The Civic Action Project and High-Quality Service Learning

The Civic Action Project (CAP) is designed to support research-based practices in civic education, including engaging students in meaningful service-learning activities that are connected to the curriculum. (Guardian of Democracy, 2011)

Through CAP, students identify and address an issue or problem in their community by developing and implementing civic actions. CAP defines "civic actions" broadly to include all of the things everyday citizens do to impact public policy to solve a problem and initiate change. For example, gathering information to become better informed about the issue, making policy connections, raising awareness and building support for your issue, and working with policy makers to affect change are all civic actions.

The National Youth Leadership Council has identified best-practices for service learning, K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice. The following describes how CAP supports these standards.

Duration and Intensity

CAP is designed to be embedded in a government/civics course with students spending at least a quarter, and more likely a semester engaged in service learning. CAP requires students to think deeply about community needs as they work on a proposal that identifies an issue they want to work on, describe how this need is evidenced in the community (impact on people, society), and propose the first actions they think will be effective in addressing their identified need.

Students produce documentation of planning and the result of each civic action they take to impact their chosen community need in terms of the impact of their actions as well as reflecting on their own learning by doing (what new content, skills, attitudes are you developing through CAP).

At the end of the course, students are required to produce a CAP Report which guides them through a reflection process in which they reflect on the impact they made on the community need they addressed, as well as their own learning. The CAP Proposal, Thinking it Through document, Civic Action document, and CAP report are part of the CAP Planner that guides students through the process.

CAP provides teachers with five core lessons that focus on specific content knowledge and skills that students need to successfully identify and address a community issue. In addition, CAP provides nine more lessons that focus on specific skills and content to help and inspire students as they are engaged in civic actions including making persuasive arguments/presentations, speaking in front of panels/boards/community groups, and building constituencies. All of the lessons are linked to mandated state standards.

On average, students spend at least 40 hours on CAP.

Educate. Participate.

Link to Curriculum
CAP is designed to embed service learning into the required government/civics course as a "practicum" for effective, engaged citizenship. CRF has aligned CAP to each teachers' state standards and for classes, schools, and districts that have service-learning requirements, CAP provides an exciting and meaningful way for students to meet the requirement.

Throughout the CAP program, students relate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they gain through CAP to their own growth as effective and engaged citizens now and in their futures.

Partnerships
CAP is student-directed in terms of identifying community needs that matter to young people, thus there is not a set of official community partners attached to the program. However, CAP requires students to communicate with policy makers, community groups, and others who can share expertise on the identified need and/or help students with their civic actions. In several CAPs, students ended up joining community groups to work on their identified need. For example, high school students were very concerned about a local elementary school being closed down due to budget cuts and as they investigated, learned that there was a community group working to "Save Lopez Elementary." The students met with the leaders of this group and ended up joining them to, indeed, save Lopez. The adults in the Save Lopez association said that the students brought fresh ideas, energy, and hope to the cause, and the students shared that they learned better communication skills, the need to hang in there when the going gets tough, and that adults and youth can make things happen when they work together.

Meaningful Service
CAP requires students to select a community need and to convince others that it is important, thus they choose issues they believe relevant, and must consider how and why the issue is relevant to others. In addition, CAP requires students to make a connection between their chosen issue and public policy. To do so, students must explore and explain the social issues being addressed by the civic actions they take.

Quality of the Service Learning Experience

Youth Voice
Key to CAP is student voice in that students choose community needs that matter to them. In fact, one of the most common answers when asked, "What advice would you give the next person who wants to work on this issue?, is "Make sure you care about your CAP problem, because you are going to work really hard on it!"

In CAP, teachers take the role of coach and facilitator, not choosing the issue or running the project. Inherent in CAP's design are check in points so that teachers can monitor student progress and intervene if necessary.

Diversity
CAP requires students to look at multiple perspectives as they investigate causes and effects of community needs. CAP students must also connect their chosen issue to public policy and use a simple policy analysis tool that engages them in thinking about how different constituencies/stakeholders view the community problem and its possible solutions. CAP students are expected to interact with a range of people as they address their issues, including those in the community who work on the issue and those who are most impacted by the issue.

In addition to students interacting with community members, so far, all of the CAP teachers have students work in CAP teams of 2-10. CAP teams grapple with issues, problem-solve, and make decisions together. According to student surveys, participating in a team required them to work with others who had different points of view and learn how to communicate ideas and reach decisions.

CAP students from different schools interact on the CAP web site through its discussion and blog features. Currently students from a school in Las Vegas chat with students from East Los Angeles, who also talk with students from Thorn Bay Community School in rural Alaska, and are joined by students in Wheaton, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, and students in Fort Collins, Colorado. These communities represent a range of socioeconomic levels, ethnic/racial backgrounds, and urban/rural/suburban settings.

Reflection
CAP engages students in reflection activities throughout the program, requiring written reflection on the impact they are having on their chosen community need, as well as reflection about their own learning, specifically in terms of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of effective citizens and their roles and responsibilities as citizens. In addition, there are opportunities for students to share their experiences and reflect on their successes and challenges on the web site.

Progress Monitoring
Students are required to collect evidence of their civic actions and impact throughout their CAP experiences, including evidence of the need/problem they are addressing, emails/photos/letters showing communications they have with community members, and other products they create.

Along with reflecting on their own learning, students must assess the effectiveness of the civic actions they take and use this assessment to plan their next civic action. This analysis and planning is built in to the CAP Planner documents.

K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice. National Youth Leadership Council, 2008.

Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools, Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, 2011