

Summary of Amicus Brief filed by Professors Danielle Allen and Meira Levinson of Harvard University

*A Solid civics education is necessary to close the “civic empowerment gap” for less advantaged students.*

Robust civics education is essential to preparing students today to be effective citizens in later life, a concept recognized in numerous court decisions. Civics education, however, has been neglected in American public schools in recent years. Lack of civics education, which is particularly prevalent in less affluent schools, leads to a “civic empowerment gap” in which disadvantaged students are denied opportunities to develop the skills necessary to engage meaningfully in civic life as adults. (Empirical evidence of the connection between education and civic efficacy is summarized on pages 12 through 20.) This gap is exacerbated by these students’ life experiences, which frequently lead them to feel devalued by public officials and institutions and mistrustful of the viability of efforts to effect change through the political process.

A solid civic education beginning in elementary school through twelfth grade helps to close the civic empowerment gap in two significant ways. First, education in civics can help equip students with the tools of “participatory readiness,” namely verbal communication skills, knowledge of political institutions, and understanding of how to use levers of democracy to create change. Second, civics instruction can help students develop a sense of political efficacy by providing them historical and contemporary examples of how disadvantaged communities have utilized the political process to effect positive change and by supporting the development of student-led civic projects.

The civic empowerment gap represents an impediment to achieving political equality among all citizens. Providing students with the civics education necessary to help close this gap will help shift American civic life closer to the ideal embodied in the Constitution in which all citizens are granted equal voice and equal opportunity to participate in our democratic society.