Roots of Engaged Citizenship

Initial Findings

Search Institute

University of Rochester

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The goal of this research project is to uncover new knowledge about how youth become good citizens. We are interested in understanding the ways that youth develop capacities to positively contribute to their communities, help others around them, and participate in solving social issues. Our study tests the idea that good citizenship is rooted in character strengths, developmental competencies, and supportive contexts.

This project was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflection the view of the John Templeton Foundation.

The purpose of this study is to **understand how youth become good citizens.**

Our project name *The Roots of Engaged Citizenship* embodies our core mission to identify the developmental roots of active participation in communities and society. By "citizen," we are not referring to a legal status, but rather the way young people and their families from all backgrounds think about and participate in their communities. Another name for this kind of participation is "civic engagement." The Roots of Engaged Citizenship Project is based on the assumption that civic engagement is good for young people's well-being and functioning in other areas of life, and that youth civic participation makes our communities and societies stronger.

ROOTS of ENGAGED CITIZENSHIP PROJECT

The project is led by Laura Wray-Lake, Aaron Metzger, and Amy Syvertsen with support from a team of research assistants.

Laura Wray-Lake, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Rochester in Rochester, New York. Her research focuses on adolescent civic development and the role of everyday contexts such as families, schools, and neighborhoods.

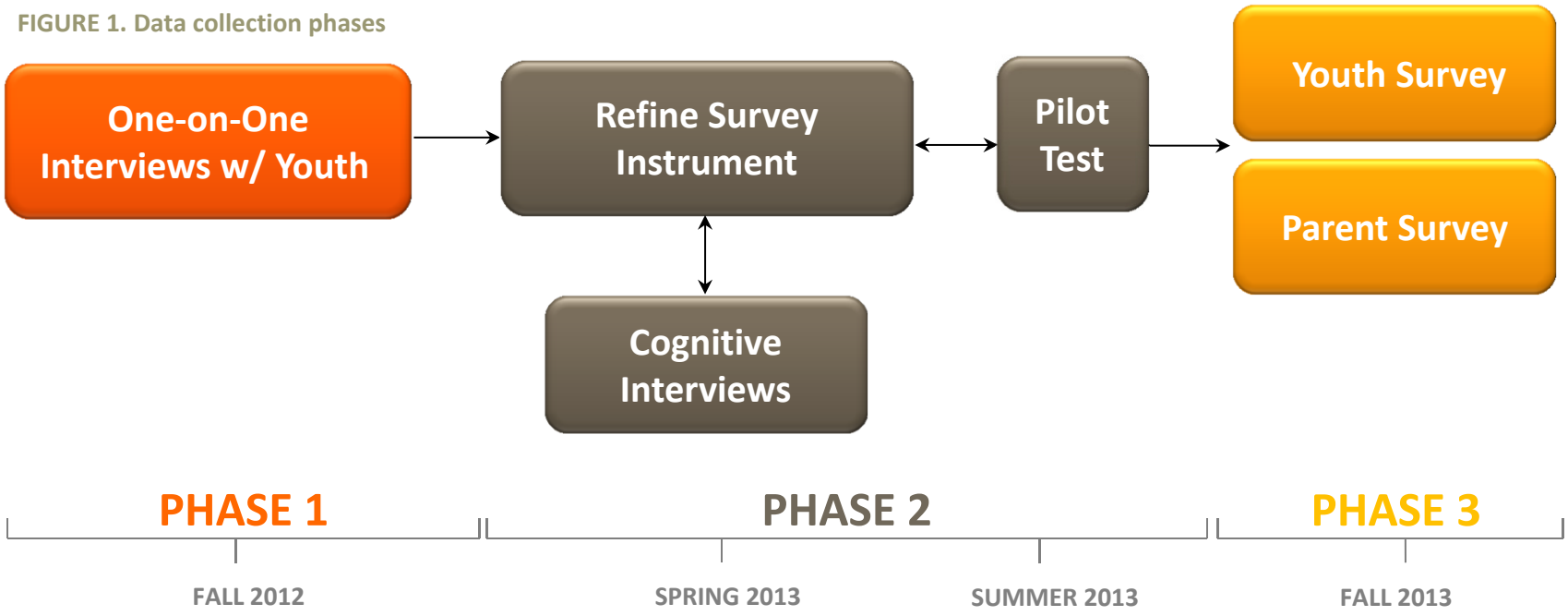
Aaron Metzger, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Life-Span Development area of the Psychology Department at West Virginia University. His research focuses on adolescent civic development and parent-adolescent communication.

Amy Syvertsen, PhD is a Research Scientist at Search Institute in Minneapolis, MN. Her program of research focuses on understanding the developmental underpinnings of social responsibility and participatory citizenship in young people.

L to R: Wray-Lake, Metzger, and Syvertsen

The Roots of Engaged Citizenship Project consists of three data collection phases. The findings in this report come from the one-on-one interviews conducted with students in Fall 2012.

FIGURE 1. Data collection phases



A **diverse sample of 90 children and adolescents** from California, West Virginia, and Minnesota participated in one-on-one interviews focused on character and civic development.

Participants represented a range of grades (4 to 12), socioeconomic and racial-ethnic backgrounds, and geographic locations. The sample was almost evenly split between males and females.

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FIGURE 2. School type

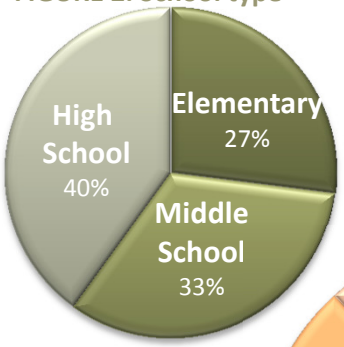


FIGURE 3. Gender

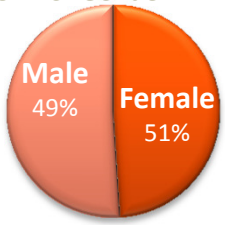


FIGURE 4. Race and ethnicity

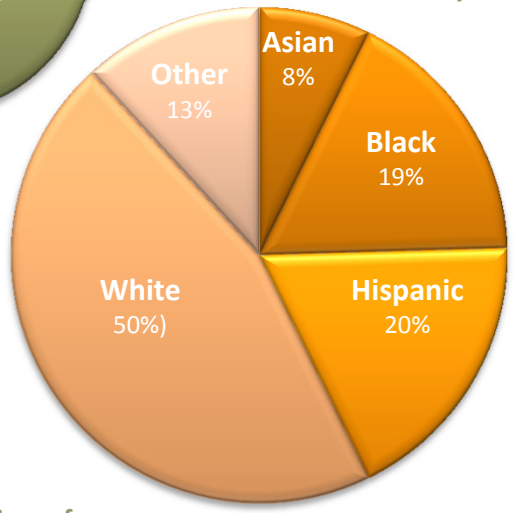
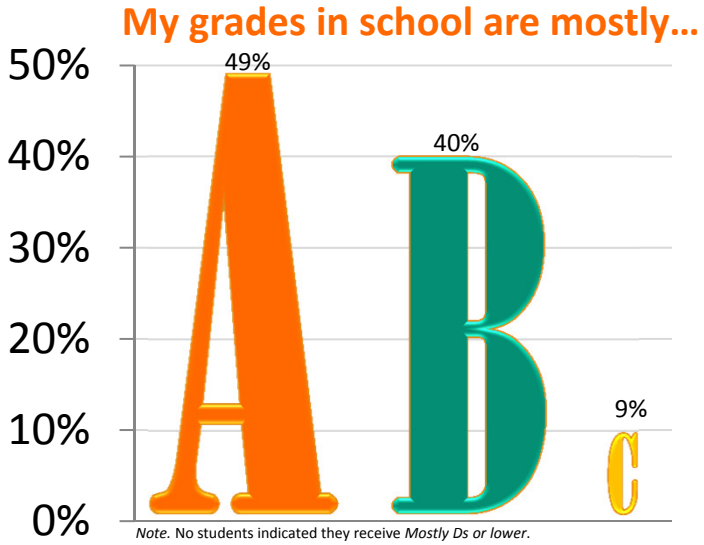
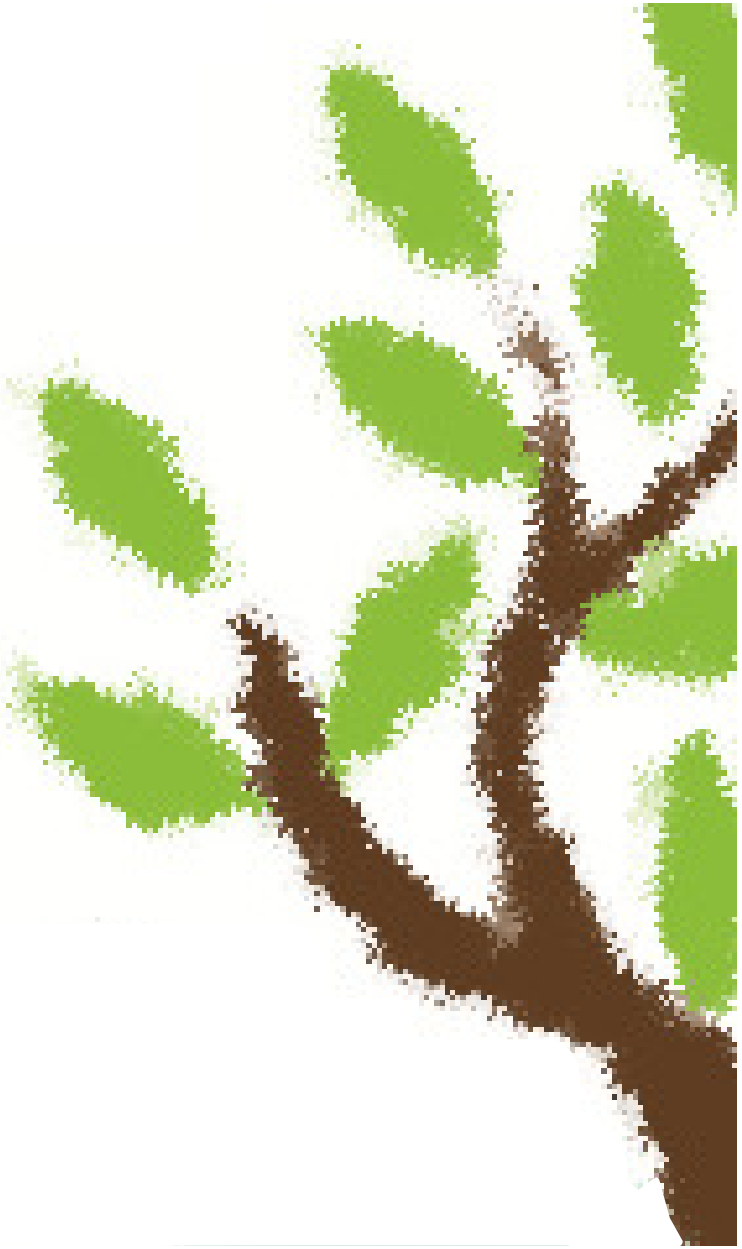


FIGURE 5. Academic performance



Note. No students indicated they receive *Mostly Ds or lower*.

Character Strengths



Across ages, youth had similar definitions of these strengths:

Forgiveness

Grateful

Responsible

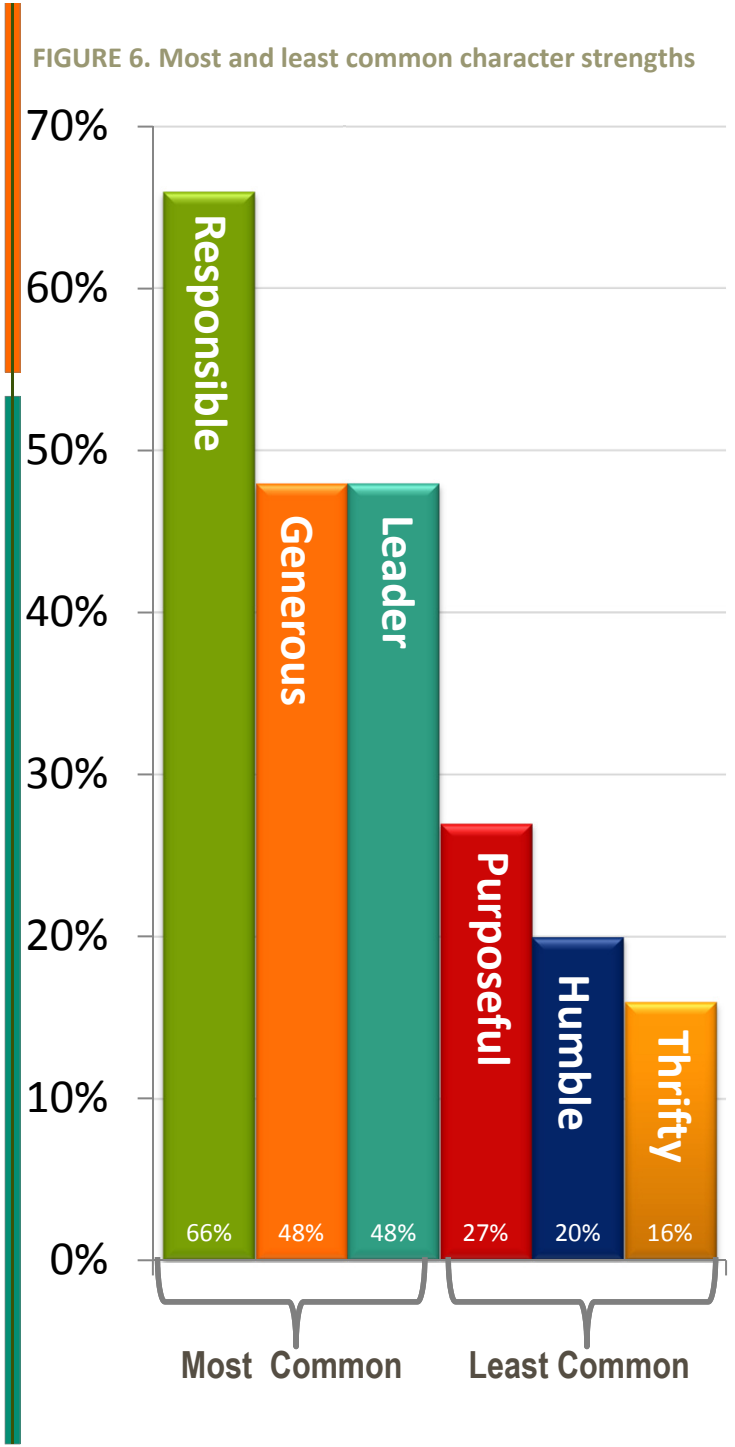
. . . and encountered similar difficulties defining these strengths:

Thrifty

Future-minded

Purposeful

As part of an activity, youth sorted twelve character strengths into five categories ranging from *Exactly Like Me* to *Least Like* Me. Youth were *most* likely to say they are **responsible** and *least* likely to say they are **thrifty**.



Analysis revealed **three unique character groups:**

Goal-Oriented Leaders

These youth described themselves as being future-minded, leaders, and responsible. These youth also named creative as a quality least like them. Older students were more likely to be in this group than in the Creative Leaders group.

Givers

These youth described themselves as being generous, joyful, and forgiving. They did not see themselves as leaders.

Creative Leaders

These youth described themselves as being creative, leaders, and responsible. These youth did not consider themselves to be future-minded.

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Goal-Oriented Leaders

47%

Average Age: 13.9
Male: 50%

Future-Minded

Leader

Responsible

Givers

21%

Average Age: 12.5
Male: 47%

Generous

Joyful

Forgiving

Creative Leaders

32%

Average Age: 12.1
Male: 48%

Creative

Leader

Responsible

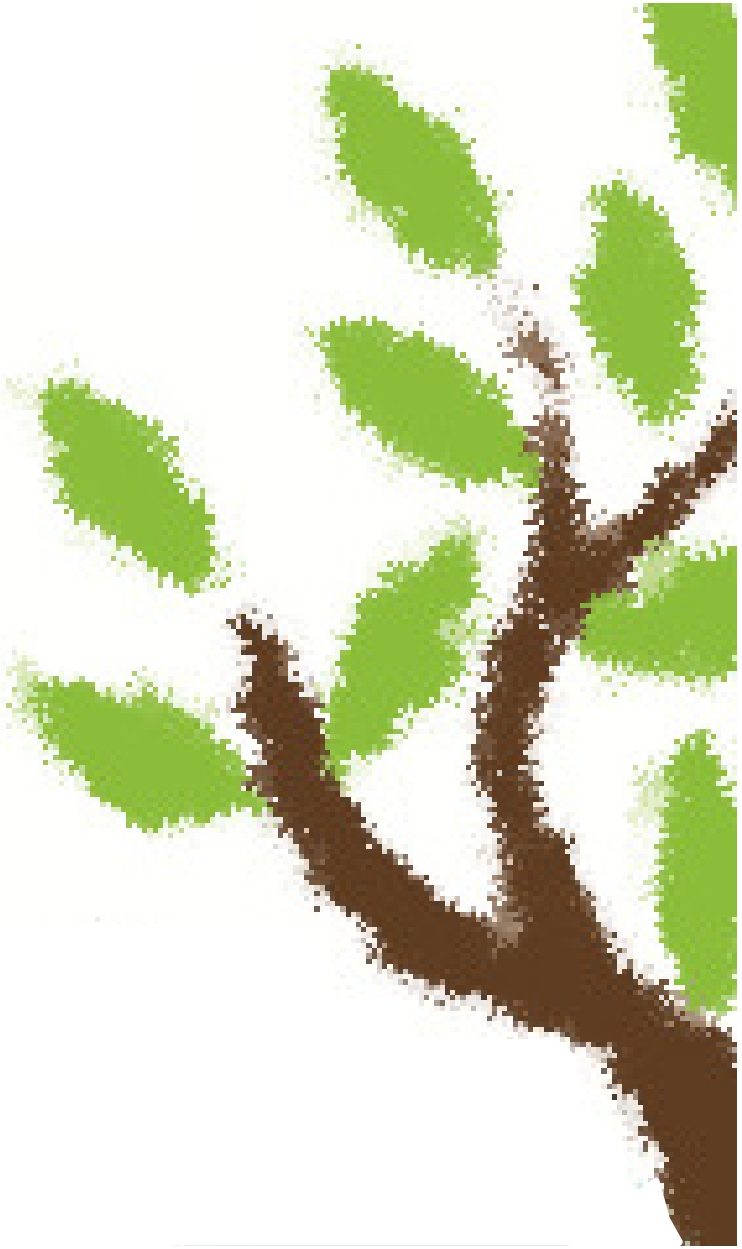
Take Aways: Character Strengths

1 → Many youth across ages described themselves as leaders, generous, and responsible. Next steps for our research involve investigating how these character strengths relate to civic engagement.

2 → Youth were overwhelmingly unlikely to report strengths of purpose, thrift, and humility. This finding suggests an opportunity for schools, families, and neighborhoods to focus on cultivating new strengths in youth.

3 → Youth define themselves by different character strengths. These findings remind us that each young person brings a unique set of skills and strengths to their interactions and adults in their lives can use knowledge of their specific strengths to help them reach their optimal potentials. Future research will examine the different positive behaviors that may result from having certain character strengths.

What it Means to be a Good Citizen



Youths' characterizations of being a **"good citizen" emphasized seven prominent themes**. The majority of youth discussed the **importance of service**: to people, to the community, and to the environment. Several youth also asserted that good citizens live by **"the golden rule."**

Service
- "if you need help, they help you" "improve education" "plant trees"

Treatment of Others
- "treat others like they wanna be treated" "cooperate"

Personal Character
- "good person" "honest" "nice"

Responsibilities
- "obey the law" "pay taxes"

Personal Behavior
- "good neighbor" "takes care of yard"

Voting
- "vote – it is an honor to have that"

Connection to Community
- "taking pride in your country"

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Differences emerged in how older and younger youth defined what it means to be a good citizen.

NUANCED AGE-APPROPRIATE EXAMPLES: Relative to younger students, older students were more likely to mention paying taxes, serving in the military, and being knowledgeable about politics as important.

BEING NICE DOESN'T MATTER: Middle school and elementary students emphasized "being nice" as central to being a good citizen. In contrast, high school students emphasized respect, but being nice was a less dominant theme. In fact, a few older youth explicitly said that good citizens do not need to be nice.

CONTRIBUTE TO COUNTRY: Older students were more likely than their younger counterparts to mention contributing to country and community as an important aspect of good citizenship. Moreover, they were also more likely to express concern about those who do not contribute, and the importance of not relying too much on the help of others.

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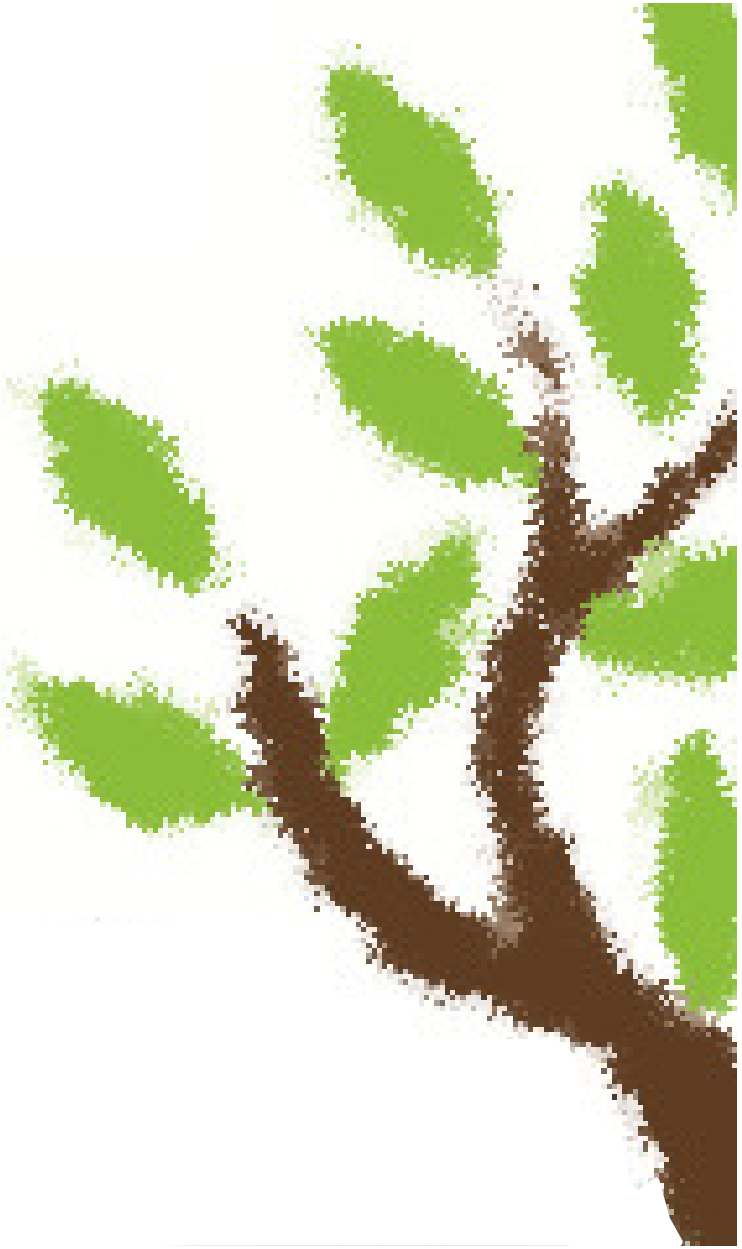
Take Aways: Good Citizen

1 → With age, young people develop a more nuanced sense of the rights and responsibilities of being members of the community. It is likely that individuals' early ideas about what it means to be a citizen are exhibited in their behaviors, both in adolescence and adulthood.

2 → Building on youths' open-ended narrative about the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizens, the upcoming quantitative survey will explore a range of pathways to civic participation, including concern about injustice, and contextual supports like peers, families, and schools.

Helping Others



Students identified a broad range of small, everyday actions they take to help others at **school**.

Most youth were quick to name at least one way they help at school. Across ages, students highlighted various informal help-giving behaviors such as helping classmates with homework or problems, picking up trash, or cleaning up the campus. Older students were more likely than their younger peers to mention participation in formal activities (e.g., clubs, sports, fundraisers) as ways of helping at school.

Research suggests that schools are places where young people learn what it means to be part of a community.

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Although more difficult, students also identified **BIG** and **small** ways they **help in the community.** Younger students tended to have smaller "community circles," focusing mostly on their families.

Relative to helping at school, more students reported that they did not help in the community. In some interviews, we probed further to better understand what "community" means to young people. The answers were widely divergent ranging from "my family" to "everyone in Minneapolis."

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Students' motivations for helping others stemmed mostly from beliefs in **karma**, feelings of **compassion**, and the perception that **others need help**.

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Parents were most frequently identified as **the people who encourage youth to help others**. However, with age, students were more likely to mention other adults as sources of encouragement.

Most students identified more than one person who encourages them to help others. The majority of these people were other adults in the child's life; only a small portion of students identified a peer. Few students mentioned that they received encouragement to help others from teachers.

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Other responses included family members, peers, and other adults.

The most common way of encouraging help-giving was by modeling this behavior.

The second most common way of encouraging help-giving was direct communication.

Youth, across ages, spoke of ways others engage them in helping activities (e.g., volunteering as a family or recycling at home).

The rationale most frequently given for helping others: "helping others will help you."

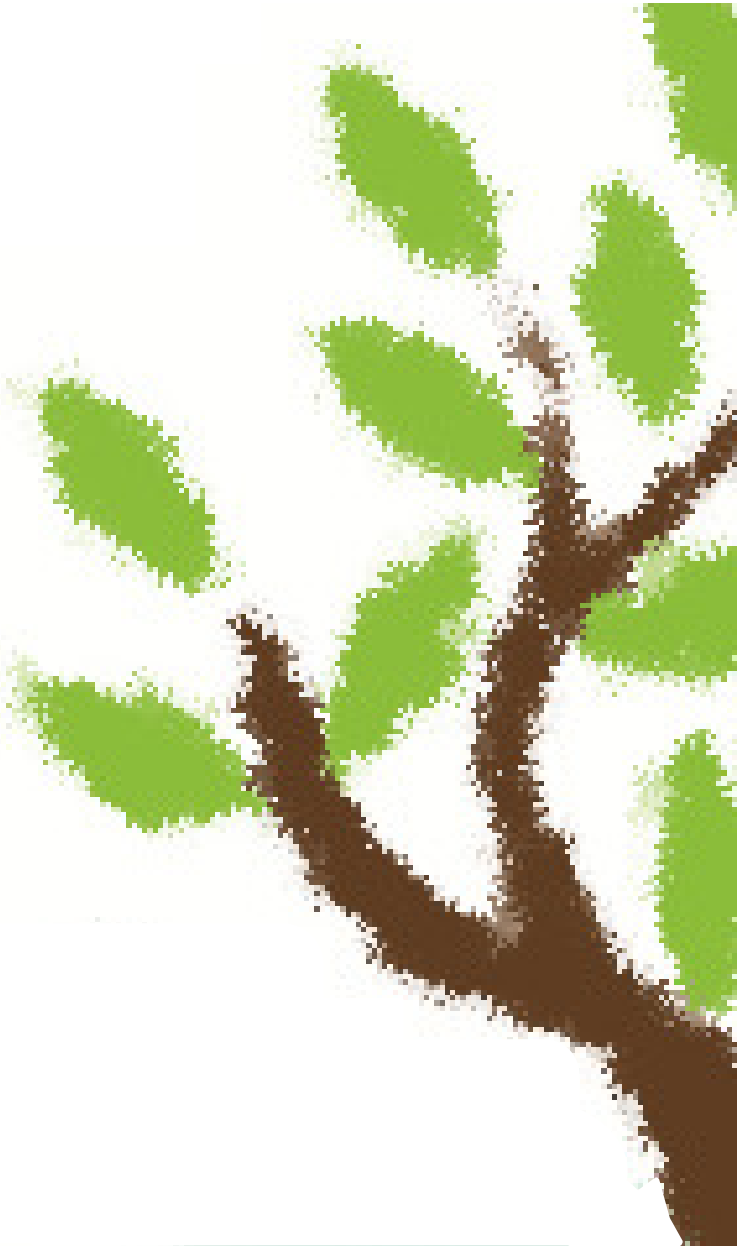
Take Aways: Helping Others

1 → Schools are crucial training grounds for learning about others' needs and practicing helping others in big and small ways.

2 → Young people vary dramatically in how they define their "community." Young people tend to focus on community helping behaviors within their own families, but older youth have a broader view of ways in which they can help their neighborhood and community in both formal and informal ways.

3 → Young people learn to help others mostly from their parents, but other adults can play an important role too!

News and Politics



The **most common** technological mediums for accessing information about politics and current events were **television** and **Facebook**.

However, it was fairly rare for elementary students to follow what is happening in their community and world. With age, students reported more news consumption and through a wider array of resources.

Only a minority of students reported posting status updates, tweeting, or discussing politics online with peers in other formats.

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The majority of youth reported **paying some attention to the 2012 presidential election**. Older students paid **closer attention** and accessed a **wider range of information sources** including news and political websites.

Generally older students expressed more intense interest in the election and politics, more generally. In contrast, younger students primarily followed the election out of curiosity or because it was required for an assignment.

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Sources of Election Information

Younger Students

TELEVISION

PARENTS

Older Students

SCHOOL

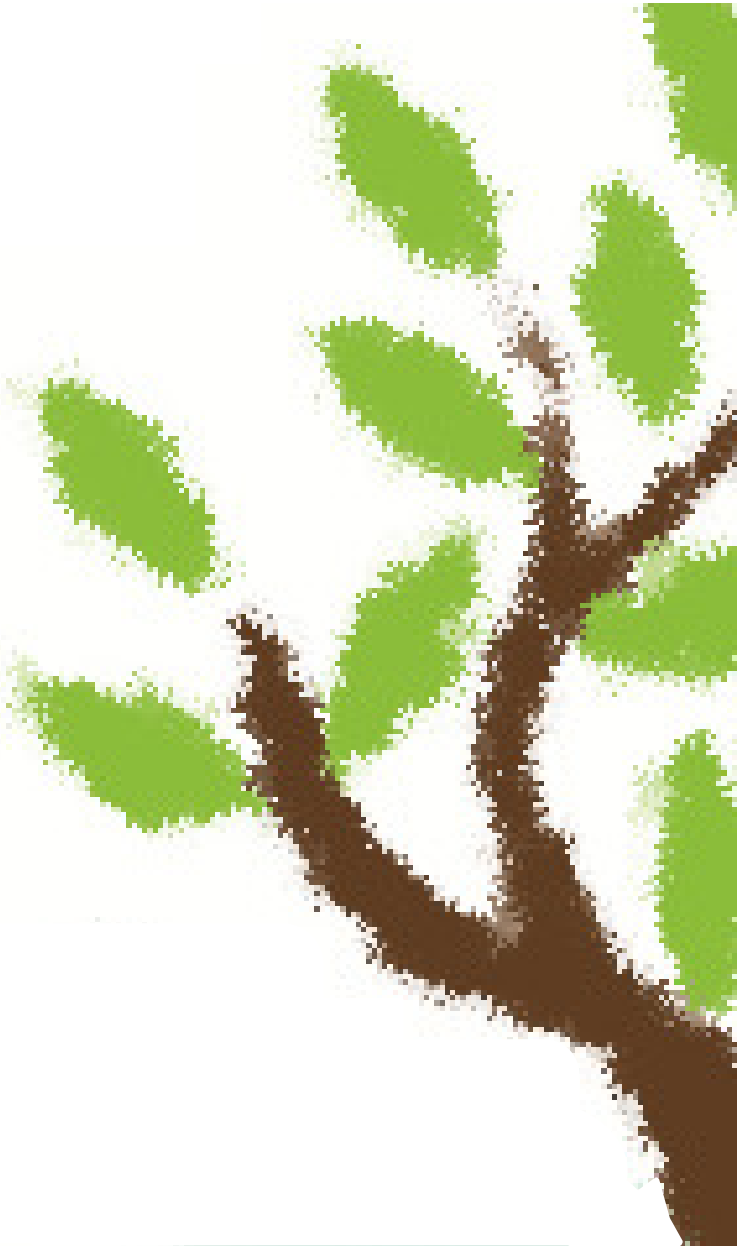
INTERNET

Take Aways: News and Politics

1 → Parents play a key role in establishing habits around staying informed about the happenings of the world and getting youth interested. For older youth, schools are particularly important sources of political news and information. Establishing this as part of any course could enrich youths' development as citizens.

2 → Youth of all ages were interested in the presidential election. Civics and social studies classes should capitalize on students' natural interest in national elections to facilitate discussions of civic engagement and political process. Classes with older youth should include a wider assortment of media sources to facilitate conversation and discuss the political implications of the election.

Moving Forward



The quantitative and qualitative data from earlier phases of this study were used to develop survey instruments for youth and parents. **These surveys will be administered in Fall 2013.**

In **Fall 2014, each participating school district will receive a report** summarizing key study findings.

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CALENDAR

September-October 2013
Youth Survey

October-November 2013
Parent Survey

December-August 2014
Data Analysis

August-November 2014
Final Report to School

SHARING FINDINGS

Some of the ways study findings will be shared include:

- Scientific publications in peer-reviewed journals
- Conference presentations
- Applied reports aimed at adults who run community programs and work with youth
- Reports tailored to the schools who participate
- Newsletters to families who participate
- A webinar for parents and others
- Our website (www.civicroots.org), which contains up-to-date information about our project

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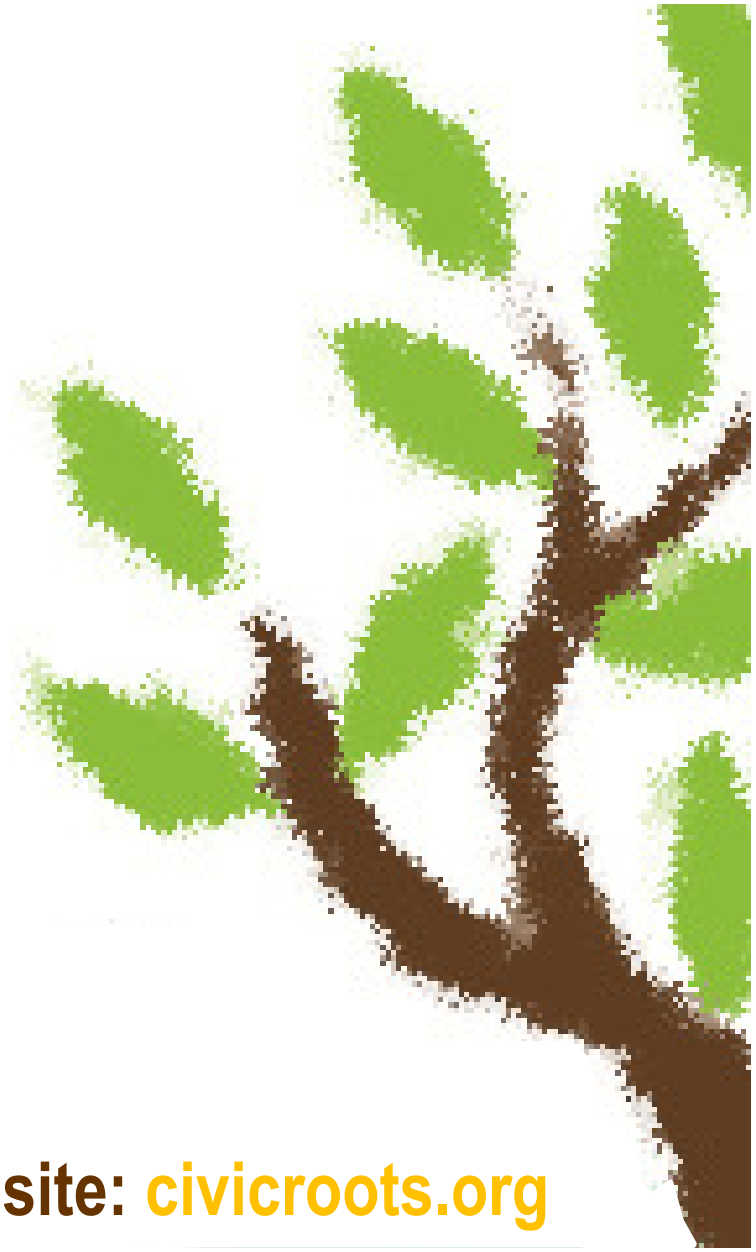

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