately mutes the voices of non-white, foreign-born, and especially low-income citizens and amplifies the voices of white, native-born, and especially wealthy citizens. Second, many of these poor, minority citizens attend de facto segregated schools when young. Given the high percentage of young people at the lower end of the gap who attend these schools, these schools’ documented contributions to the civic learning opportunity gap, and the obstacles to civic empowerment often posed by segregated, economically impoverished settings, we should pay special attention to how civic educational practices in these schools in particular might be reformed in order to combat the civic empowerment gap. This is not to say that school reform will be sufficient. Numerous changes
need to be made across multiple sectors of society: consistent, same-day voter registration laws; early and expanded voting opportunities; nonpartisan redistricting boards to increase the number of contested elections; political and economic policies that reduce as opposed to increase economic inequality; increased investment in low-income communities; massive reform of the school-to-prison pipeline in poor and minority communities; improved and expanded social service provision; greater challenges to institutional racism; immigration reform; the list could go on indefinitely. (See Macedo & et. al., 2005 for a careful examination of the ways in which electoral, municipal, and voluntary sector policies and practices often impede the quantity, quality, and equality of civic engagement in the United States.) But schools should not be left out of the picture, as they also have an important role to play. My purpose in the rest of this chapter is therefore to provide some constructive suggestions for how de facto segregated schools in particular can help reduce the civic empowerment gap, and hence help promote true civic and political equality for all Americans.

I recommend five essential reforms specifically for de facto segregated, poor and minority, urban public schools:

1. **Commit to improving urban schools and reducing the drop-out rate**, which reaches nearly fifty percent in some urban districts. Calls for urban school reform may seem simultaneously banal and absurdly idealistic: who doesn’t support the massive overhaul and improvement of urban schools in the United States in the early twenty-first century, and who has robust confidence in such an overhaul’s bearing significant fruit? Yet it is a need that nonetheless bears repeating. In emphasizing the vastly unequal distribution of power along demographic lines that should be politically irrelevant (for example, one’s level of wealth should not be correlated with one’s level of political power in a democracy), the civic empowerment gap
reminds us that our society is both inegalitarian and anti-democratic in some fundamental ways. The abysmal quality of many urban schools as compared to their wealthier, suburban counterparts contributes significantly to this inequality. If urban schools were better, and if more students stayed in higher-quality schools and graduated, then the demographic divide in this country would narrow, and the civic empowerment gap would narrow along with it.

Furthermore, higher quality urban education resulting in higher educational attainment among students who attended those schools would likely have a direct effect on these students’ civic empowerment, since education is the single most highly-correlated variable with civic knowledge, civic skills, democratic civic attitudes, and active civic engagement (Galston, 2003; Nie, et al., 1996).

2. **Restore civic education to the curriculum.** The precipitous decline in the number, range, and frequency of civics courses offered in US elementary and high schools must to be reversed. There is ample evidence that civic education improves civic outcomes (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003; Damon, 2001; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta, Hahn, & Amadeo, 2001), but resources devoted to it have dropped markedly over the past thirty or forty years—especially in schools serving minority students. In the 1960s, students regularly took as many as three civics courses in high school, including civics, democracy, and government; now students tend to take only one—government—and that only in the twelfth grade (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003, p. 14; Niemi & Junn, 1998), by which point many poor and minority students have, sadly, already dropped out. In the year 2006 alone, for example, about *nine percent* of students living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent dropped out of high school; this is actually an improvement from 2004, when well
over 10 percent of students in this income bracket dropped out. Poor students are four-and-a-half times more likely than their peers from families in the top 20 percent of the income distribution to decide to drop out of high school (Laird, Kienzl, DeBell, & Chapman, 2007, p. 4 and Figure 1). Likewise, barely 70 percent of Hispanic students youth overall, and only 58 percent of immigrant Hispanic youth, have graduated from high school by age 24, in comparison with 85 percent of blacks, 93 percent of whites, and 96 percent of Asians (Laird, et al., 2007, p. Table 9).

If civic education is offered to students only in twelfth grade, therefore, then in effect it is disproportionately provided to wealthier, whiter, and native-born citizens.

Furthermore, it is absurd to think that by offering civic education only a few times at most over the course of a child’s education, we will reliably enable and encourage students to become active, engaged citizens. There is a reason that we require students to take English and math every semester of every year of elementary and secondary school. We want students to master the content and skills of reading, writing, and doing mathematics. We recognize that true mastery takes time and practice. Hence we expect students to engage in on-going, consistently reinforced learning and coaching with regard to these essential disciplines and practices. If we want students to become masterful citizens, then the same expectations should apply. If we want to narrow the civic empowerment gap, especially by increasing poor, minority, and immigrant students’ civic knowledge and skills, then civic education must begin in elementary schools and be a regular part of education K-12 (and beyond).

3. Reform history education in order to help students construct empowering civic narratives that simultaneously cohere with their lived experiences and impel them to civic and political action. When we think about how to eliminate the civic empowerment gap, we need to take seriously what students bring with them into the classroom from “outside”: from their lived
experience, from the stories and messages they hear from family members, friends, and neighbors, from various media sources, and so forth. Students aren’t empty vessels waiting to be filled with appropriate civic attitudes and knowledge; rather, they come into the classroom having already at least partially constructed their own understandings of their civic identity, of their membership in or exclusion from the polity, and even of history’s significance and meaning for their own lives. (See Barton, 1995; Barton & Levstik, 2004 for further evidence of this attitude and approach.; Epstein, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2009; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001)

When teachers and schools attempt to address the civic empowerment gap, therefore, they need to engage with students’ constructions of history, civic membership, political legitimacy, and power relations. They need to recognize that students construct meaning independent of—and therefore often in conflict with—the meanings specified by curricula, textbooks, teachers, or other educational “authorities”\(^5\) (Haste, 2004; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta, et al., 2007). Educators must therefore overtly and intentionally engage with students’ beliefs, attitudes, and narrative schema—which means adjusting instruction from school to school, class to class, and student to student. At the same time, educators must maintain a vision of desirable civic outcomes (including desirable civic and political knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors) that goes beyond what students enter with. Engagement with students’ constructed narratives, in other words, does not mean straightforwardly validating them, since the civic empowerment gap cannot be solved simply by reinforcing students’ beliefs, attitudes, and differences. Rather, educators need to help students to construct more empowering

\(^5\) This is true not only of students, of course; adults, too, ignore or reject depersonalized authorities – books, television programs, in-school curricula, teachers who seem to be mere transmission agents for received wisdom – in favor of direct experience (either personal experience, stories told by family members, or direct interaction with historical artifacts in museums or historical sites) (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998).
civic narratives: ones that are truthful but not self-defeating, that incorporate individuals’ and communities’ lived experiences while simultaneously justifying and reinforcing a sense of personal and political efficacy, of civic membership, and of civic duty.

This approach requires, however, a massive change in how and why history is taught in this country, and especially in most urban schools. History education would have to be co-constructed with students, as opposed to delivered as a set of truths to be memorized (and then forgotten). Textbooks would need to be used “only [as] reference works,” as Diane Ravitch correctly recommends (Ravitch, 2003, p. 156), rather than as primary let alone sole sources of knowledge and historical understanding. The telling of “the American story” (Albert Shanker Institute, 2003) as a “moderately triumphalist” one (Avery & Simmons, 2000; see also Damon, 2001; Gibbon, 2002; Ravitch, 2003; Schlesinger Jr., 1993; Stotsky, 2004) highlighting the inevitability of historical progress toward grand American ideals would need to be abandoned, or at least treated as only one possible interpretation among many. There would also need to be a shift away from teaching history as a story of individual, larger-than-life heroes to teaching history as a story of collective action by ordinary people (Levinson, forthcoming). Even the most profound civic changes, led by the greatest and most extraordinary of human beings, are usually brought about by the collective work of “ordinary” people working together: of “men and women obscure in their labour,” as Obama put it in his Inaugural Address (Obama, 2009).

Although I do not have space to justify this claim here, I would suggest that one possible model might be found in a civic counternarrative fostered by many historically segregated African American institutions, including de jure segregated schools pre-\textit{Brown v. Board of Education}, Freedom Schools from the 1960s through today, historically black colleges and universities, black churches, and some contemporary \textit{de facto} segregated schools that serve
African American students. These institutions have often taught a civically empowering historical counternarrative centered on themes of struggle, obligation, and opportunity. With some imagination and flexibility, teachers and students in other settings can expand upon and incorporate these historical narratives in ways that promote their own civic and political engagement.

Although part of the work of helping students construct empowering civic narratives has to be done in a historical context, recognizing how students interpret the past in relationship to their possible roles in the present, other work needs to be done in a contemporary context, changing students’ civic and political present by involving them in guided experiential civic learning and other civically empowering pedagogies. Thus, I suggest that we need to:

4. **Provide students frequent opportunities to engage in empowering civic practices:** discussion of meaningful, contemporary, and controversial issues; simulations, role plays, and mock trials; classroom and school elections; group collaboration on problems that address community concerns and attitudes in a way that enables students to demonstrate their local knowledge and expertise; and participation in guided experiential civic learning in which they actually “do” civics, not just read about it, including via public policy involvement, youth organizing, participatory action research, or other mechanisms. Civic education needs to become a living part of the school, and it must enable students regularly to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities. In other words, civic education at its heart must be about active participation, not passive observation. In order to increase students’ political and personal efficacy, in particular, and to change students’ minds about the value of civic and political engagement more generally, we need to find ways of giving them positive, real-world, civic and political experiences.
What would this look like in practice? Guided experiential civic learning can take a huge variety of forms, including activities within classrooms and schools as well as those beyond school walls. Students may serve on the school site council, governing board, or diversity committee. They may invite local community leaders to come visit the school and then interview them in small cooperative groups about their accomplishments, the challenges they face, and what motivates them to keep on working for what they believe in. After conducting a “constituent survey” of their peers, students may work together as a class to develop and implement a strategy to improve an aspect of their school. Students may debate current events and then write a letter expressing their opinions to an elected representative or government official. They can participate in a mock trial, conduct a voter registration drive in the school parking lot or before PTA meetings, or create a webquest about a policy issue that matters to them. An ambitious teacher may encourage students to research a public policy issue and then made a presentation to local officials, or attend a city council meeting as advocates for their position. Even more ambitiously, a teacher may serve as a facilitator for participatory youth action research projects, in which youth research and act upon problems that they themselves identify and define. Closer to home, they can elect class officers who will collaborate with the teacher on planning field trips and other special activities; or, they may as a class deliberate about and vote on issues including due dates for major projects, the order in which to read class novels, or the consequences for minor disciplinary infractions. Numerous examples, analyses, and evaluations of such approaches are available in the research literature (e.g., Apple & Beane, 2007; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Hess, 2009; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Noguera, Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2006; Schultz, 2008; Weis & Fine, 2000; Westheimer & Kahne, 2002) and from practitioners
and civic education organizations (see www.campaignforthecivicmissionofschools.org for information about and links to over 100 well-vetted curricula, programs, and organizations).

It’s important to note that although these examples range from very simple and straightforward to quite ambitious, they all intentionally build on collective and policy-oriented action. None represent such piecemeal approaches as donating cans to a homeless shelter or spending a morning visiting elderly people in a nursing home. Although both of these activities are noble and may be worthwhile, they don’t foster the kind of attention to systemic issues that is important. Nor do they help students recognize the power of their community and of joining together to effect change. Emphasis on communal action is especially important when teaching poor, historically disenfranchised youth who tend to live in poor, historically disenfranchised communities, since collective action is one of the most effective ways to reduce (even if not entirely eliminate) their power differential (Alinsky, 1971).

Research uniformly supports the efficacy of these kinds of active civic learning approaches (e.g. Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, & Nikolova, 2002; Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003; Hahn, 1998; Hess, 2009; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Kirshner, 2007; Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedy, 2007; Torney-Purta, et al., 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2002). Done well, guided experiential civic education helps students learn and apply a broad range of civic knowledge, develop a number of civic skills, embrace positive civic attitudes, and practice important civic behaviors. It promotes an active, explicitly political conception of citizenship. It can help students make contacts with adults and role models in the community, as well as help the participating organizations and institutions themselves. Guided experiential civic education can motivate students to become civically engaged in the future by contributing to their sense of empowerment and agency, connecting them to adults and peers
who model civically engaged behavior, and enabling them to use their knowledge and skills to achieve concrete results. Guided experiential civic learning may also reinforce (or generate) adults’ sense of connection to and responsibility and respect for the younger generation, including toward children and young adults who live and are being educated in communities very different from those adults’ own. These are all extremely important civic outcomes.

5. Finally, we need to provide powerful civic learning and engagement opportunities for urban teachers so they can develop these domains of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of participation themselves. Teachers in de facto segregated, poor urban schools are often as civically disempowered as their students. Urban teachers work in institutions that are often incredibly bureaucratic, discourage and even sometimes punish autonomous decision-making, foster a culture of compliance rather than collaboration, that are chronically underfunded, and are buffeted by political and partisan swings in ways that tend to make long-term institutional improvement unlikely if not impossible. These are not the conditions for building civic skills or civic efficacy among adults, let alone youth. Civic education reform to combat the civic empowerment gap is necessary not just for students, therefore, but for teachers as well.

As schools put these reforms into place, they will provide students and teachers with a set of powerful civic experiences that are likely to increase their sense of personal and political efficacy and trust, and hence to inspire their acquisition of civic knowledge and skills as well as continued productive participation. In doing so, schools will also help strengthen local communities, both via the direct work that students accomplish and by building a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults. Reducing the civic achievement gap also strengthens democracy. It broadens government’s representativeness, increases its responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities, and thereby also reinforces its political legitimacy in the eyes of
historically disenfranchised community members. It strengthens schools, as students turn their attention to solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out. And finally, it promotes civic and political equality and fairness – ideals that are central to our American democracy. These are goals all schools can and should embrace.
Bibliography


Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle School District No. 1, et. al. (05-908) and Meredith, Crystal (next friend for McDonald, Joshua) v. Jefferson County Bd. of Education, et al. (05-915), 551 1 (Supreme Court 2007).


