

# Improving Communities through Youth Civic Engagement in Afterschool Settings

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States is facing a critical challenge when it comes to youth civic engagement, with young people often feeling uninformed and unqualified to participate in civic and political life despite a strong belief in their collective power to drive change. This predicament underscores the urgent need for supportive environments that foster civic learning and action. Afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to address this gap by providing hands-on, community-centered, and youth-led experiences. These programs offer vital spaces where young people can develop essential civic skills, translate their beliefs into real-world action, and cultivate a sense of belonging and efficacy.

### Bridging the Civic Opportunity Gap for Young People

While the majority of young people (76%) believe they have the power to make change, and even more (83%) feel they can do so by working with other generations, only half feel well-informed and just 40% feel well-qualified to participate in politics. This gap highlights the need for programs to actively empower young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to actively participate in civic life.

Youth voter turnout, a key metric of civic engagement, saw a record high of 50% in 2020 but dipped to 47% in 2024 for those aged 18-29. A significant factor contributing to lower engagement is the prevalence of “Civic Deserts”—areas where 60% of rural youth and one-third of suburban/urban youth perceive a lack of resources for engagement. Afterschool programs are crucial in these areas, providing much-needed opportunities.



Photo credit: Vermont Afterschool

## Benefits and Impact of Youth Civic Engagement

Engaging youth in civic activities yields notable benefits for individuals, communities, and the nation, including:

- **Youth Well-being:** Civic engagement is linked to improved academic performance, better behavior, and stronger community connections. Long-term, civically engaged youth are more likely to achieve higher education and income, report greater life satisfaction, and are less prone to risky behaviors.
- **Community Improvements:** Youth-led initiatives can drive positive community-level change, such as middle schoolers reducing wildfire risks in rural Colorado, students restoring oyster habitats in New York Harbor, and more.
- **Workforce Development:** Civic skills like communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration are directly transferable to the workforce and are crucial for career readiness. Programs fostering leadership and civil discourse prepare youth for professional success.

## Civic and Democratic Education: Bridging K-12 Student Programs and Afterschool

While K-12 civics education in schools and community engagement efforts in afterschool programs often operate independently, there is a growing recognition of the need to bridge this divide to create a more robust ecosystem for youth civic participation. Examples of exemplary programs and initiatives doing this work include the **Illinois Democracy Schools (ISD) model**, a school-wide approach that integrates community, family, and afterschool programming to strengthen democratic learning and foster student voice. Another is the **Vermont State Youth Council** (supported by the Vermont Afterschool Network), which provides formal platforms for young people to influence policy and decision-making, offering hands-on learning about government processes, and advocating for their communities.

## The Growing Intersection of STEM and Civic Engagement

Afterschool programs nationwide are leading an exciting movement, integrating science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and civic engagement. This natural synergy equips young people with the knowledge, tools, and agency to tackle real-world issues in our increasingly STEM-driven world, fostering a new generation of active and empowered citizens. Organizations like **trubel&co** empower youth to use geospatial technology (GIS) to address social justice and environmental issues, fostering data literacy, critical thinking, and community advocacy. **Technovation** equips girls globally to use technology to solve community problems, encouraging them to develop mobile apps that address real-world challenges, such as an app to reduce paper waste in schools. These programs demonstrate how STEM can be a powerful tool for civic action, inspiring a new generation of innovators dedicated to positive change.



Photo credit: Technovation

## Recommendations

Cultivating civically engaged young people is crucial for their well-being, their communities, and the future of democracy. By fostering collaborations that include afterschool programs, which demonstrably build civic dispositions and empower youth to act, we can more effectively bring democratic lessons to life and nurture a new generation of active citizens. Recognizing this profound potential, the following recommendations outline a path forward for maximizing youth civic engagement in afterschool programs.

- 1 Empower Authentic Youth Voice and Leadership:** When young people feel their voices are heard and valued, they will build confidence and a sense of agency, recognizing the power of civic engagement and the collective power to address community and public issues they see.
- 2 Focus Intentionally on Developing Youth Civic Identity and Engagement:** Taking a cohesive approach that weaves civic identity throughout established youth development practices—including youth voice and empowerment and holistic youth thriving and well-being—will ensure that democratic lessons become an inherent part of young people’s personal and social development.
- 3 Break Down Silos and Promote Cross-sector Collaborations:** Actively dismantle existing silos in education by promoting and incentivizing interdisciplinary collaborations across settings, particularly between schools and afterschool programs. Youth civic engagement needs a robust and multi-pronged approach that addresses young people’s holistic development and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need across career, community, and civic life.
- 4 Support Integrated Research on Youth Civic Engagement:** Synthesize existing research across STEM, civics, and youth development to effectively support youth in fully realizing their power and agency across all dimensions of their lives, rather than treating them as isolated areas.
- 5 Establish or Expand a Coordinating Entity for Resources, Partnerships, and Exchange of Expertise:** Build new or expand existing networks focused on involving young people authentically in civics and STEM learning. Such networks can mainstream best practices, share lessons learned, broker relationships between stakeholders looking to collaborate, and coordinate tailored professional development and technical assistance for diverse stakeholders.



Photo credit: trubel&co

*This report was a collaboration between CYESS, a project of the Afterschool Alliance, and CIRCLE, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University’s Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life.*

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