



February
2022

CFER 2022 Policy Report: California Action Civics Bills & Programs

“Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.”

– Thomas
Jefferson

As in other instances of promoting progressive education reforms such as a state-wide ethnic studies requirement and new math standards anchored in equity, California is exploring the frontier of instituting “action civics.” *Action civics*, [also known as](#) “New Civics,” “Civic Engagement,” and “Project-Based Civics,” is an alternative pedagogy of civics education that fosters learning of government and civics through direct political actions. These actions range from community service to lobbying of elected officials for changes to various voter education campaigns.

While having its broad appeal entailed in “learning by doing,” this new concept has been widely criticized by policy observers and education policy experts for its overemphasis on [partnership over citizenship](#) and [bias toward progressive political activism](#). Critics argue that “the nationwide movement to replace ‘content-based’ civic education with ‘action civics’... would rob our already civically illiterate students of class time needed for study.”

California’s political and educational establishments are actively promoting action civics this year, through three new bills introduced to the State Legislature and a state-wide public program offering cash incentives for specified community service programs. Taking into consideration other related, ongoing attempts to radicalize teaching with race-based, identity-based contents, it is safe to argue that **the state government is pushing public education decisively towards political indoctrination, away from education.**

This report summarizes these ongoing developments and their potential consequences. For more information regarding CFER’s policy monitoring work, please contact us at info@cferfoundation.org and/or visit CFER’s official website at www.cferfoundation.org.

“The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.” – James Madison

SB 955: Excused absence for civic or political events

Should a student be granted an excused absence for participating in a political demonstration? California Senator Connie M. Levya (Democrat, SD 20) thinks so and has proposed [a bill](#) to legislate this. Senate Bill 955 would amend the Education Code to require a middle or high school student who’s absent from school to “engage in a civic or political event to be excused for only one school day absence per school year.” Furthermore, the bill would also authorize local educational entities to permit additional excused absences to “engage in a civic or political event... in the discretion of a school administrator.” The state would reimburse local agencies and school districts for certain costs associated with state-mandated local programs.



CFER Analysis:

SB 955 facilitates “action civics” and indoctrination due to a tendency toward promoting progressive political causes by empowering school administrators and the Commission on State Mandates to determine eligibility. The state education apparatus, with its introduction of a critical ethnic studies model curriculum and piloting of a new math framework centered around equity, leans left decisively. At the same time, the majority of school board members, superintendents and school principals are ideologically aligned with the state bureaucracy. This political context of progressivism undergirding the identification of priorities for civic and political events should sound alarm for citizens and parents who want a knowledge-based paradigm for civic learning. They should be concerned about the establishment’s redefinition of civics as progressive activism, including propagation of critical race theory masquerading as civic events.

The issue of activism over citizenship would be more pronounced, considering [chronically low proficiencies](#) in civics, reading and writing for the state’s middle and high school students. The problem of low performance has been exacerbated by [pandemic-induced learning loss](#) in the last two years.

“There is an old saying that the course of civilization is a race between catastrophe and education. In a democracy such as ours, we must make sure that education wins the race.” – John F. Kennedy

AB 1939: Climate change advocacy for coursework

Introduced by Assembly Members Luz Rivas (D, AD39), Lisa Calderon (D, AD57), Christopher Ward (D, AD78) and supported by a dozen more Democratic legislators, [Assembly Bill 1939](#) would amend the Education Code to add climate change lessons to a variety of school disciplines grades 1 to 6. Specifically, it would mandate local school districts to adopt “an emphasis on the causes and effects of climate change” in English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, Visual and Performing Arts, Health, Physical Education and more, no later than the 2023-2024 school year.



CFER Analysis:

With a presumption that climate change is an established scientific discipline, AB 1939 risks proselyting political beliefs surrounding [the controversial topic](#) rather than inform students about the debatable conjunctures and hypotheses inherent in any emerging field of scientific inquiry. When married with other developments mandating students’ political participation and implemented by self-identified teacher-activists, this bill could effectively infuse the climate advocacy work or climate justice activism into the track of action civics.

Like the rolling-out of the ethnic studies paradigm in the last four years, “climate change” is being treated in AB1939 as a teaching philosophy, approach or pedagogy that needs to be infused into all school disciplines. If unchecked and unchallenged, such an all-level endorsement could easily turn into ideological re-education in favor of fringe political theories including critical pedagogy or critical race theory.

"No free government, nor the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people, but by...a frequent recurrence to fundamental principles." – George Mason

SCR 60: Art therapy week of civic engagement

Branded as a bi-partisan effort, Senate Concurrent Resolution 60 was introduced by California State Senator Jim Neilson (R, SD 4) to recognize the week of October 10 through October 16 as “Art Therapy Week of Civic Engagement” to celebrate “the contributions of professional art therapists to California’s communities.” Built in the pleasant-sounding verbiage of [SCR 60](#) is the recognition of art therapists’ affirming “a commitment to inclusivity” and upholding “social justice and sustainability.” Additionally, the resolution acknowledges art therapists for their efforts “to advance a sustainable and just society.”



CFER Analysis:

By grafting art therapy, a non-political profession and pursuit in principle, with social justice and racial representation, SCR 60 erodes civics education by commending civic engagement and highlighting political advocacy. The underlying logic is one for social justice, amounting to state-sanctioned political action for progressive policy positions. How will art therapists who support heterodox positions such as viewpoint diversity and oppose political correctness be recognized?

Of particular concern to CFER is SCR 60’s identification of valuable art therapy along the axis of increasing racial representation, a term that can be easily abused and stretched as racial favoritism and zero-sum identity politics. If every art therapist is evaluated by aforementioned standards, the Art Therapy Week of Civic Engagement would become a political litmus test for allegiance to far-left activism.

“The philosophy of the schoolhouse in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next.” – Abraham Lincoln

#CaliforniaForAll College Corps: \$159 million state funding for action civics

In January 2022, California’s Chief Service Officer Josh Fryday, in partnership with Governor Gavin Newsom and leaders of 45 participating colleges and universities, launched [the CaliforniansForAll service initiative](#). Estimated to appropriate \$159 million from the state budget, the initiative will sponsor up to 6,500 qualified college students (including Dreamers) to each complete 450 hours of community service with [California College Corps](#). The program is commissioned from California Volunteers at the Office of the Governor. Students who qualify as College Corps Fellows and complete the service will receive \$10,000, including a \$7,000 stipend and a \$3,000 Education Award and academic credits.

Notably, [\\$92 million](#) of the total budget will not go directly to students, of which \$77 million is for project operations and \$15 million is for personnel. The initiative will direct participants to support and learn from non-profit organizations “working in three priority areas: K-12 Education, Climate Action and Food Insecurity.” As a state service program, the initiative has three goals: “1. Engage college students in meaningful service opportunities that build leadership skills and civic responsibility; 2. Help students from diverse backgrounds graduate college on time and with less debt; 3. Support the work of community-based organizations focused on key local priorities.”



CFER Analysis:

Without public access to criteria on how participating non-profits are selected, the College Corps program can succumb to a bait and switch technique that turns public participation into political advocacy that folds in cash transfer incentives. The three priorities of the initiative can be implemented with tremendous leeway for partisan purposes, while the ballooning administrative cost of the program signifies the bumbling bureaucracy of the progressive establishment. Specifically, the official announcement for the initiative lists relieving college debts as a motivator: “nearly four million Californians owe \$147 billion in student debt with Black and Latino Californians facing the highest rates of default and delinquency.” We will continue to monitor the rolling out of #CaliforniaForAll College Corps to ensure its compliance with California’s constitutional guarantee of equal protection.