It is a longstanding goal of schools to educate individuals to participate in a democratic society. But recent events, including the storming of the U.S. Capitol and disinformation campaigns around the U.S. presidential election, have made it clear that we need to improve the way students understand history, government, and their roles in them. Civics education is more critical than ever.

A recent mixed-methods study offers information about how the features of a high school action civics curriculum and implementation support for educators helped students develop the knowledge and skills needed to participate in a democratic society. The researchers found that the curriculum structure combined with teachers’ instructional decisions influenced student outcomes.

**METHODOLOGY**

The researchers examined the impacts of an action civics curriculum called Project Soapbox, a five-week curriculum that aligns to best practices in action civics and deliberately cultivates social and emotional learning skills. The curriculum is designed to develop students’ knowledge about politics and current events as well skills related to civic participation through a structured process in which students develop and deliver speeches about community issues. Students ultimately presented those speeches to an audience of peers and community members during a citywide contest and were judged against a common rubric.

Action civics is a particular approach to civics education that focuses on eliciting student voice, developing and arguing a position or perspective, and engaging with relevant real-world issues. Research shows that youth who participate in civic education programs are more likely to participate in civic actions as adults and influence their families to participate as well.

The researchers conducted their study at nine public high schools in the Chicago area, focusing closely on nine classrooms. The schools served either majority Hispanic/Latinx or majority African American student populations; eight of the nine schools served 90% or more low-income students. The student sample was 41% African American, 48% Hispanic/Latinx, and predominantly low income. The researchers administered pre- and post-surveys, which were aligned to the Common Core State Standards and had been tested for reliability, to 204 students.

Student survey data was complemented by student focus groups and an analysis of student work, including watching the student speeches at a citywide competition. Student survey and focus group questions asked whether students felt they had improved in public speaking, confidence, and desire to speak up in class or when an issue in the community or politics inspired them.

Students were asked about their parents’ or guardians’ involvement in politics and current events as well as about classroom factors and teacher actions. Researchers also gathered data about which classes focused on Project Soapbox, how many class periods were spent on speech development and delivery, and how closely teachers adhered to the curriculum. Teachers also were interviewed about their experiences and pedagogical choices.

**FINDINGS**

The study found that students felt more confident about speaking in public and more likely to speak up and be civically engaged as a result of participating in Project Soapbox. Students’
The variations in implementation depended on the teachers’ experiences and goals for using Project Soapbox. Teachers appreciated the curricular supports, such as video links, sample speeches, handouts to help students analyze speeches, and organizers to help students move from brainstorming to structured speeches. The curricular scaffolding allowed them to integrate the curriculum into a range of courses and adapt the curriculum to varying degrees.

**IMPLICATIONS**

This study speaks to the importance of well-designed professional learning for achieving high-quality curriculum implementation and ultimately student success, as Learning Forward outlines in the Standards for Professional Learning. The *Outcomes standard* establishes the importance of linking educators’ and students’ learning, and the Project Soapbox research shows how closely tying these goals leads to impact.

To provide the opportunity for students to develop the knowledge and skills needed to become participatory citizens, teachers had to learn to create a classroom climate and appropriate supports for student choice and development of listening and collaborative skills.

The curricular scaffolding helped teachers to varying degrees in creating space for student voice, an important pedagogical skill that teachers often do not have the opportunity to develop or practice. The combined impact of structured curricular supports and educator decision-making speaks to the importance of good *learning designs* in professional learning that focus on the close tie of educator designs to student goals. In that way, the project can be a model for other classroom interventions, including but also beyond civics education.