



## INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: SIX PRACTICAL TIPS



Sustainability and the environment are top issues for young people. For this reason, they are a promising way to encourage civic engagement, helping to fulfill public education’s mission of preparing youth for their roles as citizens in a democratic society.

A recent peer-reviewed article presents a case study of *Cultivating Pathways to Sustainability*, a statewide effort in Vermont that does just that. The project helps middle and high school students work with adults to develop and implement community action projects to address the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These goals focus not only on core environmental objectives such as clean energy and water but on equity issues related to access (e.g., “decent work and economic growth”).

The article is authored by Eric McGinnis and NEPC Fellow Dana Mitra, both of Pennsylvania State University. It’s grounded in interviews and observations with middle and high school students and teachers who participated in the project during the 2019-20 school year. The authors offer the following six pieces of advice for educators interested in creating opportunities for their own students to learn about civic action:

- 1. Reinforce the value of young people and adults working together by modeling collaboration:** For instance, in the kickoff meeting for the project, students and adults worked together to provide an introduction to the group. The students then worked alongside their teachers to rank the 17 United Nations goals in terms of their priority to their communities and schools.
- 2. Partnering with the broader community can increase the odds that students will be able to spark meaningful change:** The project that was the focus

of the case study was founded by three nonprofits and supported by multiple other organizations. “The number of nonprofit organizations . . . built capacity for students to consider more complex interventions because of the many intersections of adults in the room across multiple projects and initiatives,” McGinnis and Mitra write.

- 3. Consider starting with school-centric projects with attainable goals:** Environmental challenges can seem insurmountable. The schools McGinnis and Mitra researched started small, introducing students to civic engagement via doable projects such as “designing outdoor classrooms, improving recycling and compost and increasing time for exercise and recess.”
- 4. Consider embarking on multiple smaller projects at the same time:** This approach allowed more students to get involved since there was plenty of work to go around. In addition, if a particular small project stalled, the students working on it could switch to a different project.
- 5. Involve students in every aspect of the project:** This means students should be involved not just in carrying out the work but in every aspect of the project—from determining how to decide which action to pursue to inviting new students to participate in the program.
- 6. Teach students to connect projects with work that’s already underway:** Students can learn from and expand upon ongoing initiatives both in their schools and in their communities.

McGinnis and Mitra conclude that the study “shows how a youth-adult partnership model can deepen the meaning and implementation of student-led civic action.”

## NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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