

Insights Brief

Connecting Professional Development to the Curricula: Insights from the Center for Civic Education

Amid recent calls for improvements in professional development, a frequent refrain is that teachers need more training geared specifically to the curricula they teach.¹ The argument is that much of the training teachers receive is focused on generic teaching skills or general content knowledge, but teachers need more training on how to deliver the specific curricula they use in their classrooms. Despite calls to connect professional development to the curriculum, there is limited guidance on how to do so. This brief describes insights from the Center for Civic Education’s experience implementing professional development aligned to its civics curriculum as part of a U.S. Department of Education Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant.

BACKGROUND

The James Madison Legacy Project (JMLP) is a professional development program that supports teachers in using the Center for Civic Education’s “We the People” curriculum. The program is meant to build teachers’ competence and confidence to engage diverse learners in key ideas about the U.S. Constitution. The Center for Civic Education developed JMLP to address the concern that teachers need deeper knowledge of constitutional concepts to teach the “We the People” curriculum in a meaningful way. Teachers are grouped regionally and participate in 36 hours of in-service institutes over the summer, followed by 16 additional hours over the course of the school year.

A central feature of the training are lectures and discussions led by scholars to build teachers’ knowledge related to constitutional principles and history. After these talks, mentor teachers help participants incorporate this knowledge into their instruction and develop their plans for teaching the curriculum. Although these talks by scholars were initially delivered in person, the Center has used videos to deliver the content online in certain sites. Teachers in these “blended” sites can access an online platform to watch videos assigned by the JMLP mentors and submit brief answers to prompts. The platform also lets teachers share their ideas for teaching specific parts of the textbook.

Studies of the JMLP have found that it improves the civics knowledge of both teachers and students.²

About this series

The U.S. Department of Education’s SEED grants fund evidence-based programs that prepare and develop effective educators. As SEED grantees implement, adapt, and grow their programs, they gain valuable insights that can inform the work of districts, states, and organizations working to improve educator effectiveness. In this series of briefs, grantees share these insights with the broader field. Each brief describes a grantee’s perspective on the lessons learned from its implementation experiences.

The briefs are part of a broader project for the Office of Innovation and Improvement to disseminate lessons learned from SEED grants. Mathematica Policy Research is leading the project in partnership with AEM and Knowledge Design Partners. This brief was prepared based on input from the Center for Civic Education.

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INSIGHTS ON CONNECTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO THE CURRICULUM

Below are insights from the Center for Civic Education on linking professional development to the curriculum

What does it mean to connect professional development to the curriculum?

The Center for Civic Education's professional development is connected to its curriculum in several ways:

- ❖ **The professional development program follows the same structure as the curriculum for students.** Professional development that aligns with a curriculum provides a chance to immerse teachers in the structure and design of the curriculum. The Center for Civic Education organizes its professional development into six parts that align with the six units of the curriculum for students. As a result, the professional development covers the core content for each part of the curriculum and in the same order that teachers cover it with students.
- ❖ **Teachers experience the same types of learning activities that they will use with students.** Directly linking teachers' professional learning to their curriculum provides opportunities to train teachers on the specific activities they will conduct with students. For example, in the "We the People" curriculum, teachers are expected to lead classroom discussions on central themes related to the U.S. Constitution and to organize the culminating activity (a simulated congressional hearing). To prepare teachers for this role, mentors who lead the JMLP engage teachers in the same types of discussions and activities that teachers will use with their students. The discussions typically revolve around a central idea, such as "What is due process?" or "How has the right to vote been expanded since the adoption of the Constitution?" This gives mentors a chance to model the learning activity and teachers a chance to experience rich conversations before they lead these types of conversations themselves.
- ❖ **The program gives teachers the specific content knowledge they need to teach the curriculum.** Content-focused professional development may be designed to broadly improve teachers' knowledge of a

subject without any connections to the curricula teachers use. In contrast, the Center for Civic Education's program builds the specific content knowledge that teachers need to teach each unit of the curriculum. In the Center's blended approach, teachers watch a series of video interviews of Constitutional scholars covering the key points in each unit of the student curriculum (teachers watch the videos in segments lasting from four to seven minutes). Mentors use the videos as the basis for discussions with teachers about the Constitution and how to teach it. Teachers also have online access to the videos so they can review them as they prepare their instruction.

How can professional development be connected to the curriculum and tailored to teachers' needs?

Professional development linked to a curriculum needs to account for the fact that teachers have different levels of knowledge related to the curriculum content. Teachers also have different school contexts and student populations that present different challenges for teaching the curriculum.

The Center for Civic Education allows mentors to adapt the professional development to the needs of the teachers who attend. During the summer training, the mentors ask teachers for periodic feedback on how prepared they feel to teach the content (for example, teachers fill out brief evaluations at the end of each day describing the aspects of the day that were most useful to them and the additional guidance they need). Teachers in the blended model can also use an online forum to seek guidance from mentors and other teachers on current challenges. In addition, in-person follow-up training during the year is used to address the challenges that teachers encounter as they begin teaching the curriculum to their students.

What types of educators are well-positioned to train teachers on how to deliver a curriculum?

Professional development that is aligned to a curriculum may require trainers with different types of skills and knowledge than other development opportunities. For

example, training that is based on a curriculum could benefit from experienced teachers who know the curriculum and have experience teaching it. The JMLP relies heavily on mentor teachers to guide other teachers through the core knowledge needed for the curriculum and to engage teachers in rigorous discussion. The Center for Civic Education recruits mentors who have extensive experience teaching the curriculum, focusing on those who are particularly skilled with the curriculum's content and pedagogy. This approach allows mentors to draw on their own practical understanding of how to engage students with the material.

What types of supports are useful for educators who provide curriculum-based training to teachers?

A key question for professional development providers is how to support those who train teachers. The Center for Civic Education holds an annual meeting for mentors to collaborate and plan their professional development activities together.

During this meeting, mentors collaboratively develop plans for how they will engage teachers in discussions on each of the curriculum's six units. For example, mentors participate in a "jigsaw" activity in which they break into six small groups and each group plans activities for one of the six units. They are then reconfigured so that each group includes one "expert" on each unit, and they continue planning.

This approach allows mentors to develop training plans for all six units that are informed by several other mentors. For each unit, these plans typically include key vocabulary (such as "civic virtue" and "social contract"), sample discussion questions (such as "What did John Locke believe to be the purpose of government?"), and suggested activities (such as a "Pin the Tail on the

Philosopher" game, in which players must explain why certain ideas, quotes, and historical figures belong to one of three views on the role of government). This collaborative approach to planning gives mentors a chance to benefit from the collective experiences of other mentors and to share lessons learned from their experiences with the curriculum.

The training plans and other resources shared by mentors are posted on the Center's online mentor forum. Mentors across the country can add resources and exchange ideas on the forum as they plan for professional development and support teachers throughout the academic year.

About this Brief

This brief was prepared based on input from several leaders at the Center for Civic Education: Maria Gallo, Director of Professional Development; John Hale, Associate Director; Alissa Irion-Groth, Director of Program Administration; Diana Owen, Associate Professor at Georgetown University and Principal Investigator for Research for JMLP; and Scott Schroeder at Georgetown University and Research Specialist for JMLP.

Jeff Archer and Jeffrey Max worked with the Center for Civic Education to develop this brief.

For more information on the Center for Civic Education's James Madison Legacy Project, visit: <http://www.civiced.org/programs/jmlp>.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For example: Darling-Hammond, Linda, Marla Hyler, and Madelyn Gardner. "Effective Teacher Professional Development." Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2017. Hawley Miles, Karen, David Rosenberg, and Genevieve Quist Green. "Igniting the Learning Engine: How School Systems Accelerate Teacher Effectiveness and Student Growth Through 'Connected Professional Learning'." Watertown, MA: Education Resource Strategies, 2017. Weiner, Ross, and Susan Pimentel. "Practice What You Teach: Connecting Curriculum and Professional Learning in Schools." Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. 2017

² Owen, Diana, and Scott Schroeder. "Research Brief: James Madison Legacy Project, Cohort 2: Student Knowledge." Washington, DC: Georgetown University, August 2017. All of the Center for Civic Education's evaluations can be found at: <http://www.civiced.org/resources/research/researchevaluation>