

# TEACHING DEMOCRACY

Insights on Civics Education in  
Hawai'i's Public Schools



A thriving democracy depends on well-informed, engaged citizens. In Hawai'i, where unique cultural and historical contexts shape civic life, understanding how civics is prioritized and taught is essential for ensuring that students develop the knowledge and skills necessary for informed engagement.

Recognizing the need to strengthen civic learning, the Hawai'i Supreme Court established the Commission to Promote and Advance Civic Education (PACE) in 2021. PACE aims to develop sustainable programs and resources that reflect the diverse needs of Hawai'i's population. While many

students graduate with a strong foundation in civic knowledge and engagement, others may feel less confident in their ability to participate effectively in civic life.

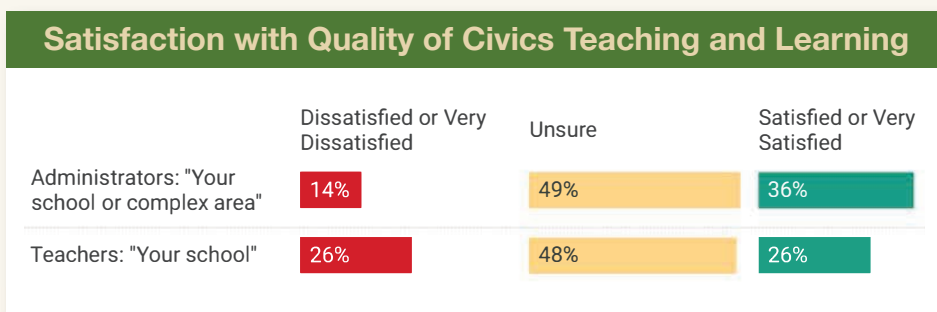
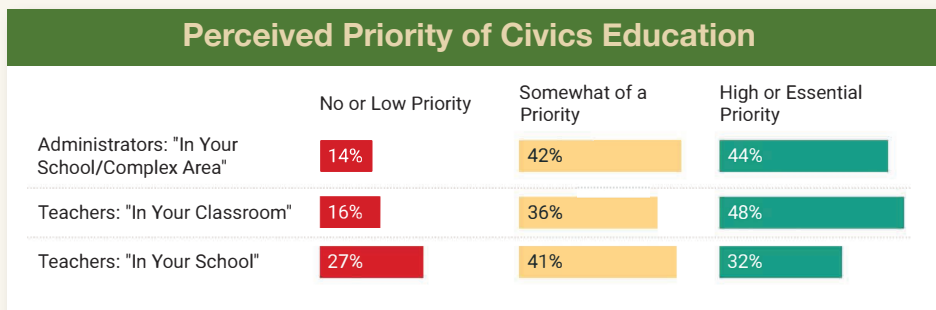
To better understand these dynamics, PACE and the Hawai'i State Department of

Education (HIDOE) conducted a comprehensive survey of 627 teachers and 168 administrators between October 2023 and April 2024. The survey explored how civics is prioritized, taught, and perceived in Hawai'i's public schools, identifying gaps and opportunities for improvement.

This research provides a basis for further discussion on how to ensure that civics education remains a meaningful and relevant part of the curriculum, equipping students with the tools they need to engage with the civic institutions that shape their communities.

## Prioritization and Satisfaction

The survey revealed a misalignment between how teachers and administrators perceive the emphasis on civics education. While 48% of teachers consider civics a high or essential priority in their classrooms, only 32% believe it receives similar attention school-wide. Administrators, on the other hand, are more optimistic, with 44% viewing civics as a high priority across their schools.



Teachers and administrators also have different perceptions about the quality of civics teaching and learning. Among administrators, 36% report being satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of civics education, with only 14% expressing dissatisfaction. While 26% of teachers also report satisfaction, there is room for growth as nearly half (48%) remain uncertain about the quality of civics instruction in their schools.



# Challenges

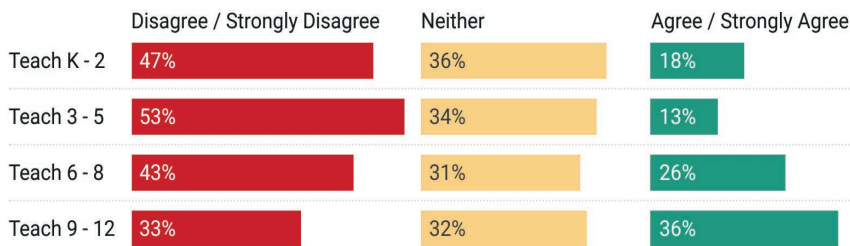
Civics education in Hawai'i's public schools presents several key challenges that affect both administrators and teachers. For administrators, the primary concern is limited time in the curriculum, with 59% identifying this as a major obstacle to implementing civics

education. Teachers report similar challenges in the classroom. According to 56% of respondents, the greatest challenge is the pressure to cover other subjects, reducing the time available for civics instruction. Additionally, 54% of teachers cite insufficient

or outdated resources, while 46% report that many students lack the foundational knowledge needed to fully engage with civics concepts.

Access to high-quality, civics-focused materials is another major concern, particularly at the elementary level. Nearly half of all teachers (45%) stated that the resources available to them were inadequate, with the problem most acute in grades K-5. With only 13% of grades 3-5 and 18% of K - 2 teachers reporting that they have access to sufficient materials, this gap points to a clear area for investment, especially given the critical role elementary teachers play in building the foundation of civic understanding at an early age.

## "I have access to high-quality civics-focused curricular materials or resources designed for teaching and learning"



# Professional Development Needs and Opportunities

Professional development plays a crucial role in strengthening civics education in Hawai'i's public schools. There is broad agreement among educators that the most pressing priority for professional development is improving the pedagogy of civics education, including best practices for fostering student engagement. Three-quarters of administrators and 71% of teachers identified this as the most important area for professional learning.

Other areas of need show some variation between the two groups. Service-learning, a teaching method that integrates community service with classroom instruction, was identified as important by 56% of administrators and 49% of teachers. Similarly, media and news literacy, a crucial skill in today's digital age, was prioritized by 51% of administrators and 42% of teachers.

Unfortunately, the availability of civics-specific professional

development remains limited, posing a challenge to improving instruction. While 37% of administrators report offering such opportunities at least once a year, only 17% of teachers indicate that they participate that often. More critically, the majority of both groups responded "Never" or "Once every few years," signaling a need for more regular and accessible opportunities.

## Professional Learning Opportunities



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

# Effective Practices

Despite the challenges, teachers have identified several effective strategies for engaging students in civics education:

## **Real-World Connections:**

Integrating current events, news articles, and videos helps students relate civics concepts to their daily lives and communities. Teachers report that making issues relevant, whether through discussions or project-based explorations of real-world problems, significantly enhances student engagement and interest.

## **Project-Based Learning:**

Hands-on, experiential learning approaches, such as problem-solving activities and civic process simulations (e.g., mock trials or debates), deepen student understanding. Allowing students to select topics of personal interest and develop projects around them further increases their investment in learning.

## **Interactive Approaches:**

Incorporating digital media, visual aids, and arts-based strategies, such as drama and visual arts, helps make civics concepts more engaging and accessible. Teachers also highlight the effectiveness of class discussions, simulations, and role-playing exercises in fostering critical thinking and meaningful dialogue.

# Recommendations

The survey reveals a consensus among teachers and administrators on the importance of civics education in preparing students for active participation in our democracy. Yet it also highlights key challenges that impact the effective delivery of this content, including limited classroom time, insufficient resources, and a lack of ongoing professional development. To address these challenges, the following key recommendations focus on strengthening civics instruction and ensuring students develop the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful civic participation.

**Expand Access to High-Quality Resources:** High-quality, civics-focused curricular materials are particularly needed in the early grades, when students begin developing their understanding of civic life. Providing teachers with well-designed instructional resources will help create engaging and meaningful lessons that build a strong foundation of civic knowledge from an early age.

**Enhance Professional Development Opportunities:** Both teachers and administrators emphasize the need for more civics-specific training. Expanding access to regular professional development would help teachers stay current with best practices, including strategies for engaging students with current events and fostering critical thinking about democratic values. Additional training in effective pedagogical approaches would further strengthen civics instruction.

**Foster Hands-On Civic Experiences:** Many teachers already use effective instructional strategies, such as making connections to real-world issues, implementing project-based learning, and incorporating interactive activities like debates and discussions. Providing additional resources and training to support these methods will help ensure their consistent implementation across all grade levels.

# Learn More

For the complete PACE report on civics education, including survey results from independent schools, an overview of civics standards, and opportunities for civic engagement through nonprofit organizations, please visit the PACE website or the HIDOE website:

**CivicsHawaii.org/** or **HawaiiPublicSchools.org/**

