

Best Practices in Civic/Law-Related Education: What Does “Good” Look Like?*

The national evaluation of law-related education conducted in the early 1980s identified six best practices (then called “prescriptions” or “essential elements”), which have been updated and expanded to reflect more recent research in teaching and learning, prevention, and civic education. Particularly influential in revising these best practices for the 21st century was the 2003 *Civic Mission of Schools* report and the research on which it rests.

While best practices are always evolving, current research suggests the following are key elements of powerful civic/law-related education programs. Of course, each of the best practices has a quality dimension; for example, a discussion that indoctrinates students, rather than encouraging them to think critically about multiple perspectives on a controversial issue, will not achieve the desired outcomes. Developing our own and other educators’ capacity to address these best practices is a challenge for the field.

- **Deliberate focus on civic/law-related student outcomes.** In order to achieve outcomes related to greater student engagement in civic and political life, educators must explicitly emphasize these outcomes as part of their teaching. Such outcomes include students’ propensity to vote, to work on local problems, to join voluntary associations, and to follow the news. Educators should explicitly encourage students to be civically and politically engaged.
- **Focus on essential civic/law-related knowledge and skills.** This knowledge includes legal literacy focusing on civil, criminal, and constitutional themes; practical information about the law and public policy; and concepts underlying our constitutional democracy. LRE skills include critical thinking (e.g., decision making, problem solving) and social participation (e.g., communication, cooperation, and empathy). All other aspects of practice must be linked to the essential LRE knowledge and skills targeted as outcomes.
- **Judicious selection and presentation of issues and materials.** Materials should be selected so that they provide a balanced view of the judicial system and other aspects of our political system. Controversy is also important, as it motivates student interest. Finally, treatment of legal and constitutional issues should be characterized by depth of analysis.
- **Sufficient quantity of instruction.** While “sufficient quantity” is not a precisely defined term, programs where LRE is a semester course or is carefully integrated into a yearlong course represent the quantity the early LRE research suggests is needed. Particularly intense programs of shorter duration may also meet this criterion. Programs that begin early in a student’s school career and provide ongoing reinforcement are more likely to be effective than programs where civic/law-related education is concentrated in one course.
- **Use of hands-on, active teaching strategies, particularly strategies that foster true student interaction and provide opportunities to share and develop respect for different points of view.** Two key teaching approaches recommended in the CMS report as best practices are open and balanced classroom discussion of current controversial issues and participation in simulated democratic processes, which give the school curriculum a “real-life” connection. Other characteristics of sound instruction (sharing objectives with students, drawing on students’ existing knowledge and linking that knowledge to new information, multiple opportunities to practice skills, etc.) are also important.

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- **Repeated opportunities for students to interact with community resource persons who have been well prepared for constructive interaction with students.** The content presented by resource persons should be integrated with course content and the principal mode of visitors' activities should involve interaction with students. Connections to the community can also be provided through service learning, which, when it deliberately addresses civic outcomes and links to the curriculum, can contribute to development of engaged citizens.
- **Active involvement of administrators.** Administrators are involved in providing classroom resources, facilitating field experiences, and dealing with concerns voiced by other teachers or members of the community. Involvement of administrators is also key to helping students understand how their schools are governed and how they can have input in school governance. In addition, administrative support is critical in ensuring that civic education programs are designed for all students, especially those who might otherwise be disengaged.
- **Professional development and support networks for teachers.** Ongoing professional development in which teachers have a voice is also critical to successful civic/law-related education. Research has identified characteristics of successful professional development programs, including content focus, active learning, adequate duration, collective participation, promoting coherence, and appropriate form to provide the previous characteristics. Collaboration and networking make the challenging work of civic/law-related education easier for teachers. See "Moving Toward Professional Development that Incorporates Research-Based Best Practices" for additional information.

Moving Toward Professional Development that Incorporates Research-Based Best Practices

Traditional Approaches	Effective Practices Add . . .	Because . . .
PLANNING		
Teachers are introduced to someone's program—a recipe for change. Experts plan based on what they think teachers need to know.	Emphasis on finding out what teachers need to do to improve student learning. Teachers participate in process of determining their needs and designing professional development so they can learn how to teach a particular thing or a particular group of learners.	Engaging teachers in the planning process promotes buy-in, as well as coherence with teachers' goals and curriculum. In addition, it ensures that the professional development activity will meet real needs.
TRAINING DESIGN		
Content		
Since teachers are "certified" as specialists, the purpose of professional development is to orient teachers to an innovation. They have the expertise that they need to carry through on their own.	Deepening of teachers' content knowledge and their knowledge of how to teach particular content. Pedagogical knowledge includes knowing the content, being able to select appropriate cases or issues, and being aware of likely misconceptions.	Teachers' content knowledge makes a difference in the quality of their teaching. In addition, teachers often have not had the opportunity to learn content-specific teaching strategies.
Active Learning		
Teachers take part in lesson demonstrations and small- and large-group discussions.	Opportunities for teachers to actively discuss, debate, and observe how complex innovations work. Student work is examined, and teachers observe one another's work and provide feedback. Time for planning for classroom implementation is provided.	Implementing new programs or approaches is not a simple matter of just "doing it." In their regular working day, teachers have little time to plan for change and engage in reflection. Yet they need such opportunities if they are to make a change successfully.
Duration		
Providers aim to reach as many as possible through awareness sessions or formal activities during which teachers are provided materials and oriented to what they should do following the workshop. Professional development is seen as event-based.	Contact hours are significant and spread over a period of time so that teachers have opportunities to try elements of the innovation, share their experiences, and problem solve collaboratively.	A brief program may energize a teacher, but to make a significant change in practice, enough time is required for depth of study; extending the experience over a longer period of time allows for practice, feedback, and reflection.

Moving Toward Professional Development that Incorporates Research-Based Best Practices, continued

Traditional Approaches	Effective Practices Add . . .	Because . . .
TRAINING DESIGN		
Coherence		
The suitability of the innovation is largely assumed. A pro forma correlation with standards may be provided.	Explicit links are made between the content of the professional development programs and teachers' and schools' goals, standards, and assessments. Teachers are encouraged to communicate regularly with their colleagues on professional matters.	Teachers are under intense pressure for students to perform well on state assessments. They simply do not have the time and energy to devote to efforts that do not help them meet their most fundamental goals.
Collective Participation		
Teachers are recruited based on interest—the goal is to reach as many teachers as possible.	Teachers are purposefully recruited so that teachers from the same building, department, or grade level have the opportunity to participate together, creating a learning community with similar needs and interests.	Teachers need support in order to keep doing the hard work that change requires. Being part of a learning community provides that support.
Form or Organization		
Discrete events—such as institutes or workshops—are planned and presented.	Designers work carefully to ensure the professional development has the design features mentioned above. Doing so may require addition of such features as study groups, dialogue groups, teacher networks, action research, and/or mentoring and coaching relationships.	Reform activities are specifically designed to occur over time and to encourage collaborative work to create change.
EVALUATION		
Evaluation reports what participants say about the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development activities.	Evaluation is extended to include what participants do in their classrooms as a result of training and what students learn as a result.	The purpose of staff development is to improve both teaching and learning; thus, determining its effectiveness requires attention to these variables.