*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | October 17, 2023 |
| **Subject:** | Civics Update |

The importance of high-quality, equitable civics education today is widely recognized. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department or DESE) is investing in a range of initiatives to provide all students with access to high-quality civics education that nurtures their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. We will have a presentation and discussion of these initiatives at the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) meeting on October 24. This memorandum provides an overview.

***Background***  
2018 marked a milestone after years of Board and legislative effort to strengthen history and civics education in Massachusetts. In June 2018, the Board adopted a revised History and Social Science Framework, which included a stronger focus on civics at all grade levels and an emphasis on historical inquiry and critical thinking skills. [*An act to promote and enhance civic engagement*](https://malegislature.gov/laws/sessionlaws/acts/2018/chapter296) was enacted in the same year, as Chapter 296 of the Acts of 2018. Among other provisions, the legislation established a requirement that all public high schools and school districts serving eighth-grade students provide at least one student-led, non-partisan civics project for each student ([Mass. General Laws c. 71, s. 2.)](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section2) This legislation also created a Civics Project Trust Fund which, pending annual allocation, provides funding to DESE to support civics education initiatives.

***Civic Learning is Deeper Learning***

High-quality civics education prepares students to become thoughtful and active participants in a democratic society and a complex world. Beginning in kindergarten and continuing through high school, students develop their civic capacity along three dimensions, articulated in the History and Social Science Framework:

* *Civic knowledge*. This is core knowledge related to government, economics, geography, and history, including the rights and responsibilities established by the Constitution and how to exercise them in local, state, and national government.
* *Civic skills*. These are intellectual and participatory skills that encompass the ability to assess, describe, and explain matters relating to civic life, knowing how to make and support arguments using logical reasoning, and the ability to use the political process to take informed action.
* *Civic dispositions*. These are values, virtues, and behaviors, such as respect for others, commitment to equality, capacity for listening, and capacity for communicating in ways accessible to others, including engaging with varying points of view and ideas in civil discourse.

At its best, civic learning is intertwined with students’ everyday lives and experiences. At every level, civic knowledge can be tied back to local governmental structures, people, and issues students know and care about. The culmination of active civic learning is the [student-led civic action project](https://www.doe.mass.edu/rlo/instruction/civics-project-guidebook/index.html#/), which by state law must be assigned to every Massachusetts public school student in eighth grade and again in high school.[[1]](#footnote-2) This project allows students to select an issue that is relevant to them and their community; to study and discuss it with peers and community members; to identify and analyze root causes and what impacts the issue; to plan and take real-world civic action in an attempt to influence the issue; and to showcase their learning to others and reflect on what they have learned that might impact their future civic advocacy.

In alignment with the Department’s [Educational Vision](https://www.doe.mass.edu/commissioner/vision/), these relevant and real-world learning experiences can set students on a path to lifelong civic action. As one student stated at DESE’s Civics Project Showcase this past June, “I loved advocating for my project and the importance of it and spreading awareness about my topic. I fully believe I can make a huge impact on my school as well as all the schools in Massachusetts and hopefully, in the United States.”

The 2018 History and Social Science Framework and the civics project requirement shift teaching methods away from traditional lecture-based teaching and towards a student-led inquiry approach. In addition, providing students with a meaningful civic action project experience requires middle and high school teachers to develop new instructional skills for real-world, project based learning. [A 2020 study](https://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2020/12civics-report.docx) found that educators still needed significant support to update their practice in alignment with these expectations. At that time, only 44% of teachers reported knowing how the 2018 framework should impact their instruction. Additionally, a majority of middle and high school teachers reported either that they had never heard of the civics project or did not know how to incorporate a civics project.

***Progress since 2018***

With the funding support of the Civics Trust Fund, the Department has offered a range of resources to schools and districts to meet these needs and advance quality and access in civics education. Since FY2021, the Department has awarded nearly $3.7 million in competitive grants for civics education. This funding supports initiatives such as in-district professional development for educators targeted at civics knowledge, skills, and civic action projects; purchase of curricular materials for civics; and experiential civics learning through field trips and special programs. Schools and districts have demonstrated strong demand for the Civics Teaching & Learning grant, resulting in a competitive process for allocated funds.

In addition to grants, the Department has also provided direct support through programming and resources, including:

* [Investigating History](http://www.mass.gov/investigatinghistory), a DESE-developed, comprehensive curriculum for history and social science in grades 5-7. This curriculum is openly available for any school to use and will provide a solid foundation for students leading up to a full-year course of civics in grade 8. In the 2023-2024 school year, DESE has awarded $1.2 million in grant funding to support 38 districts’ adoption of this curriculum. Schools and districts have expressed high demand for access to Investigating History and related support programs, outstripping availability.
* [Grade 8 Civics: Curricular Materials Guide](https://www.doe.mass.edu/rlo/instruction/grade-8-civics/index.html#/), and [K-5 Curricular Materials Guide](https://www.doe.mass.edu/rlo/instruction/k-5-social-studies/index.html#/), online guides to available materials that align to Massachusetts standards, to assist schools and districts in selecting high-quality materials by grade.
* [Civics Project Guidebook](https://www.doe.mass.edu/rlo/instruction/civics-project-guidebook/index.html#/), a detailed handbook to assist teachers in providing a high-quality civics project experience for students in grade 8 and high school.
* [Civics Project Showcase](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/hss/civics/showcase.html), a “science fair style” event that DESE organizes, as provided in Mass. General Laws c. 71, s. 2(d), enabling students to showcase their student-led civics action projects. The first Civics Project Showcase took place in June 2023.
* [Civics Professional Learning Pathways](https://pz.harvard.edu/professional-development/events-institutes/civics-pathways-event): In partnership with Harvard University’s Democratic Knowledge Project and Project Zero, DESE has launched a diverse range of professional learning opportunities in civics, both in person and online beginning this school year. Eventually, these Civics Pathways aim to serve 400 teachers annually.

***On the Horizon***

DESE will continue to provide leadership with civics education across K-12 for all students. The following initiatives for the 2023-2024 school year will expand our support for schools and districts to align curriculum and instruction with a vision of equitable, high-quality civic learning experiences for all students.

* Further reviews of curricular materials: Building off prior reviews, the Department will publish a guide that provides additional information to help high schools select high-quality curricular materials and updates and expand the reviews for grades K-5 and grade 8 to include additional materials.
* Investigating History for elementary grades: Driven by the success of and demand for Investigating History in grades 5-7, the Department has initiated development of curriculum materials for grades 3-4; these materials are being field tested in the 2023-2024 school year with anticipated broader availability in fall 2024.
* Expansion of Civics Project Showcases: Building on the success of the June 2023 inaugural event, the Department plans to offer the event annually at multiple locations across Massachusetts to elevate the civic engagement and learning of hundreds more students.
* MCAS Grade 8 Civics Field Test: In spring 2024, DESE plans to conduct a required field test of a new MCAS grade 8 civics assessment across all schools enrolling grade 8 students. The assessment design provides opportunities for students to demonstrate their civic knowledge and skills through an in-depth performance task and an end-of-course test. This fall, DESE will conduct in-person and virtual informational sessions to support schools’ preparation for the field test.

At the Board meeting on October 24, Department staff including Erin Hashimoto-Martell, Associate Commissioner of Instructional Support, Katherine Tarca, Director of Literacy and Humanities, and Reuben Henriques, History and Social Science Content Support Lead, joined by Dave Buchanan, representing the [Massachusetts Civic Learning Coalition](http://www.macivicsforall.org), will provide additional information about the state of civics education in Massachusetts and answer your questions.

1. (c) Each public school serving students in the eighth grade and each public high school shall provide not less than 1 student-led, non-partisan civics project for each student; provided, however, that each such project shall be consistent with the history and social science curriculum frameworks adopted by the board pursuant to [section 1E of chapter 69](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter69/Section1e) and with structured learning time requirements as required under regulations promulgated by the board of elementary and secondary education. Civics projects may be individual, small group or class wide, and designed to promote a student’s ability to: (i) analyze complex issues; (ii) consider differing points of view; (iii) reason, make logical arguments and support claims using valid evidence; (iv) engage in civil discourse with those who hold opposing positions; and (v) demonstrate an understanding of the connections between federal, state and local policies, including issues that may impact the student’s school or community. Any student choosing not to participate in a particular group or class-wide project shall be offered the opportunity to develop an individual civics project, with approval by the principal. Mass. Gen. Laws c. 71, s. 2(c). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)