Educating High-Need Students for Citizenship

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The need to improve civic education in the nation’s middle and high schools is especially pressing for high-need students—students living in poverty, minority students, English language learners, and special needs students. Instructing high-need students, who have fewer civic learning opportunities and access to resources than more advantaged students, presents unique challenges to educators. Teachers must contend with students who are not interested in the subject matter, have low levels of reading and other academic skills, are truant, present disciplinary problems, and have learning disabilities that are not well-addressed (Gehrke, 2005). Schools serving high-need populations frequently are under-resourced and have large classes. Students have few opportunities to learn and engage outside of the classroom. Still, civic education has been found to be most effective for increasing democratic capacity in high-need students (Gainus and Martens, 2012).

This workshop focuses on lessons learned from the James Madison Legacy Project (JMLP), a program of the Center for Civic Education (CCE) that provides professional development (PD) to teachers of high-need middle and high school students nationwide based on the We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (WTP) program. The PD program is designed to improve teachers’ civics content knowledge and develop their pedagogic skills in order to enhance students’ achievement in attaining state standards in civics and government. In-depth studies of the impact of civic education on high-need student populations are limited in number, and the JMLP offered a unique opportunity to collect and analyze data on civics teachers and their students on a large scale. Thus, the goals of the workshop are twofold: 1) to demonstrate instructional pedagogies that are effective in providing civic education to high need students; and 2) to present research findings on the effectiveness of these instructional strategies in imparting civic knowledge, disposition, and skills to students.

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution

We the People is a secondary school curriculum intervention that has involved more than 30 million students and 75,000 teachers in all 50 states and the District of Columbia since 1987 (www.civiced.org/wtp-the-program). The WTP program is grounded in the foundations and institutions of American government and is distinctive for its emphasis on constitutional principles, the Bill of Rights, Supreme Court cases, and their relevance to current issues and debates. Students take part in a range of learning activities, such as group projects, debates, document-based inquiry, and relating current events to historical and constitutional precedents. The culminating activity is a simulated congressional hearing where students prepare to answer questions from a panel of judges. Teachers frequently bring prominent members of the community to their classrooms to judge the hearings. WTP middle and high school classes have the option of participating in district and statewide competitions based on these congressional hearings. States send representatives to the National Invitational (middle school) and National Finals (high school) that are held each Spring in Washington, D.C. Students from several JMLP classes have made it to the Nationals as either winners of their state competitions or as wild card teams.
James Madison Legacy Project

The James Madison Legacy Project delivers professional development to secondary school teachers of high-need students who then implement the WTP curriculum into their classrooms. Since 2015, the JMLP has been administered to four cohorts of teacher participants from 48 states and the District of Columbia over the course of four years. Over 2,000 teachers and 80,000 students nationwide have participated in the JMLP since its inception.¹ (Research on the JMLP can be found at http://jmlpresearch.org/.)

Teachers participating in the JMLP PD program attend summer institutes at one of 26 sites where they are educated in the We the People curriculum, subject-area content, and effective pedagogies for presenting the curriculum to students. The PD program covers six content units aligned with the WTP textbook that convey standard civics topics related to the Founding, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and the institutions of government (see Figure 1). The JMLP begins with 36 hours of PD at a multi-day summer institute and is followed by an additional sixteen hours of PD during the ensuing academic year. The follow-up PD is spread across three days—typically two in the fall and one in the spring. Locations for the in-person PD sessions include universities, conference centers, and facilities at historic sites, such as Mount Vernon and James Madison’s Montpelier. Scholars provide teachers with content knowledge via in-person lectures and short videos followed by structured discussions. JMLP teachers are instructed in the curriculum’s pedagogies by mentor teachers who have experience with the WTP program. At the summer institutes, teachers prepare for and participate in simulated hearings themselves so that they have first-hand experience with the process. Teachers also engage via the JMLP’s online professional community and maintain regular contact with the program’s staff and mentors. They implement the WTP curriculum in their classrooms during the academic year following their attendance at the summer institute.

Figure 1
We the People Six Content Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit One</th>
<th>What Are the Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit Two</td>
<td>How Did the Framers Create the Constitution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Three</td>
<td>How Has the Constitution Been Changed to Further the Ideals Contained in the Declaration of Independence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Four</td>
<td>How Have the Values and Principles Embodied in the Constitution Shaped American Institutions and Practices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Five</td>
<td>What Rights Does the Bill of Rights Protect?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Six</td>
<td>What Challenges Might Face American Constitutional Democracy in the Twenty-first Century?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The JMLP is funded by a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant from the U.S. Department of Education.
The teachers participating in the JMLP were provided with textbooks, lesson plans, and other resources to facilitate their implementation of the WTP curriculum in their classrooms. These teachers work in schools with underserved populations and often have inadequate resources that can preclude the adaptation of cutting-edge pedagogies, especially those that require technology and software (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008; Murnane and Steele, 2007; Jamieson, 2013).

Table 1 indicates the percentage of teachers in the study reporting that they had adequate access to books, school supplies, like paper, pens, and pencils, technology, such as computers and tablets, Internet access, digital media, and software. 54% of middle and high school teachers had adequate access to the Internet. The availability of other resources, especially books, digital media, and software, was more limited. Middle school teachers had access to fewer of these resources than high school teachers. 34% of middle school teachers and 42% of high school teachers reported that they had adequate access to books, a fundamental educational resource that the JMLP was able to provide. Around half of teachers had adequate access to basic supplies and technology. Sufficient access to digital media (29% middle school; 39% high school) and software (20% middle school; 29% high school) was available to a small percentage of teachers and their students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access to Adequate School Resources</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplies (paper, pencils, pens)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology (computers, tablets)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Media</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data

Extensive data were collected on the teachers and their students participating in the first three cohorts of the JMLP. The data on pedagogy presented here are from the Cohort 3 teacher study. Teachers of high-need students were recruited for participation in the JMLP by the Center for Civic Education’s extensive network of coordinators in the participating 48 states and the District of Columbia. Coordinators work for civic education organizations, such as state bar associations, in each state. Surveys measuring teachers’ civic content knowledge, instructional goals, pedagogy, access to resources, and self-efficacy were administered online before and after they received the JMLP PD. Student data consist of measures of their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions prior to and following their WTP class. A total of 502 teachers for whom there is complete data were included in the study, of which 211 are middle school teachers and 291 are high school teachers. These include 335 teachers in Title I schools,2 54 teachers of English as a

2 Most of the schools in the JMLP were Title I eligible, but not all received funding. The teachers in the Title I category in the analysis taught at schools that received Title I funding.
Second Language/English Language Learners, 50 special education teachers, 9 teachers of incarcerated students, 5 vocational teachers, and 19 teachers of Native American students.

Teachers were asked to indicate how frequently they used specific pedagogic methods in their civics classes during the semester in which they were enrolled in the JMLP. The pedagogies we included in this study were grouped into five categories: 1) basic pedagogies; 2) We the People pedagogies; 3) project-based pedagogies; 4) active classroom pedagogies; and 5) media-related pedagogies. The pedagogy items were originally measured on four-point scales; teachers indicated how often they employed the pedagogy in their classroom before and after the JMLP (frequently, sometimes, rarely, never). For most of the analysis in this study, we report the percentage of teachers who indicated that they used the pedagogy frequently or sometimes. The percentage of teachers who regularly employed each pedagogy was reported for all JMLP teachers as well as teachers in Title I schools and teachers of ESL/ELL, special education, incarcerated, vocational, and Native American students.

Teacher Effectiveness and Student Outcomes

Research indicates that effective teachers are the most important factor contributing to student achievement. The impact of teachers on reading and math achievement is two to three times that of any other school factor (RAND Education, 2012). Similarly, research on the JMLP demonstrates that teachers who have a strong command of civic content and implement a range of instructional pedagogies associated with the WTP curriculum in their classrooms are highly effective in increasing the civic literacy of high-need students (Owen, 2016; Owen and Riddle, 2017; Owen, 2018).

Acquisition of government and politics knowledge is an important outcome of civic education as it is a core competency for good democratic citizenship. A basic understanding of American founding principles, the tenets of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, and the workings of government institutions is essential to individuals making informed civic judgments (Galson, 2001; Niemi and Junn, 1998; Finkel and Ernst, 2005; Galston, 2004; Brody, 1994; Youniss, 2011; Persson, et al., 2016). Knowledgeable citizens are more politically efficacious. They have the confidence to participate more fully in political life by voting, engaging in their communities, and taking part in governmental affairs (DelliCarpini and Keeter, 1996; DelliCarpini, 2005; McDevitt and Chaffee, 2000; Meirick and Wackman, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Campbell, 2006; Milner, 2010; Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011). Active citizenship in the 21st century also requires knowledge of how to navigate the digital terrain for politics, as technology has instigated an expanded realm for civic discourse and engagement (Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen, 2014; Owen, 2014; Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Owen, 2016).

Students whose teachers participated in the JMLP gained significantly more civic knowledge than students in traditional civics classes that were not taught by JMLP instructors. JMLP middle school students scored 33% higher on a civic knowledge test than their counterparts in the control condition. High school students of JMLP teachers scored 12% higher on a civic knowledge test than those whose teachers did not participate in the program (Owen, 2018). Students in classes that held a WTP simulated congressional hearing scored 2.5 points higher on a test of civic knowledge than their counterparts in classes that did not hold a hearing.
In addition, teachers’ civic knowledge corresponds significantly with students’ knowledge acquisition. We computed the correlation (Pearson’s R) between JMLP teacher and student civic knowledge on the post-tests administered after they had completed the program holding constant students’ pretest knowledge scores. The correlation was .214 (p≤.01) for middle school and .378 (p≤.01) for high school. The fact that high school teachers need to be proficient in higher order civic knowledge may explain, at least in part, the difference in the association between teacher and student knowledge at the middle and high school levels. High school teachers with greater knowledge can contribute more to their students’ civic knowledge gain than teachers whose content knowledge is less developed.

**Pedagogies for Civic Education**

While the positive effects of civic knowledge on people’s civic orientations have been well-established, there is still much to be understood about the conditions under which political knowledge is most successfully conveyed to students. There is great variation in civics instruction across schools and classrooms. Teachers can draw upon a wide range of instructional methods ranging from traditional textbook and lecture-based approaches to methods that allow students to take a more active part in their civic education experience. The effectiveness of active learning approaches, such as those employed in the WTP curriculum, have been well-documented. Active learning privileges student-based instruction and encompasses “any instructional method that engages students in the learning process, meaning that students are actively doing things to learn and thinking consciously about what they are doing as they learn” (Gainous and Martens, 2012: 237). These approaches have been found to increase interest in civics content and motivation to learn, especially in high-need students who may not respond readily to more passive instructional methods. Active learning approaches include discussion, debates, project-based learning, and media-based techniques that employ digital tools. Active methods are especially relevant for civics instruction as they can model citizenship in a democracy (Thornton, 2004). Pedagogies can allow students to emulate democratic practices, such as contacting public officials, creating and circulating petitions, and meeting with community leaders. Activities like simulated congressional hearings, mock trials, and mock elections can mimic democratic processes.

The challenge is to identify which educational practices and pedagogies are the most effective for students’ acquisition of civic knowledge. Having established that teachers in the JMLP were successful in imparting knowledge to their students, especially when compared to teachers and students in traditional civics classes, we now examine the pedagogies that JMLP teachers employed in their classrooms. For purposes of the analysis, we group the approaches into five categories of basic, *We the People*, project-based, active classroom, and media-related pedagogies. There was no “one size fits all” model of pedagogic practice, as the WTP curriculum is conducive to teachers employing their choice of instructional approaches. The flexibility in teaching methods is especially relevant given the diversity of the high-need students in the JMLP classes which included ESL/ELL, special needs, and incarcerated youth. At the same time, the JMLP focused on pedagogies that have been demonstrated to be most effective in conveying the WTP curriculum. Prior research indicates that high-need teachers were substantially more likely than teachers of more privileged students to rely on lecture as their primary pedagogy (Owen,
We found that JMLP teachers moved away from a lecture-heavy approach to teaching civics to one that engaged a range of active learning pedagogies. The substantial knowledge gain of JMLP students supports teachers’ implementing more active learning strategies in their classrooms.

**Key takeaways from the analysis are as follows:**

- The vast majority of teachers lectured to students at least sometimes prior to and following the JMLP. However, fewer teachers lectured *frequently* after participating in the JMLP PD program, allowing more classroom time for active, student-centered learning.
- JMLP teachers incorporated basic reading and research pedagogies into the civics curriculum in addition to more active learning approaches.
- The JMLP was successful in having teachers adopt the core pedagogies associated with the WTP curriculum. Over 65% of teachers held simulated congressional hearings in their classrooms and 24% participated in a WTP civics competition.
- There was a significant increase in teachers having students engage in respectful debate and having students develop their public speaking skills as a result of the JMLP PD program.
- Teachers reported an overall increase of 30% in their use of group projects.
- Teachers felt empowered to incorporate active classroom activities that complement JMLP’s core pedagogies and increase students understanding and engagement of democratic institutions.
- Teachers were more likely to have students use digital tools for accessing news and information from government websites, contacting government officials, and sharing and creating civics content after taking part in the JMLP.

**Basic Pedagogies**

Basic pedagogies are well-established learning approaches that have the goal of imparting knowledge and core skills to students. These standard approaches prioritize teacher control over the classroom environment, the organized presentation of information, and formalized assignments. The basic pedagogies we examined were lecture, reading out loud, reading silently, library research, and Internet research. The use of these basic pedagogies is foundational for learning and can work to enhance students’ civic knowledge (Niemi and Junn, 1998). However, an overreliance on lecture without active student engagement can inhibit learning, especially for high-need students. Students can better retain information from lectures when it is presented in conjunction with current events or a learning activity (Winerip, 2011).

Teachers of high-need students generally rely more heavily on lectures as opposed to more active pedagogies than teachers of more privileged students (Owen, 2016). Our findings indicate that JMLP teachers, while still incorporating lectures at least sometimes into the civics curriculum regularly, were less inclined to lecture *frequently* after going through the PD program (see Figure 2). The percentage of all teachers who lectured *frequently* decreased from 49% pre-
JMLP to 37% post-JMLP. The trend was apparent across all the teacher categories in the study. 51% of Title I school teachers lectured frequently pre-JMLP compared to 41% after participating in the program. Notable differences are apparent for teachers of special education, vocational, and Native American students.

**Figure 2**
Percentage of Teachers Who Lectured “Frequently”

![Graph showing percentage of teachers who lectured frequently](image1)

A majority of JMLP teachers regularly had students read out loud or silently during class time. Over 60% of teachers had students read out loud and over 70% had students read silently in their classes both pre and post JMLP (see Figures 3 and 4). There is a slight uptick in the percentage of all teachers and Title I who had their students read silently and aloud following the PD program. Reading in the classroom was more frequent post-JMLP for special education, vocational, and Native American students. Teachers of ESL/ELL and incarcerated students assigned reading silently more often than reading out loud post-JMLP.

**Figure 3**
Percentage Reading Out Loud

![Graph showing percentage of teachers who read out loud](image2)
Having students conduct research is a core pedagogy that is also central to the WTP curriculum, as students bring evidence to bear for the answers to questions that they prepare for in the simulated congressional hearings. Teachers are far more inclined to have their students conduct Internet research than traditional library research (see Figures 5 and 6). Well over 80% of teachers have their students conduct Internet research, a trend that is consistent before and after the JMLP. Far fewer teachers have their students use physical libraries for research. In fact, there was a decline in the traditional library use post-JMLP for all categories except ESL/ELL and Native American teachers.
We the People Pedagogies

The *We the People* curriculum features a variety of active learning approaches that were imparted to teachers during the JMLP PD program. Simulated congressional hearings are a central and unique feature of the WTP curriculum. Classes break into teams based on the six WTP content units and prepare for the hearings researching a set of questions and linking principles of democracy and American government to relevant issues. Hearings are held in class, and teachers can bring in scholars and community leaders to serve as judges who provide evaluation and feedback on the teams’ preparation and ability to answer follow-up questions. Some classes, including JMLP classes, take the simulated hearings beyond the classroom and compete in district and state competitions. The winners of state competitions and wild card teams compete in the finals in Washington, D.C. each spring.

There are a number of pedagogies that are aligned directly with the WTP curriculum and the simulated hearings that we examine here. These include having students research document-based questions, holding discussions where students consider issues from a variety of perspectives, having students give speeches, holding debates, having students write essays, holding discussions of current events, and meeting with government officials.

The JMLP was successful in encouraging teachers adopt the core pedagogies associated with the WTP curriculum. While few teachers employed simulated Congressional hearings in their classrooms prior to the JMLP, over 65% incorporated them into their classes following the PD program (see Figure 7). The percentage of teachers holding hearings increased markedly across all of the teacher categories in the study. A notably smaller percentage of teachers had their classes take part in a WTP civics competition (see Figure 8). Still, the percentage of teachers participating in competitions doubled from 12% pre-JMLP to 24% post-JMLP. Teachers often prefer to gain experience with the simulated hearings before taking part in competitions. It may be the case that the number of JMLP teachers who have their students participate in competitions will increase over time.
A strong majority of teachers used document-based inquiry, held issue discussions, talked about current events, and had students write essays prior to participating in the JMLP. Over 85% used document-based questions with their students, a figure that remained constant pre- and post-JMLP (see Figure 9). The one notable finding was the increased use of document-based inquiry by teachers of vocational students, which climbed from 40% to 80% following the PD program. Prior to the JMLP, 90% of teachers had their students discuss issues from a variety of perspectives (see Figure 10). Discussing issues was a pedagogy that was almost universally employed (97% of teachers) following the JMLP PD. The increase in class discussion of issues was observed across all teacher categories with the exception of teachers of incarcerated students. The percentage of teachers who discussed current events regularly in their classrooms was over 85% pre/post-JMLP (see Figure 11). There was a 5-percentage point increase in the use of current events by Title I teachers and teachers of Native American students. The percentage of
all teachers who regularly required students to write essays remained steady at 83% before and after the PD program (see Figure 12). However, teachers of ESL/ELL, special education, incarcerated, and Native American students were more inclined to have student write essays post-JMLP.

**Figure 9**
Percentage Document-Based Questions

![Percentage Document-Based Questions](image)

**Figure 10**
Percentage Discuss Issues

![Percentage Discuss Issues](image)
Holding debates and having students give speeches were two pedagogies that teachers were substantially more likely to incorporate in the classroom post-JMLP PD. The simulated congressional hearings require students to engage in respectful debate. There was a 14-percentage point increase in the number of Title I teachers who had their students take part in debates from 68% pre JMLP to 82% post program (see Figure 13). Teachers of ESL/ELL, special education, and Native American students were far more likely to include debates in the curriculum after receiving the JMLP PD. The simulated hearings also serve to help students develop their public speaking skills. Teachers were substantially more likely to have their students make speeches in class post-JMLP (see Figure 14).
The increase in incorporation of speechmaking into the civics curriculum was more than 10-percentage points following the JMLP PD. The findings were notable for all but special education teachers whose use of speechmaking in the classroom remained consistent. Finally, teachers are encouraged to have community leaders and public officials visit their classrooms and to serve as judges for the simulated congressional hearings. More teachers gave students the opportunity to meet leaders post-JMLP, although the number is still relatively small (see Figure 15). The percentage of teachers who had students meet leaders increased from 14% to 22%. Teachers of ESL/ELL, incarcerated, and Native American students were markedly more inclined to have meetings with community leaders and government officials post-JMLP.

**Figure 13**  
**Percentage Debates**

**Figure 14**  
**Percentage Student Speeches**
Project-Based Pedagogies

Project-based pedagogies are premised on the assumptions of situated learning that students gain greater understanding of content when they actively engage with the material by working with and using ideas. The learning environment promoted by project-based pedagogies ideally will shift the emphasis from the teacher to the student when investigating questions, proposing hypotheses, conducting research, and engaging in discussions (Krajcik and Blumenfeld, 2004). The simulated congressional hearings in the WTP curriculum epitomize project-based learning, as students work cooperatively in teams to research their unit questions and present their arguments. We examined the frequency of teachers’ incorporation of group projects and portfolio projects into the curriculum.

Group projects, in particular, foster the environment for student collaboration and engagement. Members of each team learn to delegate tasks, meet deadlines, and communicate with one another in order to complete the assignment at hand. Over the course of a group project, students develop more efficient methods for working together and learn to maintain a healthy balance of leadership and teamwork.

Following the implementation of the JMLP programming, the vast majority of teachers of high-need students, including Title I school teachers, reported an increased enactment of the group project pedagogy (see Figure 16). Teachers at Title I schools saw a 4.4% increase in implementation, while ESL teachers saw a 12.4% increase. Teachers of incarcerated students reported a 33.4% increase in use of the pedagogy, vocational school teachers reported a 25% increase, and teachers of Native American students reported an increase of 11.8%. Teachers of special-education students was the only category of high-need students sampled that reported a slight decrease of 2.1% in group project implementation. Overall, the 502 total teachers reported a 30.4% increase in the use of group projects in their classrooms.
Unlike group projects, portfolio projects are completed individually, but encourage the same shift of emphasis from teacher to student. Intended to promote self-evaluation, critical thinking, information retention, and creativity, portfolio projects push students to keep records of their work and build upon them. This project-based pedagogy helps students avoid segmenting their assignments and interests into disparate fields and, instead, develop the interdisciplinary skills to pursue their studies in a holistic manner. Teachers implementing this pedagogy are able to better serve student interests and encourage personal growth across classes and school years, rather than follow standardized curriculum.

Overall results for the portfolio projects pedagogy varied, with categories like vocational teachers dropping 20-percentage points and Title I teachers maintaining roughly 25% implementation (see Figure 17). ESL/ELL teachers, on the other hand, welcomed a 27.5% increase in the use of portfolio projects in the classroom, while special education teachers followed suit with an 18.3% increase. Teachers of incarcerated students reported the largest increase of 33.4% in implementation. Teachers of Native American students, though reporting an overall decrease in portfolio project usage, documented a 123% increase in frequent implementation.
The student benefits associated with project-based pedagogies support the overarching goals of the JMLP program. By encouraging collaborative work, leadership development, teamwork skills, and personal growth, both group projects and portfolio projects teach children to comprehend and engage with civic knowledge in innovative and interesting ways. Group projects, specifically, reported increases for the vast majority of sampled categories, suggesting its relevancy in a multi-stakeholder democracy.

**Active Classroom Pedagogies**

Active learning pedagogies can complement generic, lecture-based instruction. These approaches are typically student-centered and privilege a learning environment that emphasizes action, personalization, and customization. Active pedagogies enhance learning by having students model behaviors that they are learning about in textbooks and lectures (Guilfoile, Delander, and Kreck, 2016). Simulations, such as elections, mock trials, and congressional hearings, can be effective in increasing knowledge and fostering the development of political attitudes (Niemi and Junn, 1998; Leming, 1996; Brody, 1994; Kahne and Middaugh, 2008). Activities, like circulating petitions and writing letters to government officials, can contribute to students’ development of civic skills and political efficacy, which can stimulate a desire to engage in political affairs.

Teachers in the JMLP incorporated active learning pedagogies in their civics classes that complement the WTP curriculum but are not core elements of the program. These classroom activities included participation in mock elections and moot court, drafting and circulating petitions, and writing letters to government officials.

Mock elections and moot courts allow students to simulate the procedures that are foundational to their civic responsibility and, in doing so, become more informed citizens. Following implementation of the JMLP, approximately one-third of teachers held mock elections.
and moot courts. The number of teachers who engaged students using mock elections saw a 7-percentage point increase across all teachers. In particular, the number of vocational teachers who conducted mock elections jumped from 0% to 40% (see Figure 18). Teachers of Native American students and ESL/ELL teachers also saw strong increases of 10-percentage points and 7-percentage points, respectively. Moot court—where students simulate court proceedings—increased for teachers in the JMLP, as well (see Figure 19). With the exception of vocational teachers, who held steady at 20%, all categories of high-need teachers reported increases in the implementation of moot court in their classrooms. The overall increase in all teachers was 11-percentage points, while the strongest increases were teachers of Native American students at 20-percentage points, ESL/ELL teachers at 14-percentage points, and teachers of incarcerated students at 13-percentage points.

**Figure 18**
Percentage Mock Election

**Figure 19**
Percentage Moot Court
Active classroom pedagogies that encourage students to communicate their political values to government officials—circulating petitions and contacting government officials—were also employed more frequently by teachers who completed the JMLP (see Figure 20). Following the program, approximately 16% of all teachers had students circulate petitions and 24% had students write letters to the government. The implementation of petitions increased across all high-need groups but was most pronounced with vocational teachers at 20-percentage points and teachers of incarcerated students at 13-percentage points, rising to 40% and 33%, respectively. Letters to government officials saw similar gains as for circulating petitions with vocational teachers and incarcerated students (see Figure 21).

**Figure 20**
Percentage Circulate Petitions

**Figure 21**
Percentage Write Letters to Government Officials
Although active classroom pedagogies are not core elements of the program, teachers of the JMLP program felt empowered to expand on civics education learning through other forms of student engagement. Vocational teachers, in particular, were more expansive in their student engagement with mock elections, circulating petitions, and writing letters to government officials, with at least double the teachers implementing these strategies in their classrooms.

**Media-Related Pedagogies**

As Americans increasingly use digital technology to follow and engage in politics, there is a growing need to teach these skills in the classroom. Civics instruction for the making of good digital citizens lags behind shifts in the political environment (Owen, et al., 2011; Owen, 2014; Owen, Doom, and Riddle, 2016). Restricted resources, lack of teacher training, limited instructional time for civics, the need to conform to set standards, and uncertain outcomes can preclude schools from integrating digital media into classes. Civic educators must ensure that they do not shortchange core content related to Constitutional principles, government institutions, and political processes in favor of pedagogic novelties. Teaching students to become digital citizens goes beyond simply using technology as an instructional tool in the classroom. It necessitates the integration of digital resources into the curriculum to facilitate information acquisition and engagement in civic life. It requires teachers to develop mechanisms for digital instruction that ensure students remain attentive to the lesson rather than be sidetracked by the technology.

These obstacles to updating civics instruction to meet the requirements of 21st century citizenship are magnified for high-need students. The schools they attend are often not equipped with the technology that is needed for digital instruction. Some lack the basic infrastructure, such as sufficient electrical capacity, to accommodate computers or tablets. The civics curriculum for high need students is far less likely to involve learning activities, service, simulations, or discussions which are conducive to the acquisition of digital citizenship skills, and which are standard in classes for students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds (Spring, Dietz, and Grimm, 2007; Kahne and Middaugh, 2012).

As we have seen, JMLP teachers in many schools have insufficient resources to engage heavily in digital pedagogies. However, the WTP program, with its emphasis on active learning, is conducive to the integration of digital approaches in the curriculum. We examine teachers’ use of pedagogies where students access news online, learn to be critical consumers of news, use government websites, contact government officials online, share content online, and create digital civics materials, such as websites, blog posts, and newsletters.

Over 80% of teachers had their students access online news prior to the JMLP; the percentage increased to close to 90% following the program (see Figure 22.). The increase in accessing online news was greatest for teachers of ESL/ELL, special education, and Native American students. Teachers of incarcerated students and vocational students were less likely to have students access online news post-JMLP. Around 90% of teachers instructed their students on how to be critical consumers of news—the percentage, which was already high, rose slightly post-JMLP (see Figure 23). Once again, teachers of ESL/ELL, special education, and Native
American students had the largest increase in using this instructional element after their JMLP PD experience.

**Figure 22**
Percentage Access Online News

![Percentage Access Online News](image)

**Figure 23**
Percentage Critical Consumption of News

![Percentage Critical Consumption of News](image)

Teachers were more likely to have students access and use government websites after participating in the JMLP. There was a 10-percentage point increase in the number of teachers who used government websites in the classroom from 62% pre-JMLP to 72% post-program (see Figure 24). The greater use of government websites was evident for teachers in Title I schools and especially pronounced for teachers of ESL/ELL, special education, vocational, and Native American students. The number of teachers who had their students contact government officials online also increased post-JMLP from 21% to 27% (see Figure 25). The upward trend was especially apparent for ESL/ELL teachers.
Engaging digitally in community and political affairs requires citizens to develop skills for posting, sharing, and creating content. Some teachers in the study used Google classroom, a tool that helps teachers and students manage and share files. The number of teachers who had their students manage and share content online increased in the pre-JMLP period from 53% to 61% (see Figure 26). The trend held for all of the teacher categories with the exception of vocational teachers, of whom 60% consistently had their students share online content. About one-third of all teachers had their students create digital civics materials (see Figure 27). There was an increase in the number of Title I teachers using this pedagogy, as well as a large increase following the JMLP—from 28% to 40%—among ESL/ELL teachers and teachers of Native American students—from 16% to 25%. However, fewer special education and teachers of incarcerated students had their classes develop digital civics materials post JMLP.
Conclusion

The James Madison Legacy Project research program was a unique opportunity to study the effectiveness of specific pedagogies in imparting civic knowledge to high-need students. Typically, civics instructors of high-need students rely heavily on lectures to convey content largely to the exclusion of active learning pedagogies. JMLP teachers, through the professional development program, were trained in the use of active pedagogies that were successful for instructing high-need students, such as preparing for and holding simulated congressional hearings. Teachers also had significant opportunity to collaborate and share their experiences using a wide range of instructional approaches both in person and through the JMLP online community. These experiences allowed teachers to expand their pedagogical repertoires, as well
as to gain confidence in implementing new approaches in their classrooms. The result has benefitted the civic development of high-need students nationwide.

Students of teachers participating in the JMLP acquired more civic knowledge than those in traditional classes. Further, students in classes that held simulated congressional hearings, the signature pedagogic approach for the We the People curriculum, scored higher on civics tests than students in classes that did not hold the hearings. The findings indicate that a combination of basic pedagogies, such as lecture, reading, and research, combined with novel, active approaches is successful in imparting civic knowledge to high-need students.

References


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