

Facing History's Approach to Civic Education



Civic education can't be another add-on in a curriculum already crowded with mandates. By recognizing civic learning opportunities throughout the life of the school, Facing History's work supports the most central goal of American public education: preparing students for life in a democracy.

At Facing History & Ourselves, we believe that a good citizen possesses

- tolerance, empathy, and respect for human dignity;
- the skills to seek truth and communicate across difference;
- a capacity for ethical reflection;
- a sense of the common good;
- a habit of engagement; and
- a belief that they can make a difference and that each person's choices matter.

Our approach to educating students towards this civic identity is organized around five core insights and practices that integrate civic education, social-emotional learning, academic rigor, and attention to equity:

1 Civic education begins in learner-centered classrooms that value students' identities.

Facing History sees schools as a microcosm of democracy—a place where young people should learn that they belong, they have a stake, they are responsible, and their voices matter. We offer educators the training, tools, and resources to intentionally shape learning environments to embody equitable and democratic values, not just during a civics unit but every day of the school year. Our thematic focus on individual and group identity also centers and validates students' multiple identities and personal experiences, a practice that promotes both academic and civic learning. As recent work on "Lived Civics" explains, "concepts such as race, ethnicity, identity and lived experience must be central anchors of civic education because they shape how young people understand and engage with the state as well as the meanings they impose on any action civics project."¹

2 Civic education must confront bias and develop a sense of the common good.

It's essential for students to understand political parties, elections, and the courts—the systems and institutions that structure how citizens engage with government. But a healthy civic life also depends on how



A Proven Approach

Facing History significantly increases

- students' tolerance for others with different political views
- their capacity for civil discourse
- their belief that they can make a difference

Facing History students score higher than peers on a civic responsibility index. Facing History alumni are more civically involved than peers: more likely to vote, to participate in a civic or community group, and to discuss current events.



The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) named Facing History as one of only nine middle or high school SEL programs with a proven positive impact on students. Facing History is among the few that integrates the development of SEL competencies into the academic disciplines.

¹ Cohen, C., Kahne, J., & Marshall, J. With Anderson, V., Brower, M., and Knight, D. (2018). *Let's Go There: Race, Ethnicity, and a Lived Civics Approach to Civic Education*. GenForward at the University of Chicago. Chicago, IL.

citizens relate to each other. Liberal democracy can't thrive when citizens fail to see the humanity in those with whom they share a community and a country. We understand that empathy, tolerance, and perspective-taking are not only social-emotional skills but also key qualities of good citizenship, because they support students' ability to imagine and act on a notion of the common good.

3 Civic education must engage with the complexities of history.

History is essential to civic education because it illuminates key aspects of democracy that are missing when the functions of government are taught in the abstract. Our case studies demonstrate, first and foremost, the fragility of democracy itself and illustrate Judge William Hastie's notion that democracy is "a process, not a static condition... easily lost, but never fully won." They invite students to probe the gaps between the ideals in America's founding documents and the history and lived realities of injustice and systemic bias—an approach that has been shown to stimulate young people's civic engagement.

4 Civic education must introduce current events and controversial issues.

Current events introduce the issues, dilemmas, and controversies that shape civic life today and empower students to make informed and meaningful choices as citizens. The importance of current events to civic education has long been recognized, even as teachers have become increasingly reluctant to invite potentially polarizing topics into the classroom. Without opportunities to engage in difficult conversations across differences at school, students may never learn this essential civic skill—or they will take their cues from cable news and social media.

5 Civic education must nurture students' capacity for both reflection and action.

Increasingly, the world of civic education is oriented around action, an approach of learning-by-doing that leads students to develop civic knowledge and skills through projects and experiences in their own communities. At Facing History, we understand that effective "action civics" depends on the four other essential practices of civic education described above. These practices stimulate the authentic motivation which is essential to a meaningful civic action project. They also support equity, encouraging self-reflection on how students' own identities, experiences, and assumptions shape their civic efforts. Finally, the four practices help students develop the knowledge, agency, and capacity for ethical reflection that make any action civics project successful.



Professional Learning at Your Convenience

Check out our upcoming in-person and online workshops, courses, and webinars, and visit our On-Demand Learning Center, available 24/7, for on-demand webinars and classroom videos featuring teaching strategies in action, classroom conversations, and teacher tips.

99% of teachers surveyed would recommend Facing History professional development to their colleagues,



compared to the **29%** US average for teachers' satisfaction with PD, as reported by the Gates Foundation.

Through Facing History's case studies, students learn that history is the product of the choices of people in the past—and they discover the power of their own choice to participate today.



People make choices. Choices make history.

