

West Hartford Public School District

Agenda Item: Civic Engagement

Meeting Date: April 17, 2018

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Background

West Hartford Public Schools, as a public education system, has a responsibility to develop students who are caring, informed, and responsible citizens of the local and global community. Thomas Ehrlich, author of *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, defines civic engagement as “...working to make a difference in the civic life of one’s community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (17). Developing the understanding and spirit of civic engagement from grades Pre-K through 12 in West Hartford is fostered through classroom instruction as well as school-based efforts. This report provides an overview of how we define civics from a curricular lens as well as co-curricular efforts to foster civic engagement.

Civics Curriculum & Instruction: Developing knowledge, skills, values and motivation

National and State Standards: Social Studies (Civics, History, Geography, Economics)

In February 2015, the Connecticut State Department of Education adopted [Connecticut Elementary and Secondary Social Studies Frameworks](#). These frameworks were based on the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) [College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#) and address four disciplines of social studies learning - history, geography, **civics**, and economics. As part of the C3 Framework, the civics section represents a foundational step toward developing student understanding of the “history, principles, and foundations of our American democracy” (31-34).

Elementary Curriculum and Instructional Practices

In 2015, West Hartford educators developed a Civics Matrix which defines a PreK-5 learning progression of civics knowledge and skills. We designed the matrix in two parts: Foundations of Citizenship and Civic Virtue (PreK-Grade 3) and Government (Grades 4 and 5). The QR Code at left and hyperlink [PreK-Grade 5 Civics Matrix](#) provide access to this teaching framework. Throughout the school day, within both the classroom and school community, students engage in intentional learning experiences around (1) developing a positive self-concept, (2) identifying, understanding, and regulating emotions of self and others, (3) developing an understanding of rules and responsibilities within communities, and (4) developing positive interpersonal relationships. These four domains of social skills are critical for learning and provide the foundation for future civic engagement and understanding of government. Our focus shifts to a study of Connecticut and local government in grade 4 and federal



government in grade 5.

Core elementary curriculum resources include Second Step and Responsive Classroom. Second Step is an evidence-based social-emotional learning program that “has been shown to decrease problem behaviors, designed to promote school success, self-regulation, and a sense of safety and support” (www.secondstep.org/elementary-school-curriculum). Lessons focus on topics such as problem-solving, advocating for oneself and others, and conflict resolution. Responsive Classroom is an evidenced-based program that promotes academic success through social-emotional learning and “empowers educators to create safe, joyful, and engaging learning communities where all students have a sense of belonging and feel significant” (www.responsiveclassroom.org). Regular morning meetings are a core component of this approach to developing a classroom environment of trust and belonging. In addition, West Hartford Police Department Resource Officers visit elementary classrooms. The visits help students learn about basic safety rules within the community. Lesson topics include the role of police officers, pedestrian and bicycle safety, and substance abuse. In addition to these core resources and experiences, teachers use a variety of tools, supplementary resources, and co-curricular opportunities to foster learning in civics based on school and classroom needs.

Secondary Curriculum and Instructional Practices

At the secondary level, several curricular connections promote civic engagement. The sixth and seventh grade social studies curriculum, through its focus on world regional studies, helps students develop patterns of thinking and habits of mind necessary for civic behavior and future learning. This programming, taught over two years, exposes students to major themes and contemporary issues affecting the world. A key objective is to foster a systems-thinking approach to analyzing global problems with an eye toward identifying ways to address these problems. The culminating activity engages students in action research about a global problem of interest to them. Students work collaboratively to research the global problem and apply a systems thinking approach to identifying the factors that influence and affect the problem. Using a systems map, and tasked with the goal of “thinking globally, acting locally,” students design and implement a project to address the problem. This action-research project is in its early stages and the first cohort of seventh grade students to be involved will engage in this process at the end of this year.

At the high school level, state graduation requirements mandate achievement of a minimum of a half-credit in civics/American government (Conn. Gen. Stat. §10-221a). WHPS curriculum features a half-year American Government course that fulfills this state requirement. We also offer an Advanced Placement U.S. Government & Politics course for students who have interest in learning more about government and the political process. A key component of the American Government curriculum is the “democracy portfolio,” a requirement students must complete in order to earn credit for the course. The portfolio specifies a series of activities that engage students at varying levels of depth of understanding and action within the democratic process while offering flexibility and student choice. Level I activities are to “learn about” a topic. At this level, students are required to educate themselves about a topic in government beyond topics presented in the curriculum. Examples of Level I topics might include students attending a meeting of municipal government or following a topic in the news. A level II activity involves students “telling about” what they have learned. This may take the form of a short presentation to the class, creation of a video, or other forms of communication to a wider audience. Level III activities require students to “do something about” an issue. This level of activity engages students in the development and implementation of an activity designed to address a need and/or effect some change within the community. Examples might include organizing and carrying out a voter registration drive; or design and implementing a community service project. Because student schedules and family commitments vary, students have full choice over the activities to fulfill the

portfolio requirement.

Civics through Co-Curricular Experiences: Making a difference in the community

“Civics is not limited to the study of politics and society; it also encompasses participation in classrooms and schools, neighborhoods, groups, and organizations... In civics, students learn to contribute appropriately to public processes and discussions of real issues” (*C3 Framework* 31). At all grades, students engage in a wide range of co-curricular activities that enhance their academic learning and support understanding and development of civic engagement. These activities, which may be staff or student-facilitated, provide opportunity to make a difference and take action to improve their school communities as well as the global community.

Developing Social-Awareness

- Environmental Awareness Club (S)
- Feminist Coalition (S)
- G.S.A. (S)
- Human Rights Coalition (S)
- “Look for the Good”/gratitude & kindness campaign (E)
- “Shout-outs” for peers exhibiting positive profiles (E)
- Student-led assemblies (E)
- Student ambassadors, mentors, morning announcers (E)
- Student of the month tied to character, choices (E)
- International/multicultural celebrations (E)
- Multicultural Club (S)
- Voices of the Other (S)

Addressing issues or responding to problems to improve the communities to which we belong

- Action Club (S)
- Recycling at lunch, recycling teams, using recyclable materials for projects (E)
- Hallway/bus safety patrol team (E)
- Unified Recess (E)
- Cafeteria monitors to support clean-up (E)
- Backpack Brigade and pet shelter supplies (E)
- Hat/mitten/sock drives for the homeless (E)
- Unified Sports/Theatre (E, S)
- Disaster relief fundraisers (E, S)
- Food pantry donation drives (E, S)
- Cross Age Connections (S)
- Circle of Friends (S)

Key

E ~ Elementary
S ~ Secondary

Learning about rules, systems & government

- Citizenship Club (S)
- Connecticut Youth Forum (S)
- Debate Team (S)
- Student engagement in development of classroom rules, agreements, compacts (E)
- Responsive classroom, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (E)
- Grade 4 State Capitol visit aligned with grade level study of local and state government (E)
- Mock Trial (S)
- Model UN (S)
- Political Discussion Club (S)
- Student Council campaigns and weekly meetings to create changes in school rules and operations (E)
- Young Democrats Club (S)

Making positive, proactive contributions to society

- Book buddies and math partners (E)
- Community Service Club (S)
- Empty Bowls (S)
- Projects to bring awareness and community support (E):
 - Autism Awareness
 - CCMC Pajama Day
 - Jump Rope for Heart
 - World Down Syndrome Day
 - Johnny’s Jog
- Garden committee (E)
- Habitat for Humanity (S)
- International Aid Club (S)
- Iron Giraffe Challenge (S)
- Cards for troops (E)

Kerry Jones, Chad Ellis, and Ashley Callan will be available to answer questions.