DataHaven
Classroom Materials

Title of Material: Civic Life Inquiry Project

Topics Discussed: Civics, community wellness, community happiness, public resources, community trust, participation in public life, making a difference in the community

Skills Utilized: Reading skills, research, reflection, problem solving, community action

Format: Individual or in small groups

In Person or Online: Either

Procedure/Instruction Suggestions:
If the student does try to implement their action plan, and shows proof of it, this could be extra credit!

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Civic Life Inquiry Project:
Civics in your Community

Background:

     Civic life, defined broadly as the attitudes, activities, and investments that build on the collective resources, skills, expertise, and knowledge of citizens to improve the quality of life in communities, is a powerful dimension of our overall health and well-being. Civic life can range from the more recognizable—like informed local voting and volunteering—to the less obvious, such as access to and quality of public resources, design and upkeep of public parks, and residents' sense of safety in their neighborhoods.

     Measures of civic life provide insight as to how residents feel about their communities, the ways they choose to get involved, and opportunities for improving life in the cities and towns they share. Higher levels of civic trust, participation, and engagement are correlated with both more equitable economic outcomes and many positive health outcomes, such as lower mortality rates, improved mental and physical health, and lower crime rates. Towns and cities each have a unique sense of community, with varying traditions, public resources, and physical spaces.

Public Resources

     Residents rely on their local governments to provide a wide array of resources. While public education, social and health services, public safety, and infrastructure may come to mind as key municipal responsibilities, local governments offer many additional programs and services—like public libraries, transportation assistance, and adult education—which underserved or at-risk populations may disproportionately rely on. The fiscal health of local governments directly impacts their ability to invest in such programs and services. These resources are truly a cornerstone of civic life, helping to mitigate socioeconomic inequalities, bridging social divides, and ultimately, fostering trust in the responsiveness of government to community needs. Local government revenue comes from municipal taxes and fees (almost exclusively property tax in Connecticut), as well as state and federal grants. This means that the wealthier towns and cities, able to draw on stronger tax bases, are the biggest spenders.

Examples of resources: libraries, schools, public transportation

Community Trust and Appreciation

     At a fundamental level, civic trust helps to bridge divides and foster cooperation—conditions necessary for both political engagement and economic development; in fact, research has shown strong, positive correlations between regions' levels of civic trust and economic performance. Higher levels of civic trust also lead to healthier and more cohesive communities, encouraging the growth of social organizations, some of which promote equitable access to much-needed local programs and services in education, transportation, community health, and recreation. Confidence in organizations serving the area is another important aspect of community trust. Community philanthropy that supports locally driven development, strengthens community capacity and voices, builds on local resources, and holds itself accountable not only produces lasting results but also increases residents' trust in their community institutions.

Indicators of trust and appreciation: satisfied with area, police approval, safe walking at night, trust neighbors

Participation in Public Life

Community and civic engagement can take many forms, from more commonly cited activities—like volunteering and voting—to the vast array of opportunities provided by arts and cultural events, community and school meetings, and religious organizations. As different as they may be, these forms of participation in public life arise from a shared sense of responsibility and belonging, as well as investment and ownership in the local, regional, national, and international communities to which residents belong. The quality of our communities, and our democracy, depend on participation and citizen engagement across the various dimensions of public life. Opportunities for and rates of civic participation are impacted by socioeconomic status in both Connecticut and Greater Hartford; rates of volunteering, voting, and using cultural resources were lower for individuals with lower incomes and levels of educational attainment, indicating that structural inequalities may create obstacles to actively participating in public life.

The design of neighborhoods and public spaces impacts residents' civic health. Cycling, walking, and access to nature and green spaces are all connected to civic trust and participation; urban parks are particularly important, as they promote inclusion and strengthen social networks across diverse groups of people. Individuals residing in walkable neighborhoods report higher levels of civic trust and participation, while those with access to parks and green space are more likely to trust their neighbors and believe community members are willing to help one another. Research has shown that even the presence of a community garden in easy walking distance is associated with increased participation in public life and more informed local voting. Examples of participation: volunteering, utilization of arts/cultural resources, involvement with improving area, voting

Your Task: Now that you have an idea of what components of civic life are and how they can impact an individual and a community, you are going to look into your own community. Conduct online or in-person research on your town or city on the three components to civic life: public resources, community trust and appreciation, and participation in public life. Check off the boxes as you complete them! Your report will consist of the following:

- ❏ **Resources:** What public resources are available to your community and what they can do for your community
- ❏ **Trust and Appreciation:** The levels of community trust and appreciation, and efforts to increase this trust and appreciation
- ❏ **Public Participation:** The extent of participation in public life, including what public spaces are available and what they can do for your community and figures like voter turnout and volunteering opportunities
- ❏ **Reflection:** A reflection on how your community is succeeding in serving its members in these three realms of civic life, and where your community is failing to serve its members in these three realms of civic life
- ❏ **You in the Community:** Your experience with your communities efforts to serve its members in these three realms of civic life; what have you personality benefitted from and what opportunities do you wish you had more available?
- ❏ **Proposal:** Your proposal on how to better your community and how it can serve its members in these three realms of civic life better
- ❏ **Action Plan:** Come up with a plan on how these changes can be implemented. What do *you* need to do? Who do you contact? What do *they* have to do?

This report should be reflective, honest, and original. It should be typed, formally structured, and include your best research. You should cite your research in MLA style on the last page of your report. This report is based on your research, your desires, your observations, and what is generally best for your community. This is your opportunity to propose ways for your community to improve based on attainable goals and research. Once you are complete with your report, put your action plan into action! Make a difference!

Grading Rubric

Research	Inquiry project does not include any content from the readings or other research. **0-10**	Inquiry project includes minimal content from the readings or other research. **15**	Inquiry project includes some content from the readings or other research, but is unclear or unfinished. **20**	Inquiry project includes enough content from the readings or other research for the reader to understand. **25**
Accuracy	Inquiry project does not include accurate information on the community or related information. **0-10**	Inquiry project includes content with many errors or inaccuracies. **15**	Inquiry project includes content with few errors or inaccuracies. **20**	Inquiry project includes content that is accurate based on the given information. **25**
Uses Time Wisely	Student(s) did not use class time wisely and did not turn in the inquiry project by the assigned due date. **0-10**	Student(s) did not use class time wisely or did not turn in the inquiry project by the assigned due date. **15**	Student(s) were off task at times, but handed in the inquiry project on time. **20**	Student(s) were on task and completed the inquiry project on time. **25**
Creativity	Inquiry project does not include creative proposals or observations. **0-10**	Inquiry project shows some creativity but is repetitive or not their own original ideas. **15**	Inquiry project shows some creativity and is somewhat appealing or unique. **20**	Inquiry project is creative and is appealing to look at while also being unique and original. **25**

Total Points for Inquiry Project: /100