

# Cultivating Civic Learning and Engagement in U.S. Schools

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Supporting Whole-Child Development: Survey Findings From a National Sample of U.S. Teachers

## Introduction

Schools serving students in K–12 play a significant role in preparing young people to participate constructively in higher education, employment, and community and civic life. American society’s expectations on how schools should prioritize these goals have varied over time and across communities (Center on Education Policy, 2020; Hatfield, 2023). Recent federal education policy has tended to emphasize schools’ contributions to economic outcomes rather than to their civic missions (Hamilton & Martinez, 2024), and parents tend to prioritize academic and workforce preparation over civic development (PDK International, 2016). However, in recent years, several prominent initiatives (e.g., Educating for American Democracy, 2021; Lee et al., 2021) have contributed to renewed interest in *civic learning*, which the CivXNow Coalition defines as “the lifelong process that makes people into active, responsible, and knowledgeable members of their communities—which range from their schools and towns or neighborhoods to the whole nation and even the world.”<sup>1</sup> This definition goes well beyond the content typically covered in social studies classes to encompass a broad set of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and actions, as shown in Exhibit 1. (For additional details and references to relevant literature, see Savage et al., 2023.)

This report is one in a series of three brief reports summarizing the results of a nationally representative survey of U.S. teachers. The full series is available at: [air.org/cama/resources/wholechildsurvey](https://air.org/cama/resources/wholechildsurvey).



<sup>1</sup> <https://civxnow.org/our-vision/what-is-civics/>

## Exhibit 1. Civic Learning Framework

- **Civic learning outcomes** can be categorized into the following domains: **civic knowledge and skills**, **civic dispositions**, and **civic behaviors/actions**. Here, we describe examples of outcomes within each outcome domain while acknowledging the potential need for further refinement.
  - **Civic knowledge and skills** include the following:
    - » Academic readiness in civics, history, and social studies more broadly (i.e., both the relevant factual knowledge and the knowledge and skills regarding how and where to engage in civic life)
    - » Civic reasoning abilities (e.g., critical thinking skills and information literacy)
    - » Skills in civic discourse (e.g., ability to engage in discussions even when disagreement occurs)
  - **Civic dispositions** include civic interest, civic (self- and collective-) efficacy, empathy/compassion, personal responsibility, social responsibility/civic duty, integrity, valuing democracy, and open-mindedness.
  - **Civic behaviors/actions** include prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping, sharing, donating to charities, or volunteering) and political participation (e.g., voting, running for political office, or contacting elected officials).
- **Civic learning opportunities** include the scope of conditions and resources that promote civic learning outcomes. Therefore, civic learning opportunities are not limited to the content and activities in K–12 social studies classrooms. A much more expansive set of policies, programs, and practices can influence civic learning outcomes, and we discuss several of these learning opportunities in this brief.

*Note.* Savage et al., 2023, p. 3; minor edits made for context.

Recent events, including international conflicts, political polarization, society’s efforts to counter systemic racism, ecological threats associated with climate change, and a proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in the media, make it clear that fostering the development of civic learning competencies among all young people is a crucial task for schools and other institutions. Moreover, the variety of outcomes shown in Exhibit 1, and the range of contexts in which they can be fostered, highlights the importance of considering how learning opportunities beyond the social studies classroom can contribute to students’ civic learning. The concept of “opportunity to learn,” or OTL, refers to the “conditions and resources provided to schools to enable students to succeed” (Marion, 2020, p. 2). Monitoring OTL is critical for identifying and addressing disparities in access to curriculum and resources that promote civic learning. The lack of systematic national data on civic learning outcomes and opportunities limits our ability to monitor the breadth and quality of civic education in the United States (Hamilton & Kaufman, 2022). Where data are available, such as through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, they point to a clear need for improved civic learning opportunities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Savage & Ikoma, 2023).

Although K–12 schools are not the only institutions responsible for promoting civic learning, their role in educating the majority of young people in the U.S. gives them an opportunity to exert a significant influence in this area (Aspen Institute, 2022; Darling-Hammond & McGuire, 2023). Further, the classroom teachers who provide instruction in these schools are key players in shaping students’ opportunities to engage in activities that will improve their civic learning (Domitrovich et al., 2022; Hamilton & Kaufman, 2022). Research demonstrates that teachers’ beliefs, instructional practices, and perceptions regarding the barriers and facilitators that they encounter in their daily work are important predictors of student learning (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). An understanding of how schools are helping students to develop civic competencies requires paying attention to the perspectives of the teachers who are responsible for designing and providing many of the learning opportunities schools offer.

In this brief report, we draw on nationally representative survey data gathered from K–12 public school teachers in the U.S. in November 2022. Building on previous reports regarding teachers’ perspectives (Diliberti et al., 2023; Hamilton et al., 2020), we explore a small number of topics related to teachers’ readiness, willingness, and opportunities to engage their students in civic learning. We asked teachers to share their perceptions regarding public schools’ responsibilities to promote various civic learning outcomes, their confidence in their ability to help students achieve those outcomes, the school- and classroom-level emphases on selected civic learning topics, perceived barriers to addressing civics learning topics, and standards related to civic learning (Exhibit 2). Survey experts reviewed the questions, which we revised in response to these reviews. The survey questions were administered to teachers in November 2022 via RAND’s American Teacher Panel (ATP).<sup>2</sup> We received 1,087 responses from K–12 teachers, which includes teachers of all grades and subjects.

## Exhibit 2. Survey Questions

**Q1. The following questions are intended to gauge your opinions about the purposes of public schools in the United States. How important is it that K–12 public schools in the United States help students develop the following skills, attitudes, and other outcomes? [Not at all important/Somewhat important/Very important/Essential]**

- Commitment to democracy and democratic institutions.
- Ability to engage effectively in civic life.
- A comprehensive understanding of United States history that reflects the experiences of diverse cultures.
- An understanding of the history of slavery in the United States.
- An understanding of slavery's lasting impact on the United States.
- Ability to assess the credibility of information (e.g., information shared online).
- Commitment to addressing climate change.

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<sup>2</sup> RAND American Educator Panels, American Teacher Panel, 2022 Teacher Experience Survey, data file, RAND, Santa Monica, CA [January 4, 2023].

**Q2. How confident are you in your ability to teach or support students in developing the following skills, attitudes, and other outcomes?** *[Not at all confident/Somewhat confident/Very confident/Extremely confident/Not applicable to my teaching role]*

- Commitment to democracy and democratic institutions.
- Ability to engage effectively in civic life.
- A comprehensive understanding of United States history that reflects the experiences of diverse cultures.
- An understanding of the history of slavery in the United States.
- An understanding of slavery's lasting impact on the United States.
- Ability to assess the credibility of information (e.g., information shared online).
- Commitment to addressing climate change.

**Q3. How much emphasis have you placed (or do you anticipate placing) in your classroom(s) on each of the following topics or activities this school year (2022–23)?** *[No emphasis/Slight emphasis/Moderate emphasis/Major emphasis]*

- Engaging in critical and independent thinking (e.g., distinguishing facts from opinions, evaluating claims based on evidence).
- Evaluating the credibility of information in the media.
- Engaging in responsible social media use.
- Understanding the responsibilities of civic life in the United States.

**Q4. How much emphasis does your school place (or do you anticipate it placing) on each of the following topics or activities this school year (2022–23)?** *[No emphasis/Slight emphasis/Moderate emphasis/Major emphasis/I don't know]*

- Racism and drivers of inequality.
- Respect for and safeguarding of the environment.
- Understanding the civic responsibilities of life in the United States (e.g., voting, our constitution and political system, rights of citizenship).
- Considering multiple perspectives on American history.
- Offering opportunities to students to engage in civic action in school (e.g., participating in school decisions, voting in school elections, proposing solutions to community problems).

**Q5. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the teaching of civic learning.** *[Strongly disagree/Disagree/Agree/Strongly Agree/Not applicable to my teaching role]*

- It is hard to prioritize civic learning due to pressure to show progress on standardized tests in mathematics, science, and/or English language arts.
- My students are not interested in topics related to civic learning.
- I need more professional development related to civic learning.
- I have been directed by my district or school leadership to limit discussions about political or social issues in class.

**Q6. To your knowledge, has your state adopted any standards related to students' civic learning (for example, standards for social studies or civics instruction)?** *[Yes/No/I don't know]*

**Q7. To what extent does your district and/or school expect you to address your state's standards related to students' civic learning in your teaching?** *[Not at all/To some degree, but not extensively/Extensively/I don't know]*

In the following sections, we describe overall teacher response patterns based on data weighted to be nationally representative following RAND's technical and statistical procedures for the ATP (Robbins & Grant, 2020). We also describe several teacher characteristics (e.g., gender, grade level) and school characteristics (e.g., geographic region) that were significantly associated with teachers' responses based on a series of logistic regression analyses adjusted for multiple variables. Due to the large number of comparisons conducted, we only highlight results that were statistically significant at  $p < .01$  (for more details on these analyses, see Data Analysis Methods box at the end of the report). Readers should note that our civic learning survey items were embedded in a larger data collection that included items on culturally responsive education (CRE), culturally responsive assessments (CRA), and social and emotional learning (SEL). Results related to CRE/CRA and SEL are shared in the other reports in this series. Because these topics encompass related concepts, some results shared in this report might be helpful for understanding teachers' perspectives on CRA, CRE, and SEL. The full set of survey questions is provided in an appendix.<sup>3</sup>

We do not provide a comprehensive picture of teachers' experiences and approaches to civic learning; instead, we focus on a few key topics that have not been addressed in other studies and that are important for understanding the state of civic learning in U.S. public schools. This type of data from teachers can be especially valuable for monitoring and addressing inequities (Hamilton & Kaufman, 2022; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). We gathered these data in late 2022, at a time when schools were tackling numerous challenges, including pandemic recovery and politicization of certain topics (e.g., critical race theory and social and emotional learning; Lampen, 2022; Schwartz, 2021). In the following sections, we present key findings from our analyses of data for each question, and we conclude the report with a discussion of implications.

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More than 90% considered it essential or very important that schools help students develop the ability to assess the credibility of information and to engage effectively in civic life.

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## **Most teachers recognized the importance of civics-related skills, attitudes, and other outcomes, but a majority did not feel very confident teaching them.**

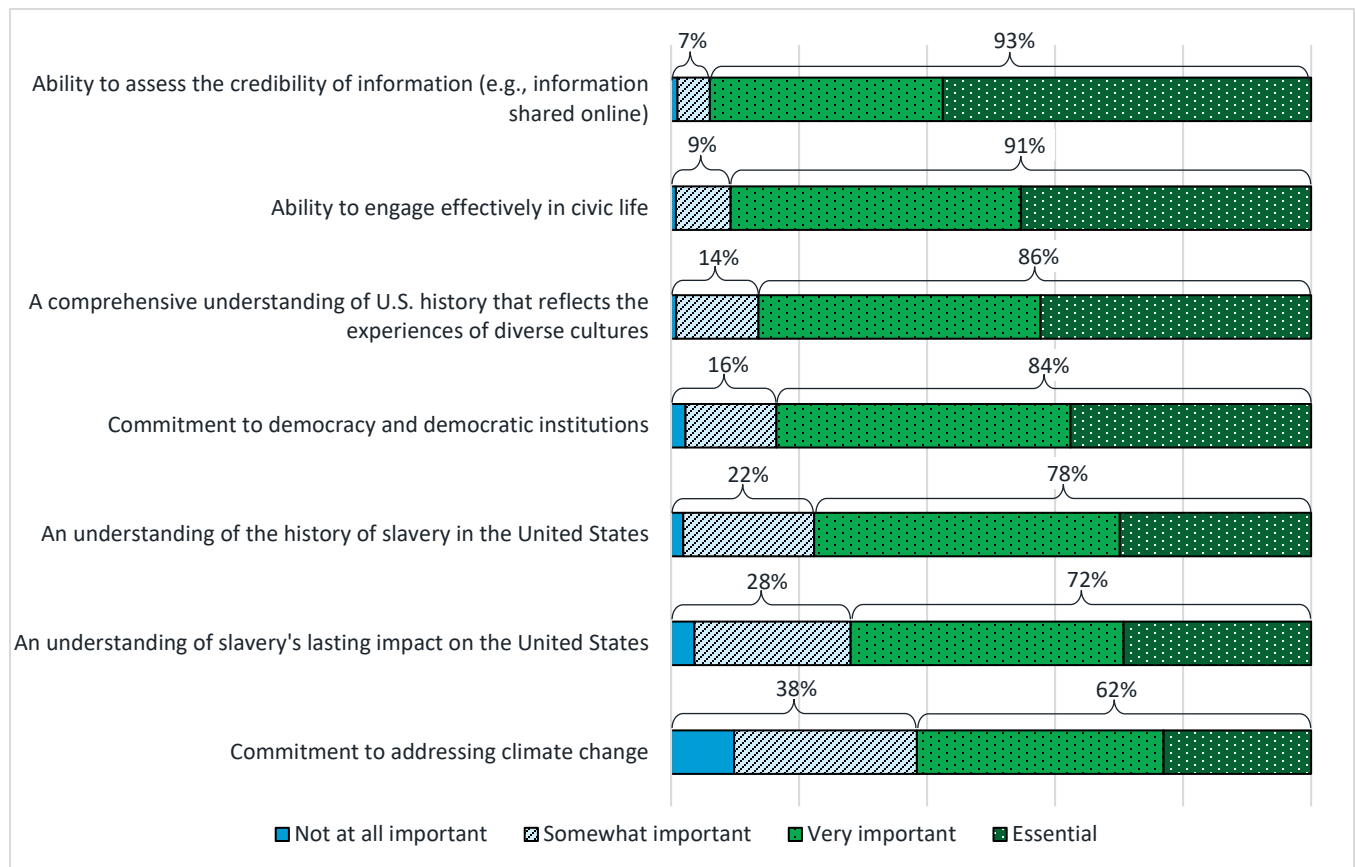
As we discussed above, opinions regarding the purposes of K–12 schooling have varied over time and across groups. During the past several years, educators' efforts to support civic learning have been accompanied by political pushback that has threatened to limit coverage of some civics-related topics

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<sup>3</sup> The briefs and appendix are available at [www.air.org/cama/resources/wholechildsurvey](http://www.air.org/cama/resources/wholechildsurvey).

in schools (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). Teachers’ beliefs and values are associated with their practices (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009), so understanding teachers’ attitudes regarding the role of schools in promoting civics-related skills, attitudes, and other outcomes is important for exploring the civic learning landscape in K–12 education. To understand teachers’ perspectives regarding the purposes of schools, we asked survey respondents how important it was for K–12 public schools to help students develop several skills, attitudes, and outcomes, including some related to civics (see Q1 in Exhibit 2). We show responses to the civics-related items in Exhibit 3. For each item, a majority of respondents rated the outcome as essential or very important. However, teachers’ responses varied substantially across these outcomes. More than 90% considered it essential or very important that schools help students develop the ability to assess the credibility of information and to engage effectively in civic life, whereas only 62% considered it essential or very important to help students develop a commitment to addressing climate change.<sup>4</sup>

**Exhibit 3. How important is it that K–12 public schools in the United States help students develop the following skills, attitudes, and other outcomes?**

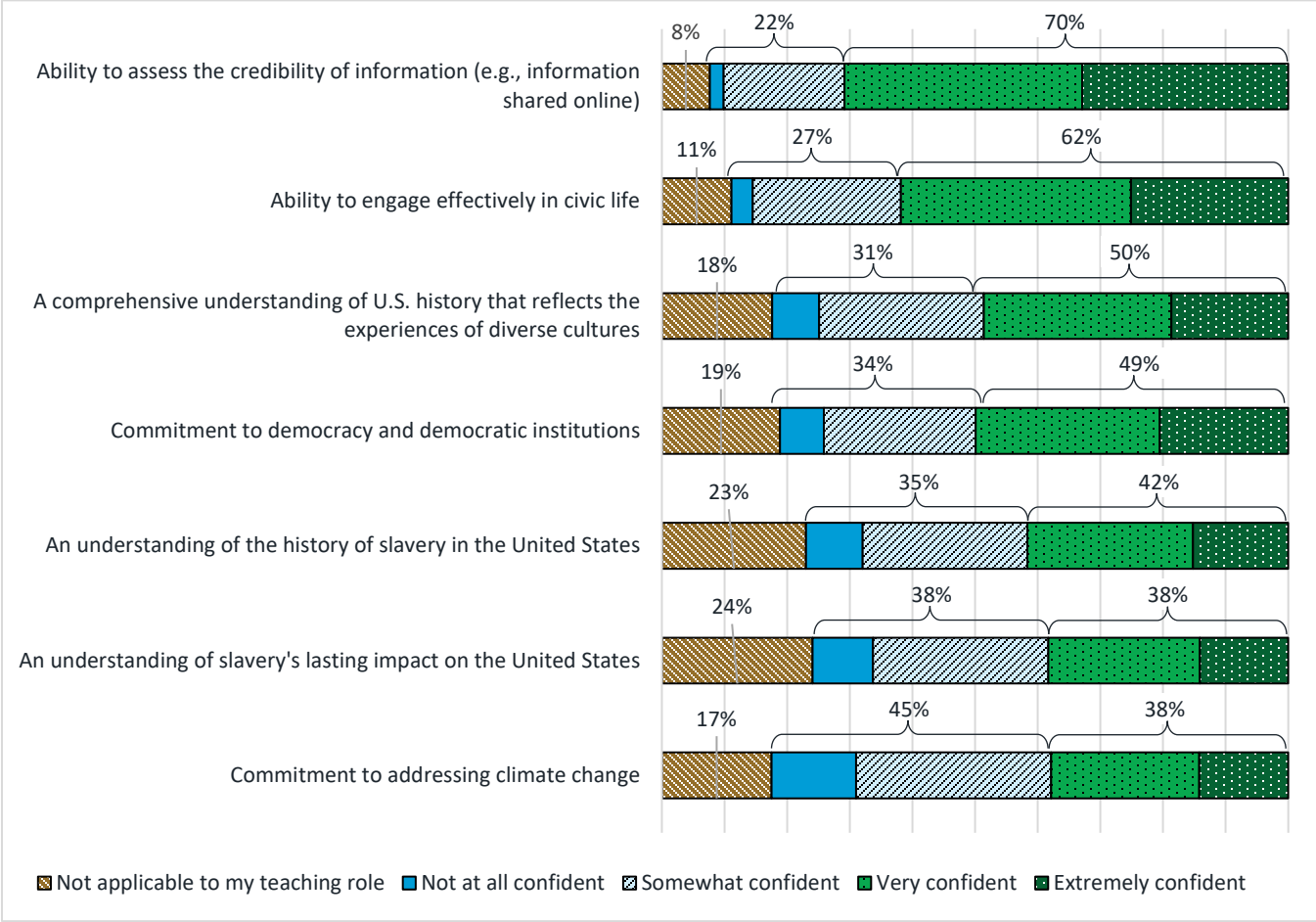


Note. Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

<sup>4</sup> Although instruction related to climate change often occurs in science courses, we included it with our civics-related items because of its connections to civic and political engagement.

In addition to asking about the perceived importance of helping students develop civic learning skills, attitudes, and other outcomes, we asked about their confidence levels in teaching them (see Q2 in Exhibit 2). Exhibit 4 shows substantial variability in responses: “Ability to address the credibility of information” received the largest proportion of teachers responding feeling very or extremely confident (70%), whereas “Commitment to addressing climate change” received the largest proportion of teachers responding not confident at all or somewhat confident (45%).

**Exhibit 4. How confident are you in your ability to teach or support students in developing the following skills, attitudes, and other outcomes?**



Note. Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

A comparison of Exhibit 3 and Exhibit 4 shows discrepancies between how important teachers considered these skills, attitudes, and outcomes to be for K–12 public schools and how confident they felt teaching them. For example, although 93% of teachers thought it was very important or essential for schools to teach students to assess the credibility of information (see Exhibit 3), only 70% reported being very or extremely confident in their ability to help students develop this skill (see Exhibit 4). These findings suggest the need for both professional development on these topics and for more detailed data regarding these confidence levels. In the particular case of addressing climate change, these results do not allow us to understand whether the 45% of teachers who reported being

somewhat or not at all confident in helping students with this commitment was due to a lack of instructional tools, inadequate professional learning opportunities, beliefs about the efficacy of individual actions in countering climate change, or some other factor.

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Most teachers, regardless of the subject they teach, believe they bear some responsibility for helping students understand history and civics-related concepts such as the impact of slavery, even as many of them expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to promote that understanding.

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Exhibit 4 also shows the percentages of teachers who indicated that the skills, attitudes, or other outcomes were not applicable to their teaching roles. These responses might indicate that teachers perceive some of these outcomes as unrelated to the academic subjects they teach, or they might indirectly signal teachers' attitudes or difficulties in addressing specific topics. For example, only 8% of teachers responded that the "Ability to address the credibility of information," a skill that can be developed in most subjects and grade levels, was not applicable to their teaching role. In comparison, 24% of teachers selected not applicable to their role to "An understanding of slavery's lasting impact on the United States."

At the same time, it is noteworthy that 76% of teachers indicated that supporting students in developing an understanding of slavery's lasting impact applied to their teaching roles. We explored this finding further by examining the percentages of teachers in each subject area marking not applicable for this topic, including teachers of elementary general education. The highest percentage of not applicable responses was 48% from computer science teachers. Percentages for mathematic and for natural sciences teachers were both roughly 40%, compared with 23% for English language arts teachers and 4% for social studies teachers. Thirteen percent of elementary general education teachers indicated that this topic was not applicable to their teaching role. Together, these findings suggest that most teachers, regardless of the subject they teach, believe they bear some responsibility for helping students understand history and civics-related concepts such as the impact of slavery, even as many of them expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to promote that understanding.

### **The perceived importance of civics-related skills, attitudes, and outcomes and teachers' confidence in teaching them varied by teachers' and schools' characteristics.**

Our analysis of the factors associated with teachers' responses indicated that, after controlling for other covariates,<sup>5</sup> teachers' race, ethnicity, gender, and total years of teaching were related to their perceptions of importance and confidence for some outcomes. As shown in Exhibit 5a, we found that a larger proportion of Black teachers than White teachers indicated that it was very or extremely important for schools to help students develop a commitment to addressing climate change (72% Black teachers, 62% White teachers) and to develop an understanding of slavery's lasting impact on the U.S. (86% Black teachers, 72% White teachers). We found that teachers' race and ethnicity were also significantly related to their confidence in helping students develop an understanding of slavery's

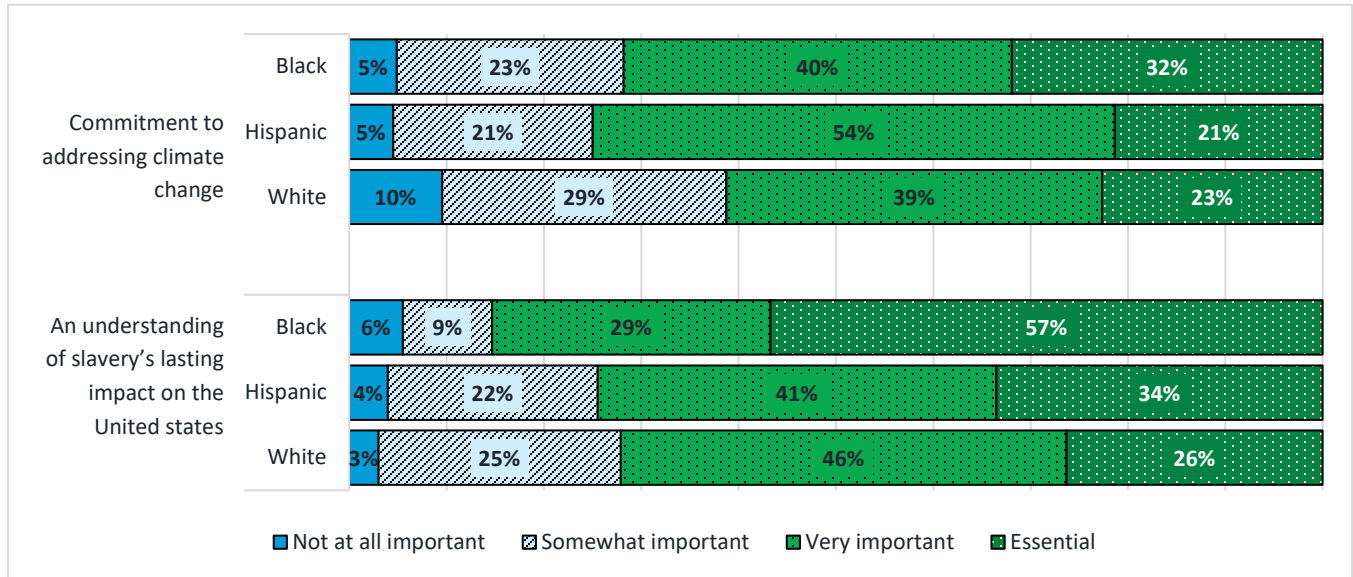
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<sup>5</sup> Although not described in depth here, all significant associations presented in this report control for a set of covariates covering teachers' and schools' characteristics. The list of variables is found in the Data Analysis Methods box at the end of this report.



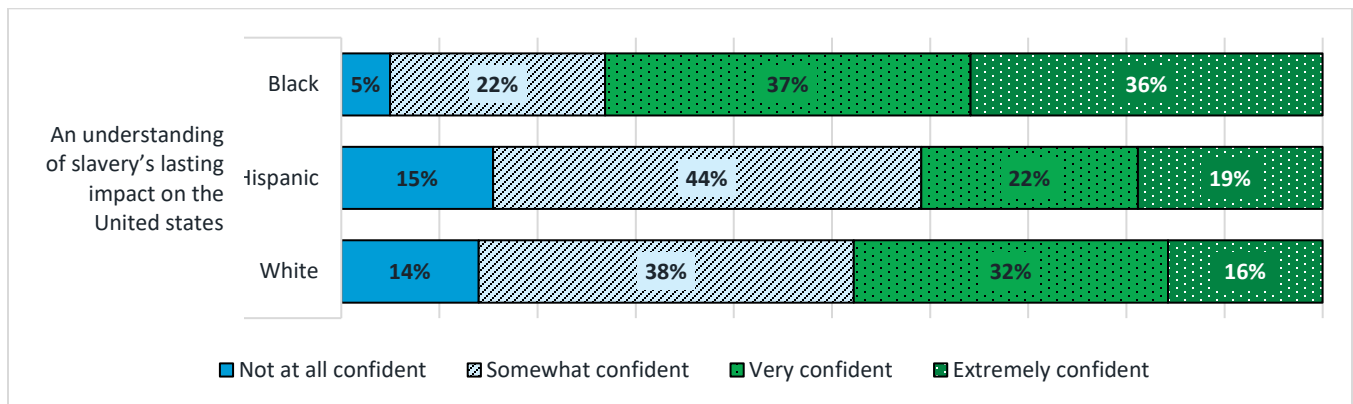
lasting impact on the U.S (Exhibit 5b). While 73% of Black teachers indicated feeling very or extremely confident in helping students with this understanding, only 48% of White teachers and 41% of Hispanic teachers reported the same confidence levels<sup>6</sup>.

**Exhibit 5a. Racial/Ethnic Differences in Teachers’ Perceptions of Importance**



*Note.* Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100. This exhibit shows only the items with statistically significant differences by teacher race/ethnicity.

**Exhibit 5b. Racial/Ethnic Differences in Teachers’ Perceptions of Confidence**



*Note.* Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100. This exhibit shows only the item with statistically significant differences by teacher race/ethnicity.

Teachers’ gender was associated with some of their responses. Female teachers were more likely than male teachers to indicate that the ability to assess the credibility of information was very important or essential, and male teachers were more likely to report that they were very or extremely confident in their ability to promote students’ commitment to democracy and democratic institutions. In addition,

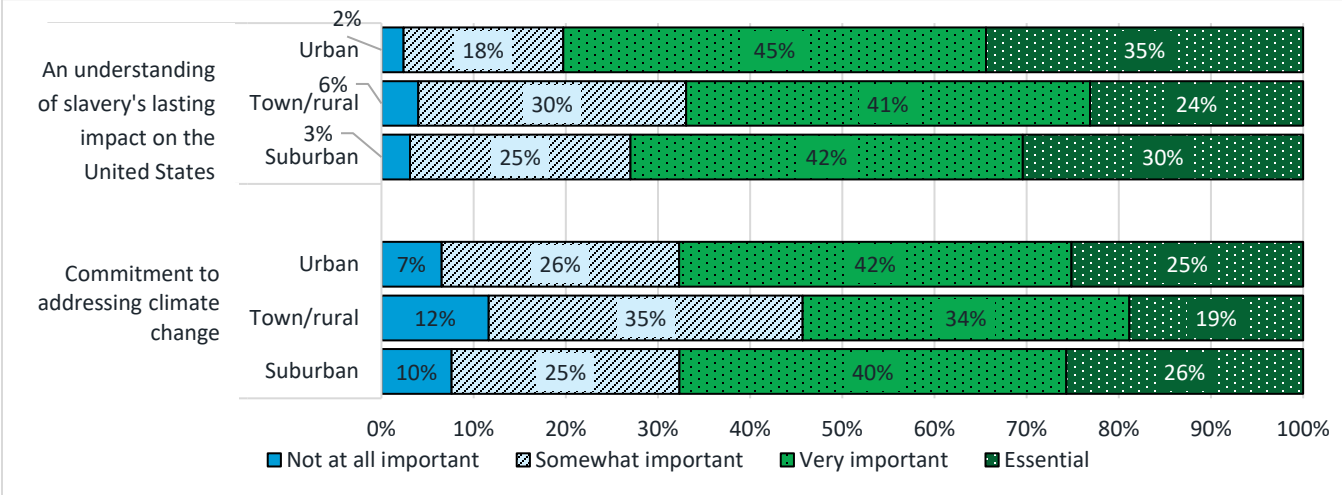
<sup>6</sup> This analysis omitted the teachers who selected “Not applicable to my teaching role.”

total years of teaching was related to teachers’ confidence in helping students with (a) their commitment to democracy and democratic institutions, (b) their ability to engage effectively in civic life, and (c) developing a comprehensive understanding of U.S. history reflecting experiences of diverse cultures. For each of these outcomes, teachers with more years of experience reported greater confidence levels than those with less experience.

Turning to school characteristics, we found significant differences with respect to grade level; 85% of secondary teachers versus 67% of elementary teachers reported being very or extremely confident in helping students develop the ability to assess the credibility of information. These results make intuitive sense, considering the higher level of access to online information among older students compared with younger ones. At the same time, information literacy is increasingly included in state standards and curricula for elementary students (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010; Huguet et al., 2020; Sitrin, 2023), so our findings suggest that teachers of these students might benefit from improved instructional tools and professional development related to this topic. The region of the country where teachers’ schools were located was also associated with differences in perceptions of importance regarding helping students with their ability to engage effectively in civic life; teachers located in schools in the Midwest were more likely than teachers in the South to indicate it was very important or essential to help students engage.

Teachers’ perceptions of the importance of schools helping students develop (a) a commitment to address climate change and (b) an understanding of slavery’s lasting impact on the U.S. differed by urbanicity (Exhibit 6). In both instances, we found that a larger proportion of teachers in rural schools than teachers in urban schools indicated it was not important at all or only somewhat important that schools promote these outcomes.

**Exhibit 6. Urbanicity Differences in Teachers’ Perceptions of Importance**

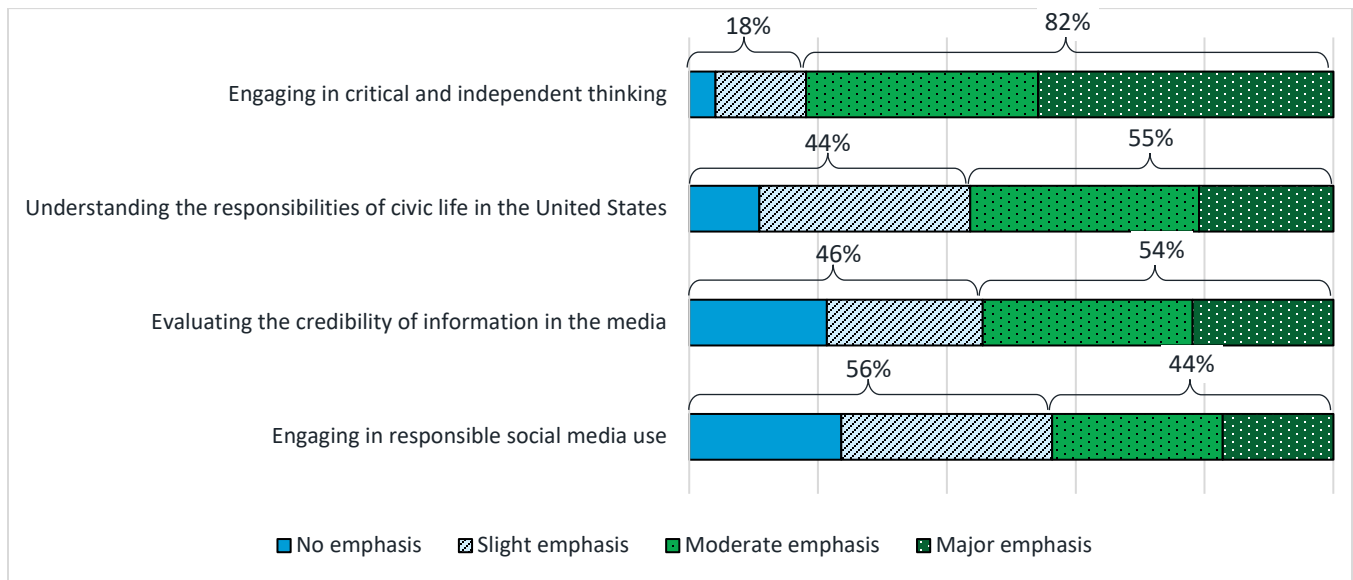


*Note.* Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100. This exhibit shows only the items with statistically significant differences by urbanicity.

## Teachers were more likely to report an emphasis on critical and independent thinking than on other civics-related concepts and activities.

To better understand students’ civic learning opportunities, we asked teachers about the extent to which they emphasized several civic learning concepts and activities in their classrooms (Q3 in Exhibit 2), and about school-level emphasis on a different set of concepts and activities (Q4 in Exhibit 2). Most teachers (82%) reported placing moderate or major emphasis on engaging in critical and independent thinking in their classrooms (Exhibit 7). In contrast, 44% of teachers reported a moderate or major emphasis related to engaging in responsible media use. Moreover, emphasis on evaluating the credibility of information varied significantly by grade level; 68% of secondary teachers but only 41% of elementary teachers indicated moderate or major emphasis. For these items, we also explored differences among secondary teachers by subject taught. We found that 87% of teachers of social science in the secondary grades chose moderate or major emphasis on understanding the responsibilities of civic life in the United States, compared with 51% of secondary-grade teachers of other subjects.

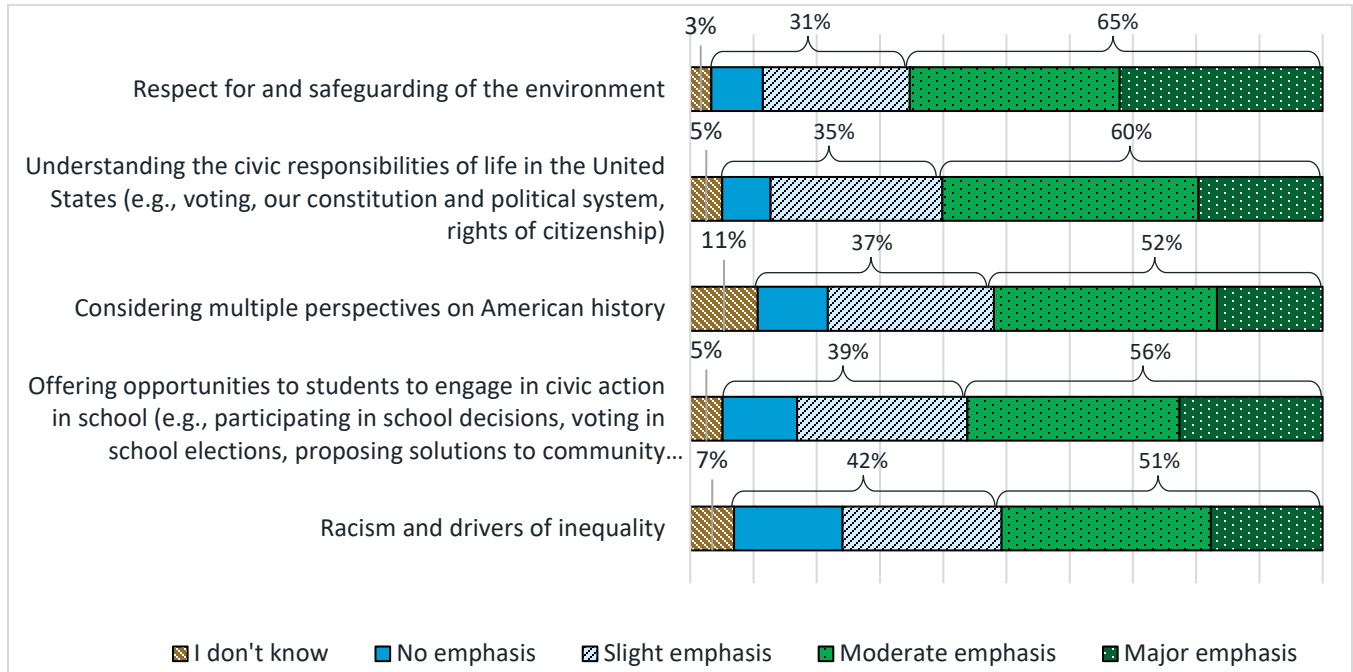
**Exhibit 7. Classroom Emphasis on Civic Learning Topics and Activities**



*Note.* Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Regarding school-level opportunities, between 51% and 65% of teachers indicated that their schools placed a moderate or major emphasis on the various civic topics or activities we asked them about (Exhibit 8). For the question on “considering multiple perspectives of American history,” we observed significant differences by grade level: 65% of secondary teachers indicated their school placed moderate or major emphasis, while only 51% of elementary teachers chose those responses.

## Exhibit 8. School Emphasis on Civic Learning Activities

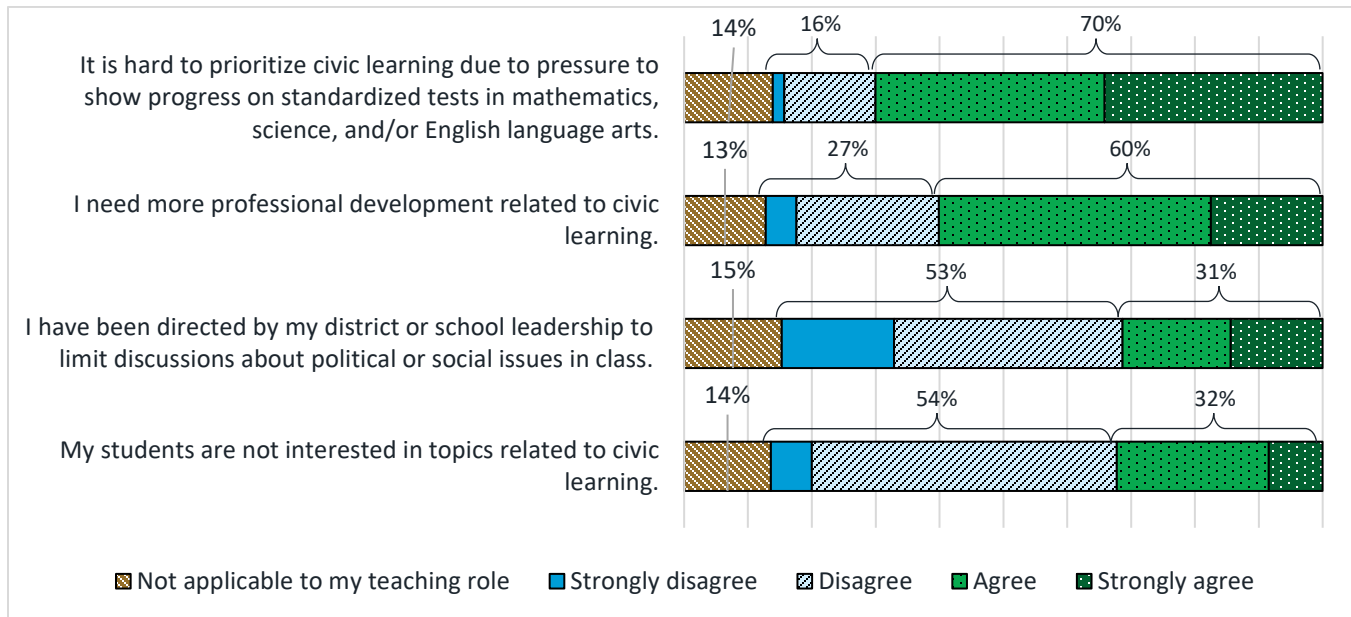


Note. Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

### Potential barriers to civics instruction include testing policies and a need for professional development.

We posed a set of questions on conditions that might influence teachers' opportunities to engage their students in civic learning (Q5 in Exhibit 2). Seventy percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that pressure to show progress on standardized assessments in math, science, and English made it hard to prioritize civic learning, and 60% indicated a need for professional development regarding civic learning (Exhibit 9). Perceptions of standardized assessments in math, science, and English as barriers to prioritizing civic learning differed significantly by region, grade level, and years of experience. Elementary school teachers, teachers in the South, and those with less teaching experience, were more likely to agree or strongly agree with this statement in comparison to secondary teachers, teachers in the West, and those with more teaching experience.

## Exhibit 9. Perceived Barriers to the Provision of Civic Learning Opportunities



Note. Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Teachers’ race and total years of teaching were significantly associated with the perceived need for professional development. Excluding the 13% of teachers who indicated that professional development in civics did not apply to their teaching role, 81% of Black teachers but only 68% of White teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they needed professional development regarding civic learning. We also found that teachers with more teaching experience were more likely than those with less experience to disagree or strongly disagree that they needed professional development regarding civic learning.

Approximately a third of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they had been “directed by my district or school leadership to limit discussions about political or social issues in class.”

Schools often provide young people with opportunities to learn how to engage in discussions of controversial issues in a civic and respectful manner (Conklin et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). At the same time, roughly a third of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that students were not interested in topics related to civic learning, with elementary school teachers more likely to agree or strongly agree with this statement than secondary school teachers. Furthermore, approximately a third of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they had been “directed by my district or school leadership to limit discussions about political or social issues in class,” with another 15% responding that this question was not relevant to their teaching role. After adjusting for other factors, responses to this item did not differ by school or teacher characteristics.

## State Standards Related to Civic Learning

Our final set of questions pertains to state standards. We asked teachers whether, to their knowledge, their state had adopted “any standards related to students’ civic learning” (Q6 in Exhibit 2). Although

state standards can be a useful policy tool for guiding local decisions regarding curriculum and instruction, their impact on teachers' practices can be limited if they are not accompanied by supports such as standards-aligned curricula and professional development (Polikoff, 2021). In their discussion of findings from a nationally representative survey of social studies teachers who responded to the same question, Hamilton, Kaufman, and Hu (2020) reported that 83% of secondary and 56% of elementary teachers of social studies indicated that their states had adopted such standards. The percentages of secondary and elementary teachers reporting that their states had not adopted such standards were 5% and 10%, respectively, with the remaining teachers responding I don't know. As of 2017, all U.S. states had adopted standards in social studies that included some civics-related content, so these results make it clear that many social studies teachers were unaware of this adoption.

Not surprisingly, in our sample, which included teachers of all subjects, the percentages of teachers indicating awareness of state standards related to civics were even lower than what Hamilton and colleagues found: 44% overall, 42% elementary teachers, and 45% secondary teachers responded yes, they were aware of the adoption in their state standards. Nearly half (47%) of teachers in our sample responded I don't know, and 9% responded no. Teachers who responded yes were asked a follow-up question on the extent to which their district or school expected them to address these standards in their teaching (Q7 in Exhibit 2). Approximately a quarter responded not at all or I don't know, and about 20% said extensively. The remaining teachers reported that they were expected to address the standards to some degree, but not extensively.

## Implications and Key Takeaways

The results we presented in this report provide incomplete but potentially useful information on U.S. public school teachers' perspectives on, and approaches to, promoting civic learning. By presenting nationally representative data and examining relationships between survey responses and several school and teacher characteristics, this report adds to a growing body of work on how U.S. schools are or are not fulfilling their civic mission. We conclude the report by highlighting a few key findings and discussing their implications for policy and practice.

### ***Teachers support the civic mission of schools, but many do not feel prepared to promote civic outcomes.***

Despite pressures associated with factors such as state assessment systems and political partisanship, most teachers agreed that public schools should help students develop several civic-related skills and dispositions, including a commitment to democracy and an ability to assess the credibility of information. Perhaps most worthy of note in the context of recent debates about how schools address topics related to race is the finding that nearly all teachers, regardless of grade level, subject, or school characteristics, indicated that developing students' understanding of slavery's lasting impact on the United States was at least somewhat important, with more than 70% responding that it was very important or essential. At the same time, we found that many teachers did not feel prepared to promote these outcomes, with most reporting a need for additional civics-related professional

development. Together, these findings suggest that most teachers have the necessary will but might lack the capacity needed to advance civic learning opportunities in their classrooms. To address this need, district leaders, professional development providers, and others who support classroom teachers have an opportunity to harness the growing collection of curriculum and professional learning resources related to civics (e.g., from Educating for American Democracy<sup>7</sup>).

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### ***Most teachers did not report pressure to refrain from discussing social issues.***

Over the past few years, headlines in education newspapers and magazines, and in the more general press, have pointed to the ways in which the actions and words of state legislators, local school board members, and parents have limited teachers' opportunities to cover certain content. As of late 2022, which is when teachers responded to our survey, fewer than one third agreed that they had been "directed by my district or school leadership to limit discussions about political or social issues in class." This finding suggests that such directives are far from universal, but they are happening in a sizeable number of schools and districts. Our findings are similar to those from an American Teacher Panel survey administered in January 2022: 24% of teachers agreed that their leadership directed them to limit discussion about political or social issues (Woo et al., 2022). Of course, this single survey question does not provide evidence regarding the extent or nature of the pressure, and many teachers who reported not receiving directives from leadership might still experience stress related to politicization of curriculum content (Woo et al., 2022). In a companion brief in this series (Rikoon et al., 2024), we report that approximately half of teachers indicated placing a moderate or major emphasis on engaging students in constructive debates with others with whom they disagree, but we don't know what factors are influencing teachers' emphasis on this activity. Equipping teachers and students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to engage effectively in civics-related discourse could contribute to more inclusive and informed public debates regarding these curriculum issues by ensuring that the groups who are most affected by these decisions—teachers and students—are prepared to weigh in on them.

### ***Students and teachers might benefit from instructional materials and approaches that enhance engagement.***

Nearly a third of teachers indicated that their students were not interested in topics related to civic learning. By itself, the implications of this finding are unclear, especially given the diversity of subjects and grade levels represented in our sample. But it is consistent with other evidence regarding a need for more engaging civics instructional materials (Hamilton et al., 2020). Curricula that connect civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions to other subject areas are particularly promising as mechanisms to encourage the promotion of civic outcomes beyond the social studies classroom. Several existing

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>

curricula and instructional materials offer students opportunities to develop civic skills while engaging with meaningful and relevant problems in mathematics or science (Citizen Math<sup>8</sup>; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2021). Similarly, programs that support engagement with news media, such as THINKING PRO<sup>9</sup>, enable students to focus on issues that are of interest to them while learning information literacy skills. Many of these curricula incorporate professional learning activities that build teachers' capacity to create engaging, high-quality lessons. To facilitate the use of these kinds of resources, policymakers and education leaders will need to create conditions that enhance opportunities for cross-disciplinary instruction while helping teachers see themselves as both capable of and responsible for helping their students develop the competencies they will need for effective engagement in civic life.

## Conclusion

We gathered, analyzed, and reported on these data during a time marked by significant political polarization, skepticism regarding government and elections, debates about racism and equity, and continuing effects of pandemic-related disruptions to schooling. Each of these factors has implications for what we as a society expect of our public schools when it comes to preparing young people for effective citizenship. In light of their critical role in supporting student learning, public school teachers' voices are critical for informing both what we expect schools to do and how those expectations are instantiated into policy and practice. Continued efforts to engage with teachers through large-scale survey data collections such as this one will provide valuable evidence to guide this decision making.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.citizenmath.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thinkinghabitats.com/>



## DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Across the United States, 1,087 public school teachers responded to survey questions about culturally responsive education and assessments, civic learning, and social and emotional learning. These questions were part of a survey fielded by the RAND Corporation to its American Teacher Panel (ATP) between October 27, 2022, and November 21, 2022. Survey respondents were probabilistically sampled, with oversampling of teachers identifying as Black or Hispanic to facilitate reporting of responses for these groups. We used analysis weights calculated by RAND in all our statistical models to obtain results that were nationally representative of public school teachers in the United States. To understand how teachers' response patterns varied across salient demographic groups and both school and teacher characteristics, we estimated a series of logistic regression models in which each survey item (recoded to a binary format— e.g., agreement vs. disagreement) was entered as the dependent variable and the following covariates were entered as independent variables:

- (a) Grade level (elementary [K–5] vs. secondary [Grades 6–12])
- (b) School race/ethnic enrollment (majority White vs. non-White)
- (c) School geographic setting (urban, suburban, town, or rural)
- (d) School's location by region of the country (Midwest, Northeast, South, West)
- (e) School size (more or less than student  $N = 450$ )
- (f) School poverty level (majority vs. minority of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch)
- (g) Teacher education level (bachelor's degree or less vs. beyond a bachelor's degree)
- (h) Teacher experience (total number of years teaching)
- (i) Teacher gender identity (male vs. female)
- (j) Teacher race/ethnic background (Black, Hispanic, White, multiracial, other)

School demographic variables were gathered from the Common Core of Data maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics and linked to the ATP survey. We reviewed statistical significance test output by the regression models to determine whether survey response patterns were statistically differentiable across demographic or other groups denoted by the covariates listed in this box. In our report, we describe differences among teacher groups only in cases where the  $p$  value for a given difference was less than .01.

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