

COMMENTARY

Teaching civics to students can also educate their parents

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Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee on July 25, 2012, in Washington. O'Connor spoke to the necessity for civics education in maintaining an independent judiciary. (T.J. Kirkpatrick/Getty)

Perhaps at no moment in recent American memory has a widespread understanding of civics been more crucial. Yet the portents are ominous.

The [latest surveys show](#) that fewer than half of American adults can correctly name the three branches of government, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the “nation’s report card,” this year for the first time in its history reported declines in eighth-grade scores on its civics exam.

Illinois is better prepared than most states to meet these challenges.

Advocates in Illinois have been emphasizing civics education for decades. One result of their tireless work is that every high school and middle school in the state now offers civics instruction, a real and shining achievement. And these Springfield successes were built on knowledge gained locally. Chicago Public Schools, for example, implemented a service learning requirement in the late 1990s, a stipulation that evolved over time to become more integrated with enhanced classroom instruction in civics. CPS’ civics experiences, its successes and setbacks, informed state policies. Doubtless there is more work to do, but Illinois has already gone far in expanding access to civics education.

And expanding access is paramount. But it’s also important to understand how civics education *works* — how it can and does affect students and their families and influences subsequent civic engagement in the community. Doing so could aid policymakers, educators and other stakeholders in crafting and delivering the best possible civics-education programs.

The Sandra Day O’Connor Institute, a nonprofit that focuses on civics, has just [published new research](#), based on extensive data from Indiana, that adds to the discussion of how civics education works. Our study sought to learn more about the role of the family because civics education in school, to a far greater degree than most subjects, works together with civics education at home.

It is generally understood that political attitudes are shaped across family generations in two ways: Political influence can flow down from parents to their children (“trickle-down” political socialization) and also up from children to their parents (“trickle-up” socialization). But how significant and pronounced are these processes? How do they work? And how might they differ for families from different backgrounds? Answering such questions would help policymakers and educators design and fund more effective and targeted civics-education programs and perhaps inform decisions about where, when and how to implement them.

We evaluated more than 580,000 individual records. Our findings were significant.

Consider this trickle-down discovery: Children whose mothers voted in the previous presidential election were 20.3 percentage points more likely to vote in the first election in which they were eligible to participate. That indicates a 64% increase in the probability of voting.

Or consider, the trickle-up finding that, for white families, having a child who voted in their first age-eligible election was associated with a 4.9 percentage-point increase in the probability a mother votes in the next presidential election. But in nonwhite families,

that figure jumped to a 6.6 percentage-point increase. In families whose children do not qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, the increase was 4.8 percentage points; but in families whose children do qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, it was 6.1 percentage points.

Why does this matter for education policy? First, it's clear that trickle-down and trickle-up political socialization not only happen but also happen to a significant degree. Second, our research suggests a pathway for civics education "spillover" effects — in other words, civics education can improve civic outcomes not only for students but also for entire families. And third, the differences in the magnitude of trickle-up and trickle-down relationships for different types of families implies that civics-education programs for students from certain groups might also be more likely to have such beneficial spillover effects.

O'Connor, the former U.S. Supreme Court justice who founded our institute, has a passion for civics education and has frequently said that civics must be taught anew to each generation. Ongoing research in civics will help make such teaching more effective for current generations of Americans and many to come.

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