Quick Reference Guide:
Student-Led Civics Projects in Massachusetts

Starting in the 2020 school year, all Massachusetts students will complete a **non-partisan, student-led civics project** in Grade 8 and again during high school. These projects are rooted in *action civics*—a process of applying civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions to identify, research, and address community issues.

The [2018 History and Social Science Frameworks](#) along with Chapter 296, [*An Act to promote and enhance civic engagement*](#), renewed the civic mission of a history and social science education in Massachusetts: to prepare students to be thoughtful and active citizens. Student-led civics projects support the the development of **civic knowledge**, **skills**, and **dispositions** that are necessary for informed civic participation**:**

Core **civic knowledge** relates to civics and 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. ***What do I need to <u>know</u> about government to be civically engaged?***	Intellectual and participatory **civic skills** encompass the ability to identify, assess, interpret, describe, analyze 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*. ***What do I need to <u>be able to do</u> in order to be civically engaged?***	**Civic dispositions** include respect for others, commitment to equality, capacity for listening, and capacity for communicating in ways accessible to others, including engaging with a variety of points of view and ideas in civil discourse. ***What values, virtues, and behaviors do I need to <u>embody</u> in order to be civically engaged?***

Defining Student-Led Civics Projects

A product of Chapter 296, student-led civics projects are meant to give students a chance to apply all the civic knowledge and skills they gained throughout their K-8 study of history and social science. Students complete the real work of engaged, informed participants in a democracy by *identifying issues and advocating for change in their communities*. For example, students may identify substance abuse as an issue in their community and after extensive research, decide to advocate to create a meaningful drug prevention program in their school.

All projects will embody the key characteristics and six stages described in the [Civics Project Guidebook](#). This tool helps educators plan for and execute the projects. Visit DESE's [current frameworks page](#) to download the Civics Proejct Guidebook, which includes key considerations for districts, resources for teachers, sample competencies for assessing projects, examples of actions and goals, and case studies from the field with embedded professional development protocol.

Project Basics:

- ***All students*** *in grade 8 and all high school students* (at any point in grades 9-12) will be provided as least one non-partisan, student led project per the [legislation.](#)

- Projects can be individual, small group or whole class; students have the option to complete a project indivudally.

- Issues and actions can vary greatly, but the key characteristics and six stages remain consistent.

- Teachers design time frame for implementation, which may be modular, unit-based, interdisiplinary/cross-content, semester long, etc.

Six Stages of Civic Action

While the issues and actions students decide to pursue will be unique to each project, all projects follow **six stages**. What makes this different than a research project is the process of developing a theory of action, and then taking action to specifically address the root cause of their issue, either by seeking to influence *public opinion* or *policy*. District and school leaders, teachers, local officials, and families should explore the six stages in order to better understand the parameters of the project. **See pages 21-27 of the Civics Project Guidebook** for goals, guiding questions, and resources for each stage.

Key Characteristics

High-quality civics projects are defined by the following key characteristics:

- **Student-led**
- **Project-based**
- **Real-world**
- **Rooted in an understanding of systems impact**
- **Goal-driven**
- **Inquiry-based**
- **Non-partisan**
- **Process-focused**

See page 11 of the Civics Project Guidebook to learn more about each characteristic.

Sample Focus Issues and Actions

Students may choose mental health as their focus issue and decide to advocate for the city to make a user-friendly app that allows young people to search for mental health services. Students focusing on education may decide to advocate for a bill that promotes physical education in schools. Students with vaping as the focus issue may create a peer education program or implement a vape "buy back" program in their town. **See pages 28-40 of the Civics Project Guidebook to see more examples.**

Stage 1: Examine Self and Civic Identity
- Students **start by exploring issues and topics that matter to them, their families, and communities.** They can begin this process by examining challenges they are currently experiencing that they feel go unaddressed or under-addressed, or alternatively they can build upon valuable work that is already done in the community to solve problems.

Stage 2: Identifying an Issue
- After students have spent time exploring and identifying issues that matter to them, **the next step is to identify a focus issue for their student-led civics project.**

Stage 3: Researching and Investigating
- During this stage, students engage in rigorous research. The purpose of this research is to **examine the context, policies, perspectives, and history of their issue, and to learn about possible root causes.**

Stage 4: Developing an Action Plan
- Once students have determined the root causes at the core of their project, it is time to **build a theory of action and action plan aimed at achieving systems impact.**

Stage 5: Taking Action
- Students **begin acting on the tactics they planned.** They move beyond the walls of the classroom and exercise their voice. This is the stage that will be the most unique to each project, depending on the choices students make along the way.

Stage 6: Reflecting and Showcasing
- Students end their project with a final, **summative reflection and work showcase.** Such a showcase is a best practice of project-based learning that supports student pride and ownership. Students should reflect on individual growth and project success throughout the six stages.

dese MASSACHUSETTS Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION