



Student-Led Civics Projects

What We Learned About Their Implementation in Massachusetts

Jacqueline Mendez, Zoe Flanagan, Beth Gamse,
Liah Watt, Rachel McCormick, Elisabet Raquel García
with Meira Levinson (Harvard Graduate School of Education)

Prepared for the Massachusetts Department of
Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) by



June 2025

How This Brief Was Created

This brief summarizes selected findings from a recent study of civics education for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) conducted by MC² Education (MC²), focusing specifically on student civics projects. One aim of the MC² study was to learn whether and how students are engaged in high-quality civics projects in 8th grade and in high school; the current study represents the first systematic effort to learn about student civics projects since the Massachusetts 2018 History and Social Science Framework and its requirements took effect.

Data Used to Study Civics Projects

To learn more about student-led civics projects, we collected three different types of data:

1. **Surveys** of district leaders and teachers responsible for implementing civics projects in their districts, schools, and classrooms (2023-24).
2. **Student project analysis** of 86 student civics projects, obtained from 29 teachers across 25 districts (2024-25).
3. **Focus groups** with students, teachers, and district leaders who had been or were currently involved in student-led civics projects (2023-24 and 2024-25).

I think often we learn about a lot of problems that are happening like economically or socially or just like in our own communities but I think it's rare that we actually go out and do something about it so I thought that was really cool and exciting.

- Student, Focus Group

Data Collection Process

1. The study team asked district leaders to forward a request to civics teachers.
2. Teachers used an online form to upload projects and provide information on instructional practices & student groups.
 - The form included instructions on selecting random projects rather than exemplars.
3. De-identified projects were collected (86 projects in total).

0	1	2	3
Not at all Evidence of component is absent.	Limited Component is present but incomplete. It is not explained & no example is given.	Adequate Component is present, & an explanation/example is provided.	Outstanding Component is present, & a detailed explanation or fully illustrative example is provided.

How We Rated Projects

We used a rubric based on the steps DESE expects to occur in high-quality civics projects (see the [Civics Project Guidebook](#)). Each project received a score for each stage, where higher scores represent higher quality. See the full evaluation report for more detail.

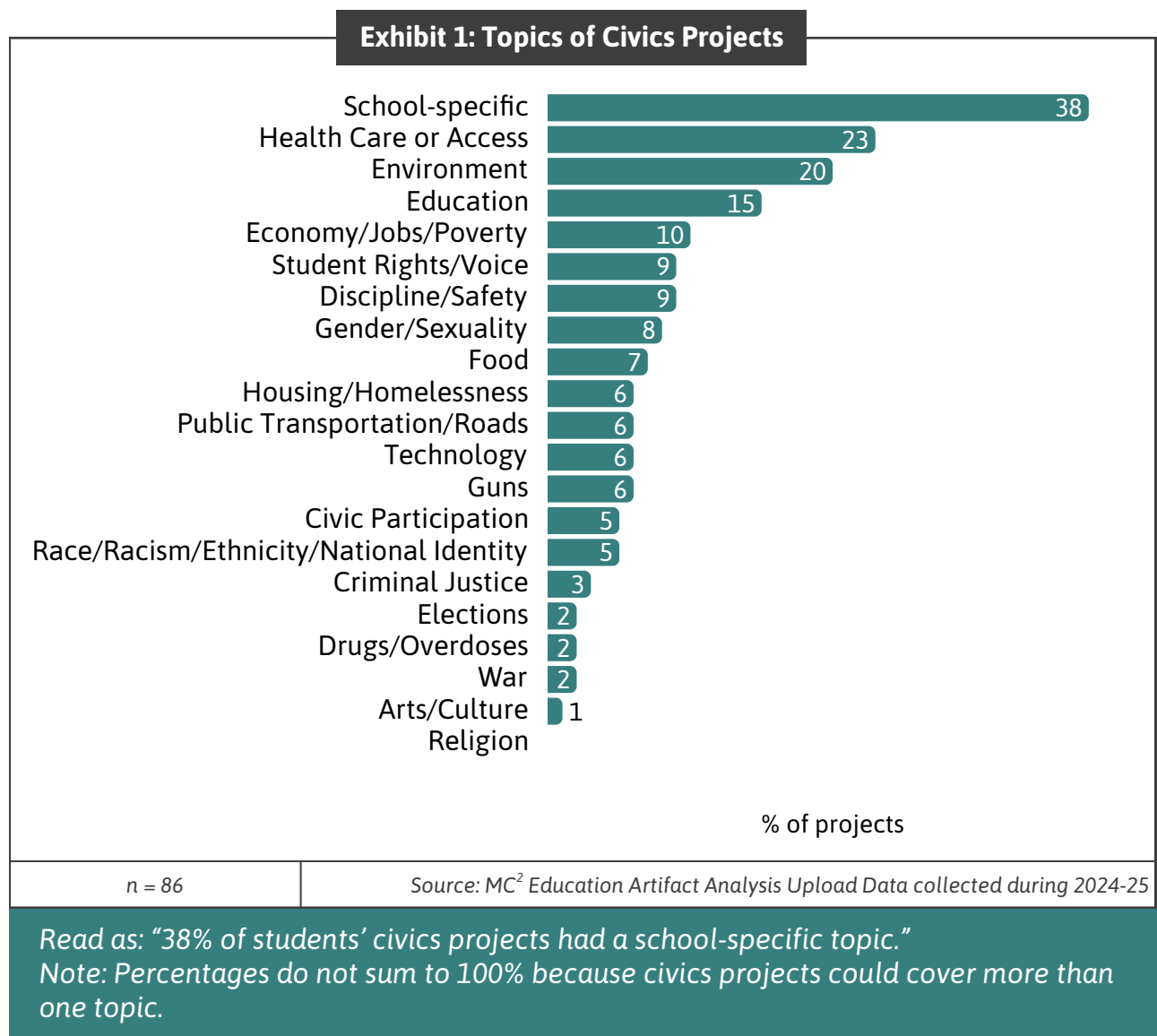
I think all the topics were super interesting and just getting to make an impact on the community it didn't really matter what topic we were doing.

- Student, Focus Group

What We Learned About Civics Projects

Civics Project Topics & Scale

All of the 86 projects we analyzed were non-partisan¹, and addressed a wide range of topics. Most commonly, students address school-specific topics, or topics related to health care, the environment, and education (Exhibit 1).



¹ A project is partisan, according to the DESE Civics Project Guidebook, if it takes a "side in party politics and party competitions" or supports a specific electoral candidate. Student projects may "be directed at ballot propositions, involve student communication with legislators in support of a specific bill, and have political viewpoints that reflect the student's political perspective." These activities are considered non-partisan. Only those student projects designed to support a specific electoral candidate or political party counts as "partisan."

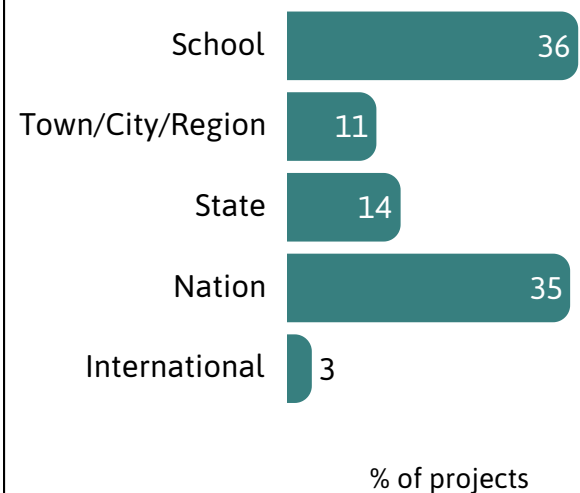
Projects also varied by scale and ranged from school-level to global-level issues. A substantial proportion of the projects (47%) - regardless of topic area - were decidedly local in scale, and targeted students' own schools, towns, or communities (Exhibit 2). Another 49% of projects focused on national or state-level issues.

Quality Ratings of Civics Projects

The projects we collected are snapshots that cannot fully reflect all of the steps taken to complete the project, work in groups, or the resources provided to students. However, we think they provide a helpful window into understanding the projects.

- We were able to rate 79 projects, which varied in score widely (Exhibit 3).
- Average scores were consistently higher in 'Examine' and 'Identify' stages, and decreased across 'Research', 'Plan', 'Take Action', and 'Reflect.'
- Average scores were below 1 ("Limited") for the 'Reflect' stage.
- The pattern of a decrease across stages holds when broken down by grade level, though high school projects scored higher on Stages 5 and 6 than middle school projects (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 2: Scale of Issue for Civics Projects



n = 86

Source: MC² Education Artifact Analysis
Upload Data collected during 2024-25

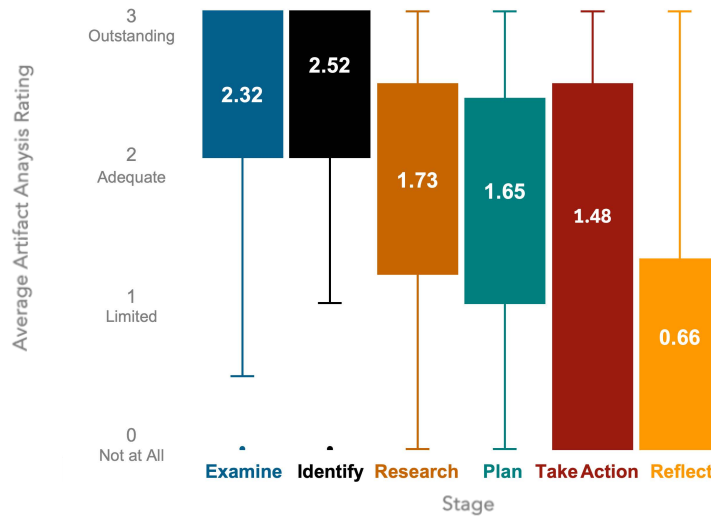
Read as: "36% of students' civics projects had a school-level scale."

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

A lot of our kids do choose things that are local. I mean local government, but also looking at actions within our school district... because that's close to them, and it's most tangible... It also produces change.

- District Leader, Focus Group

Exhibit 3: Average Scores Across Stages

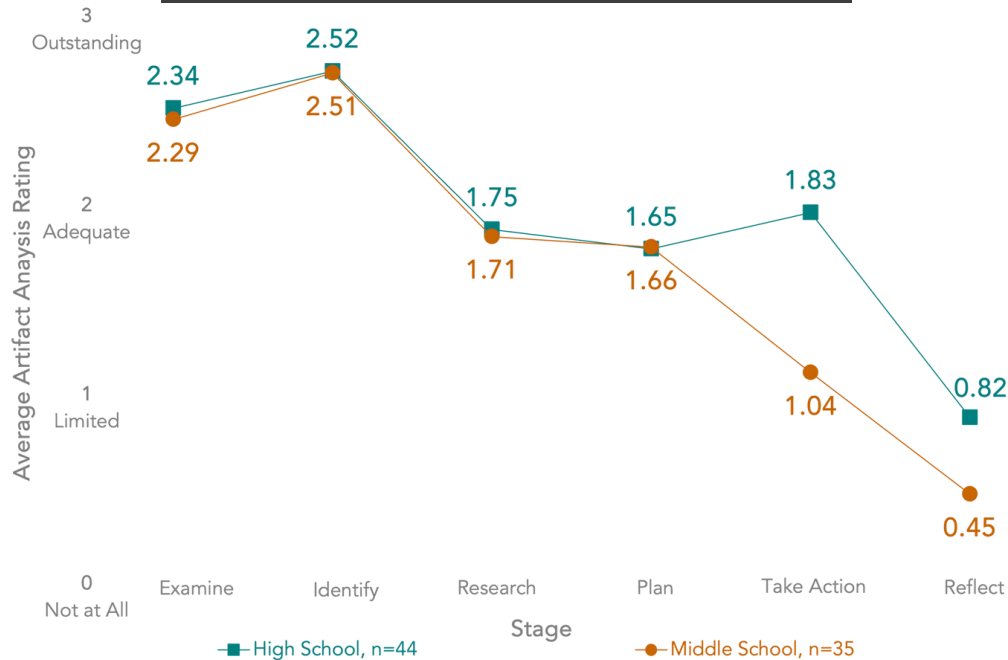


n = 79

Source: MC² Education Artifact Analysis Upload Data collected during 2024-25

Read as: "For Stage 1 (examine self & community), projects' average score was 2.32. The shaded box represents the middle 50 percent of the distribution of ratings."

Exhibit 4: Average Scores Split by Grade Level



n = 79

Source: MC² Education Artifact Analysis Upload Data collected during 2024-25

Read as: "For Stage 1, high school students' civic project artifacts were rated an average of 2.34, and middle school students' artifacts were rated an average of 2.29."

The data from this sample suggest that:

- **Students are generally participating in high-quality civics projects** as measured by this particular rubric in the initial phases [Examine and Identify].
- Students' projects are generally of **lower quality** as measured by this particular rubric **in the later stages** [Take Action and Reflect].
- There is considerable **variation in project quality** as measured by this particular rubric, both across stages and within projects in each stage.
- There may be **opportunities for improvement both in how projects are structured over time and in the nature of guidance** teachers provide to their students about documentation and evidence.
- **Future researchers** may want to
 - observe the processes students engage in to better understand the student learning experience.
 - explore other features of civics projects, including target audience, and whether students continue to focus on the same topics as they move from middle to high school grades.

This set of student projects showed consistent evidence that many students engaged in the six stages outlined by DESE, yet much more so for the first four stages of civics projects.

Challenges and Recommendations

We also learned about civics projects during three focus groups with 13 teachers and three focus groups with 10 district leaders.

- While teachers and district staff found DESE-provided resources helpful, implementing civics projects was not without challenges.
- Teachers and districts staff were often unable to prioritize civics projects for a variety of reasons, including:
 - Time constraints
 - Competing curricular priorities (e.g., MCAS in 8th grade)

I've found the Guidebook straightforward and easy to use. The artifact library has very helpful resources I've used in my own course, in PD with colleagues, and have recommended to others.

- Teacher, Focus Group

There is not enough time to teach history and social studies content and have students engage in meaningful civics projects. One always gets the short end of the stick.

- District Leader, Focus Group

Some facets of the civics project guidance could be amplified, including:

- Providing sufficient time for meaningful engagement at each stage;
- Encouraging inclusion of evidence & examples in project documentation;
- Providing illustrative examples of high-quality completed projects to students.



