

A Teacher's Introduction to CAP

The qualifications for self-government are not innate. They are the result of habit and long training.

—Thomas Jefferson

As Jefferson and many of the other founders realized, for America's experiment in representative democracy to survive, each new generation of its citizens needs to be educated about the Constitution, our system of government, and the rights and responsibilities of a participating citizenry. It is, after all, the people who make a democracy work.

In fact, the perceived need for ongoing civic education of the populace was one of the primary reasons for establishing public and free education in the United States. Advocates from Horace Mann to John Dewey recognized that a civically ignorant population would not remain a free population.

The challenge of educating each new generation of U.S. citizens has been borne by schools and teachers since the middle of the 19th century. Today, most states require instruction in state and U.S. history to help students understand the ideas, events, and the people who shaped our nation. They require instruction in world history to place our nation's story in an international and global context. Most also require instruction in civics and government so that students understand their constitutional heritage and the workings of government at the national, state, and local levels.

Unfortunately, national and state studies demonstrate that students graduate ill prepared to take on their role as informed and effective citizens. Levels of content knowledge are insufficient and students lack the dispositions to effectively participate.

CAP offers a solution.

What Is CAP?

CAP offers a different kind of civics and government course. Think of it as a culmination of students' social studies education, a chance to apply what they have learned in the real-world experience of taking civic action.

Students and adults learn best by doing. In the science curriculum, students learn the scientific method by being challenged to form a hypothesis, conduct experiments to test it, and draw conclusions on the basis of the data collected. In speech classes, students learn public speaking by organizing their ideas, writing a speech, and presenting it. In college, students often participate in a practicum, where they apply the theory of the classroom to the real world.

CAP is a practicum for high school students in civics and government. In it they see how the content of a government course can apply to the real world. By taking **civic actions**, they also practice what real citizens do when they go about trying to affect policy or solve a real problem. These actions can be many and varied, including getting informed about a public issue or problem, thinking critically about it, discovering how government is involved and makes decisions, developing a position, engaging in civic dialogue, building constituencies, working together toward a common goal, doing civic writing, making presentations, advocating for and defending positions, meeting with officials, and making decisions.

It's the stuff that empowered citizens do to solve a community problem: influence policymakers, advocate for resources, and support or oppose legislation. By conducting civic actions, students can learn how government really works, gain the skills and confidence to participate themselves, and understand the importance of what they are doing in their government course.

The CAP Classroom

CAP teachers still cover the required government content and standards and students participate in class discussions and other learning activities and are evaluated on the basis of their achievement. Every effort has been made to link the CAP curriculum to standards including Common Core State Standards and your state's Social Studies content standards. CAP embeds research-based methods and the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework, and provides multiple opportunities for assessment.

But in the CAP classroom, the teacher has additional goals and expectations and a different role. In the CAP classroom, teachers not only cover the material but provide opportunities for students to actually learn how to be engaged and effective citizens.

To do this, the teacher serves as a coach to guide students through the civic action process as they select a problem or issue, research, plan and take civic actions, and report and document the experience. The teacher motivates, challenges, critiques, and assesses student progress.

The students' role is to be accountable for completing the civic action process, just as with a science project or term paper, to the best of their ability. Along the way they must seek guidance when necessary, work with their peers to solve problems, manage their time to meet deadlines, and document their work. To help them, CAP provides structure, tips and "how-tos" for conducting civic actions, and templates for reporting on their activities.

The CAP Curriculum

The CAP curriculum consists of five core lessons and a menu of additional lessons to choose from. Each of the core lessons provides content and skills students need for their civic action projects. The CAP curriculum incorporates a range of interactive learning strategies, which are central to good classroom instruction. They include class discussion,

simulations, and role-play activities—all promising approaches practices outlined in the germinal *The Civic Mission of Schools* report. The report identified research-based promising approaches that promote the development of student civic content and capacity gains. In 2011 an updated report, *The Guardian of Democracy*, was issued which identified the promising approaches now as “proven practices.”

Civic Action

CAP challenges students to apply the content and skills they learn in a government course to the real world by working on an actual problem, issue, or policy. CAP includes a series of forms and resources that guide students through the process. While the teacher introduces and monitors the process, it is important that students take the lead in completing their civic actions. Many teachers encourage students to troubleshoot for each other when they are working to come up with new civic actions or are unsure how to proceed.

Many civic actions will take students out into the community. Notify administrators and parents about the CAP assignment and update them as necessary. Administrators and parents can be helpful resources, providing useful support for student activities.

Grouping Students for Civic Action

There are many ways to group your class for civic actions:

Small Groups. Many teachers divide students into small groups according to the different issues students find interesting.

Whole Class. Some teachers prefer that all students in the class address the same issue or problem with each group focusing on a different set of tasks.

Thematic Semester. Some teachers select a broad theme (e.g., crime) for the semester with small groups each addressing different aspects of that theme.

Independent Work. And in some classes, teachers allow students who want to work independently to select their own issues.

All of these student-grouping models work with CAP. Here are some illustrations for each:
Small Groups

The class is divided into groups of 2–6 students, and each group selects its own issue or problem to work on.

- Some teachers have the class come up with a list of issues or problems, and students select one or two that interest them. The teacher then eliminates any issues that just get one vote. Students are grouped according to like-mindedness. This way, each student is working with at least one other student on an issue of interest.
- Other teachers put students in groups (or have students self-select partners) and let the groups come to agreement on their issue.

As with any small-group work, each student takes on responsibilities that contribute toward the completed assignment. The group coordinates its efforts. You can check in with the group solely through the civic action forms, though if you work on the civic actions in class, you'll want to circulate to check on progress or to answer questions.

Some teachers prefer that each group member have a specific identified role. Other teachers allow group members to assign the tasks as they come up. Both work. The civic actions should, as with all group work, reflect the contribution of all group members. Often in the small-group model, the group turns in each form, the individuals don't, although evidence of each person's contribution should be apparent. If you don't see the evidence, ask for more.

Whole Class

In this model, the teacher helps students reach consensus on a single problem or issue. Focusing on this one issue, students form separate groups that each address the problem in a different way.

- In a whole-class model, some teachers impose a structure by having all groups share the actions they are considering with the other groups in order to coordinate activities and use each other as resources. Each group can benefit from the feedback of other groups. A group may decide to change actions to avoid duplicate efforts, or after discussion, it may decide that duplicate efforts might actually strengthen the impact.
- Some teachers use the whole-group model to have their students apply concepts of self-governance. Students decide what needs to be done regarding the civic action forms and divide responsibilities accordingly.

Independent Work

Individual students may be passionate about a particular issue not selected by any of their peers and could work independently on their own CAP. Teachers might choose to assign CAP in lieu of a typical research paper, wanting each student to do CAP individually.

- You can choose to have regular deadlines when civic action forms from every student are due.
- Or you can maintain a bulletin board or inbox for students to post or turn in their forms as they complete them.
- If CAP will be serving the role of a research paper, you might ask each student to provide evidence of particular types of resources or actions that you would like specifically to assess.

Online Resources

The web site (www.crfcap.org) has additional information and resources for both teachers and students participating in CAP. This component will be periodically updated and expanded.

CAP and the Civic Mission of Schools

The CAP program is designed to support research in effective civic education. In 2003, *The Civic Mission of Schools* was released. This report (from Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) spawned a national Civic Mission of Schools (CMS) movement to improve and increase civic education in the United States. In 2011 an updated report was issued, *The Guardian of Democracy*, and the promising approaches are now identified as “proven practices”.

The CMS report provides six proven practices for civic learning:

1. Provide formal instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.
2. Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.
3. Give students the opportunity to apply what they learn through community service linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Offer extracurricular activities that involve students in their schools and communities.
5. Encourage student participation in school governance. This can include providing opportunities for students to make decisions in the classroom.
6. Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

CAP provides opportunities to engage students in most of the CMS proven practices. Each lesson lists the proven practice addressed.

CAP and the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework

CAP provides a real-world project-based learning component for the high school government/civics course. CAP lessons provide essential concepts students need to make connections between issues/problems + public policy/government + citizens, as well as tools they need to be able to identify and address an issue that matters to them. CAP lessons make content relevant to students by using real case studies and examples of issues that other students have worked on through CAP.

The project-based learning component of CAP has students apply civics concepts and tools as they identify an issue that matters to them, make connections to public policy, develop and implement civic actions to address their chosen issue, and evaluate the impact they made through their CAP projects.

CAP is aligned to Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts and History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects and supports the C3 Framework’s four dimensions.

[More about CAP and the C3 Framework online. . .](#)