# State Seal of Civic Engagement Recommended Criteria

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**California Department of Education**

## State Seal of Civic Engagement Goal

California *Education Code* Section 51470, one of several sections that provides authority for the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) states, “It is the intent of the Legislature to establish a State Seal of Civic Engagement to encourage, and create pathways for, pupils in elementary and secondary schools to become civically engaged in democratic governmental institutions at the local, state, and national levels.”

The SSCE criteria have been developed to assist local educational agencies (LEAs) in supporting all students to develop civic competencies and identities while learning about civic responsibilities by providing high quality opportunities for student voice, civic engagement, and participation in civic life in their schools, communities, and all levels of government.

Research shows that (1) poor and minority students are receiving significantly fewer and inferior civic education opportunities than middle-class and wealthy white students, (2) people living in areas of concentrated poverty are significantly less likely to be engaged civically, and have fewer opportunities for civic engagement than those living in more mixed or affluent communities (Kahne, Joseph, and Ellen Middaugh. 2008. “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School.” February 2008), and (3) the more often a young person is civically engaged, the more likely they are to be civically engaged throughout their life (Kahne, Joseph, and Susan E. Sporte. 2008. “Developing Citizens: the Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation.” September 2008.)

Throughout their History–Social Science (HSS) educational experience, students are given opportunities to learn about the governance structures in which they operate (such as political process, power in democracy, current and controversial issues, civic leaders and candidates, etc.). Other content areas may inform students about issues they care about and/or that impact their communities, all the while appreciating multiple viewpoints and working with the institutions of power to serve the common good.

Even the youngest students can engage in and demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Civic learning opportunities may begin as early as pre-kindergarten, elementary, and middle school. School districts may consider collaborating with their feeder elementary and middle schools and English language development specialists as they develop local criteria, interim award opportunities, and applicable on-ramps for the SSCE. LEAs that enable early and ongoing opportunities for all students to gain civic knowledge, practice and apply civic skills, develop digital citizenship skills, realize civic responsibilities, and cultivate relationships with their communities will help to prepare civically aware, skilled, and engaged citizens.

Throughout the process, students are encouraged to consider interdisciplinary projects and issues, using all the knowledge and skills they have gained across the curriculum to engage with their communities.

## Recommended Criteria

The student must:

1. Be on track to complete required high school coursework;
2. Demonstrate a “competent understanding” of United States (U.S.) and California constitutions; functions and governance of local governments; tribal government structures and organizations; and democratic principles, concepts, and processes;
3. Participate in one or more informed action civics project(s) to address real world problems;
4. Present a written or oral reflection of student civic engagement project activities; and
5. Exhibit character traits that support civic-mindedness, supported by a letter of recommendation from a peer, educator, mentor, local elected official, or non-familial community member.

## State Seal of Civic Engagement Implementation Guidance

The following guidance for each criterion offers ideas and considerations to structure local SSCE requirements. Each LEA can determine how to implement the criteria in its own local context. Local school district boards are encouraged to approve or adopt their own policies regarding implementation of the SSCE criteria.

### Criteria 1:

**Be on track to complete required high school coursework.**

Districts may use their own definition of in “good standing” for a student to graduate or grade promote, such as:

* Being on track to graduate—using district or state requirements
* Demonstrating academic improvement for all youth (challenges faced by students who are English Learners [EL], homeless, in foster care, and/or incarcerated should be considered)
* Building constructive relationship(s) with the school community, (e.g., prosocial behaviors)

LEAs may also consider using student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to specify levels needed to attain “good standing, or for students to be on track to receive a Certificate of Completion.

### Criteria 2:

**Demonstrate a “competent understanding” of U.S. and California constitutions; functions and governance of local governments; tribal government structures and organizations; and democratic principles, concepts, and processes.**

Students must complete grade level HSS course requirements in U.S. history and American Government with a passing grade. LEAs may determine, through local board of education policy, their local definitions of a passing grade. LEAs may choose to measure fulfillment of HSS course requirements with a district-specific content benchmark or civic assessment. LEA encouragement of student participation in local governmental meetings may also be considered. LEAs may also consider encouraging grade eleven student fulfillment of the criteria in order for a seal to be affixed to a transcript for use in post-secondary college applications.

### Criteria 3:

**Participate in one or more informed action civics project(s) to address real world problems.**

The term, “action civics” refers to the service learning approach when students choose and define problems in their community, develop and implement plans to address those problems, and reflect on their actions and are encouraged to develop identities as citizens (with rights and responsibilities). Action civics augments service learning by encouraging students to consider influencing institutional policies along with other options for addressing problems.

Participation in informed civic action activities may take many forms. In order to promote student use of inquiry, educators are encouraged to use the Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning document, which is available on the Education Commission of the States web page at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/48/11048.pdf>. This document can help educators support students as they build civic skills during class and on the school campus as a whole. In addition, to support students as they gain civic skills, educators may want to consider several complementary streams of practice such as digital media literacy education, social-emotional learning, and school climate reform, as noted in *The Republic is [Still] at Risk—and Civics is Part of the Solution* document, which is available on the CivXNow web page at <https://civxnow.org/static/media/SummitWhitePaper.fc2a3bb5.pdf>. Both of these documents provide information to support students’ civic knowledge and skill development as they endeavor to earn the SSCE.

Additional information on civic engagement activities can be found in the *Revitalizing K–12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint for Action* document, which is available on the CDE Civics, Government, and Service Learning Resources web page at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/documents/cltffinalreport.pdf>. Students are encouraged to pursue projects that relate to issues that matter to them and their communities and that incorporate social action and policy change that could range from local to global. Action civics projects may integrate skills and knowledge across content areas. The student exemplars in the chart beginning on page seven may look different in different LEA contexts. Table 1 is provided to demonstrate a range of options that could satisfy Criteria #3. The exemplars provided are not definitive but considered a starting point for local decision making. The goal is for all students to have opportunities for experiential learning to advance democratic ideals.

Volunteering may be an aspect of a civic engagement project; however, volunteering alone does not constitute a project to address a real world problem.

Additional kindergarten through grade twelve instructional resources are available in Table 2.

### Criteria 4:

**Present a written or oral reflection of student civic engagement project activities.**

Not only do the abilities to analyze and critique their own work, collaborate, take action, and self-reflect help fulfill the SSCE criteria, but they also ensure that an eligible student candidate for the SSCE is college, career, and civic ready.

Through self-reflection, the student will demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Student self-reflection could show:

* How the student engaged with institutions of power to advance a common good (for the student’s community and/or society as a whole) or a democratic ideal, such as equity and justice;
* What the student learned and how the student has personally grown through the civic engagement activity,
* How the student was continuously involved in the project over a period of time.

Self-reflection may be exhibited in written or oral form and may include the project’s impact on the student’s learning and growth in civic skills. This may include working with others, the interdisciplinary skills applied, the effectiveness of the action taken for the community the student endeavored to serve, and ideas for further or future work. Some examples include:

* A capstone project or portfolio with self-reflection on project activities, including successes and challenges;
* A public presentation regarding information on roadblocks, or issues that happened within the civic engagement activity;
* A public presentation such as (but not limited to) a video, slide show, speech, digital presentation, photo exhibit, podcast, social media use, or scheduled meeting with a policy maker;
* A written essay explaining why an activity was chosen; what activities were undertaken; what was learned; what civic skills, competencies, and knowledge were gained; how the efforts impacted the community; and how the activity may inspire future civic engagement activities for the student or others.

The reflection or presentation should reflect a student’s choice of civic engagement activities. LEAs might consider a bi-yearly civics showcase event for students to have a platform to present their action civics project work.

### Criteria 5:

**Exhibit character traits that support civic-mindedness, supported by a letter of recommendation from a peer, educator, mentor, local elected official, or non-familial community member.**

1. Civic mindedness may encompass:

* Concern for the rights and well-being of others and a desire to contribute to the common good;
* Appreciating and seeking out a variety of perspectives and valuing differences;
* Having a sense of civic duty at local, state, national, and global levels;
* Being aware of the value of their own experiences and their power to act, and being predisposed to take action to change things for the better.

1. Evidence of observed character traits that support civic-mindedness may include:
   * Speaking and engaging others with respect and civility, especially those who are different and/or have diverse or opposing views;
   * Demonstrating empathy and understanding through inclusion and helping to elevate the voices of others;
   * Standing up for another student who is experiencing bullying, harassment, or unwanted attention;
   * Leading a group to work toward providing a common good.

Additional information on civic values may be found in the *Revitalizing K–12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint for Action* document, which is available on the CDE Civic Education Initiatives web page at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/documents/cltffinalreport.pdf>.

Students may submit letters from peers who hold an appointed or elected position in a school or civic related organization or from a coworker at a salary earning job or volunteer or paid internship.

Students may submit letters from adults who are educators, coworkers/supervisors, civic leaders, elected officials, mentors, or coaches.

## Table 1: Examples of Civic Engagement Projects: Grades Nine Through Twelve

| **Description of Civic Learning Goal** | **Project Example** |
| --- | --- |
| School support for nonpartisan engagement in all parts of the electoral process, including voter education, voter registration, and voter mobilization. | Students analyze voter turnout data for their community and formulate an outreach plan explaining to their peers why voting matters. Students can partner with a local civic institution to organize a voter registration drive at their school or in their community. |
| Students research different points of view online and learn to engage in respectful, informed, and productive online dialogue. | In class and teacher led, students practice effective discussion and deliberation techniques for controversial topics. Students select a subject of current controversy and analyze the coverage of the topic on two news sites with differing viewpoints. They check for or critique the accuracy and credibility of the information shared and of the corresponding site sources. They also conduct an audit of the online discourse readers had in response to the story, identify effective and ineffective comments and exchanges and then create a rubric with examples. After refining their tools, students create a “Better Online Conversation” campaign sharing their rubric publicly, and offer classes to community members during a school open house, using English and/or a second language. |
| Students engage in opportunities to voice their perspectives and share their feedback on current issues or policies, including social problems, to relevant and meaningful audiences. | Possible student opportunities include:   * Gathering information, data, and feedback before presenting a plan for change before a decision making body, such as a school board, special district board, city council, or legislator. * Displaying leadership by serving on an elected or appointed leadership position in an organization related to student government, school governance, or public policy for at least two full years. * Organizing a town hall meeting, community protest, boycott/buycott, or parent education night. * Writing a letter to the governing body of a local government in favor of or against an item of interest under consideration by the local government. * Producing and circulating media (such as a video, infographic, photo exhibit, or online post) in order to raise the public’s awareness about a critical civic or political issue. |
| Students organize a new effort and recruit others to participate. | Students may start a new campaign on their school campus such as a recycling program, campus beautification effort, school garden, representation on school decision-making committees, or set up an organization or a fundraiser to support or address a social issue. |
| Students demonstrate an interest in politics and the political system. | Examples include:   * Students may research state or local government issues or candidates and publish a voter’s guide. * Students may write a series of editorials to a newspaper (online or print). * Students evaluate a candidate’s platform once that candidate has been elected and share their findings with a relevant and meaningful audience. * Students may research candidates’ statements in order to fact check their accuracy and validity and share the results with a relevant and meaningful audience. * Students may develop, administer, disaggregate results, and present information from a survey instrument regarding a community issue. * Students may work with an elected official or employee from a county, city, or special district, federal or state legislator, or policy maker to propose a new law. |

## Table 2: Select Pre-Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve Resources

| **Resource** | **Website URL** |
| --- | --- |
| Teaching Tolerance—Classroom Civil Discourse | <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/toward-a-more-civil-discourse> |
| National Geographic—Geo Inquiry Curriculum | <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/education/programs/geo-inquiry/> |
| Mikva—Soap Box Challenge | [http://bit.ly/ProjectSoapbox](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=http-3A__bit.ly_ProjectSoapbox&d=DwMGaQ&c=SIStQSL0VMIUJoLS-Q8giiFlA-AKdP7tpJHyQh8DeXk&r=za2Kso8c8uEpMvUm2fiV8g&m=S4UHWEFsNgOKnR5eBpR2OXVaH1UMta8WPZnTXtk_-Gk&s=0wgWlzO-RpNtuynTaWmgxpIMblT0UtbXgWfA4J1da04&e=) |
| Constitutional Rights Foundations — Civic Action Project | <http://www.crfcap.org/> |
| Stanford History Education Group—Civic Online Reasoning | <https://sheg.stanford.edu/civic-online-reasoning> |
| Facing History and Ourselves—Preparing Students for Difficult Conversations | <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/facing-ferguson-news-literacy-digital-age/preparing-students-difficult> (registration required) |
| Generation Citizen | <https://generationcitizen.org/> |
| Way of Council (Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle) | <https://www.amazon.com/Way-Council-Jack-Zimmerman/dp/1883647185> |