

**LEARNING TO CREATE TOGETHER:  
Participatory Design of  
K-12 Civics Education**

# Learning to Create Together

Learning to Create Together is a proposed **process** for the **participatory design and implementation** of a **comprehensive, K-12 civics education experience** for schools that meets the needs of students, the community, and society for active and constructive engagement in civic life.

- No specific model or curriculum in mind, but:
  - an emphasis on **participatory design** of the program and
  - advocacy for a model that is **experience-based, integrated, and K through 12** in scope.

## The Need

**Our society, our community, and our kids need more, and better, learning opportunities related to civics, particularly a civics that *fosters active and constructive engagement in civic life.***

- “Civics”, or civic education, has no universal definition (although most people have some ideas about what it means)
- We propose thinking of civics as *learning to create together.*

# Civics Education: More important than ever

- **Rapid change** in society and **multiple complex challenges** to be faced
- Heightened need for **critical thinking**
- Political **polarization**
- **Loss of faith** in our political system
- **Lack of trust** in institutions
- **Low citizen engagement**, particularly among the young
- Effects of **new technologies** on communication, relationships, ways of being informed (or misinformed)

# Challenges with Defining “Civics Education”

Definitions of *civics education*, or simply *civics*, can reflect a wide range of assumptions and values:

- Is it defined with greater emphasis on principles *or* greater emphasis on skills?
- Is it defined with student as passive *or* student as active?
- Is it focused more around history, or more about the needs of today and tomorrow?
- Does it apply mainly to occasional civic duties like voting or is it about everyday behavior?
- Is it defined with greater emphasis on preserving existing societal patterns *or* greater emphasis on society's capacity for change (or both)?

*What do we need? What do we want?*

## A Working Definition of Civics Education

**Learning to Create Together** leans toward a definition of civic education that is about **learning to play an active role in community and society, understanding issues and creating solutions, particularly in collaboration with others, for mutual benefit and for the common good.**

# The State of US Civics Education

- Experiences will vary across the nation, across districts, and across schools
- Many critiques of weak civics education
- Many initiatives to strengthen civics education in one form or another
- Most programs seem to promote more of the traditional, just with more “rigor”
- Don’t want to generalize or idealize yester-year, but...
- There were some very vibrant approaches to authentic, hands-on, meaningful civics going on a century ago
- Civics education got caught up in the Cold War and culture wars ever since.

## What We Know

- **State and local standards for civic education can be very limited in scope and detail.**
- **There *is* civic education happening in schools.**
  - *Formally*, there are requirements (American Government, citizenship test, etc.).
  - *Informally*, there is civic education scattered throughout social studies, volunteerism, etc., depending on school, teacher, etc.
- **There is often *not* a comprehensive, systemic, K-12 civic education vision & program.**
- **We are missing a great opportunity for our kids, our schools, and our future.**

# PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

It is not likely that schools will make great progress in civic education without the understanding and support of at least that portion of the public which is deeply concerned for the future of American democracy.

*Learning the Ways of Democracy (1940)*

# Starting with Participatory Design

Civics education design should (and arguably must) be done in a **participatory** manner because:

- (a) it is unethical to design social systems for others without their participation;
- (b) it will ensure the greatest responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of the body of stakeholders; and
- (c) it will result in the greatest sense of ownership, which increases the likelihood of successful implementation.

## Participatory Design, cont'd

Civics education design is **particularly well suited** to a participatory approach, because:

- Most people outside of the education system could evoke, with minimal reflection and special expertise, some notion of what good citizenship and an active civic life means or requires.
- Civic education is a subject for which public participation is likely the most broadly beneficial
  - Reflection on the desired outcomes and elements of a civic education program would itself be of educational benefit to the community.

# How to Do Participatory Design in the Case of Civics Education

**Most stakeholders *do not* have experience and expertise in designing curricula, instruction, evaluation, etc.**

**BUT**

**Only the stakeholders have the right to define a desired civic life that is the ostensible long-term result of a civic education program.**

**THEREFORE...**

**An interweaving of the participatory (public) and expert-driven approach is needed.**

# The “Culture Wars” Context & How to Address It

- There is a political and pseudo-cultural conflict going on
- False conflict between “conservative” and “progressive” worldviews
- This is manifesting in discussions about civic education as a conflict between “traditional civics” and “activist civics” – a fire fanned primarily by special interest groups
- Opening a discussion about civic education is essential. It will also unavoidably open the door to special interest groups and firebrands who try to affect the narrative in the public eye.
- **An open, transparent, and participatory approach to designing the civic education experience is the best way to transcend the “culture wars.”**

# PROPOSED PROCESS

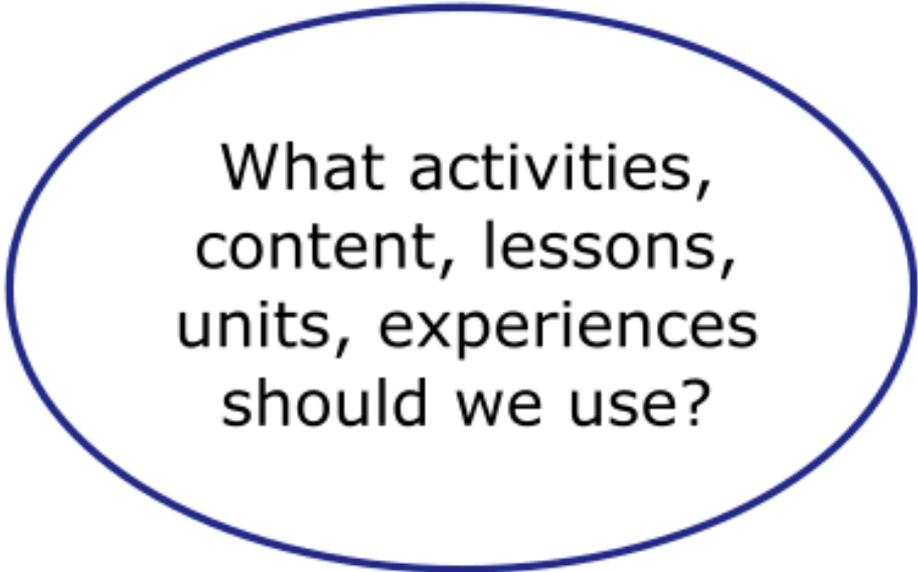
# Not Just a Class or some Content

The civics education opportunity should not be thought of in terms of just a class or some content or a particular curriculum.

We propose “design of a civic education *experience*” because “experience” could include all of the above and more.

The process should be open to encompass curriculum, content, instruction, formal or informal, inside or outside of the classroom, any/all levels K-12

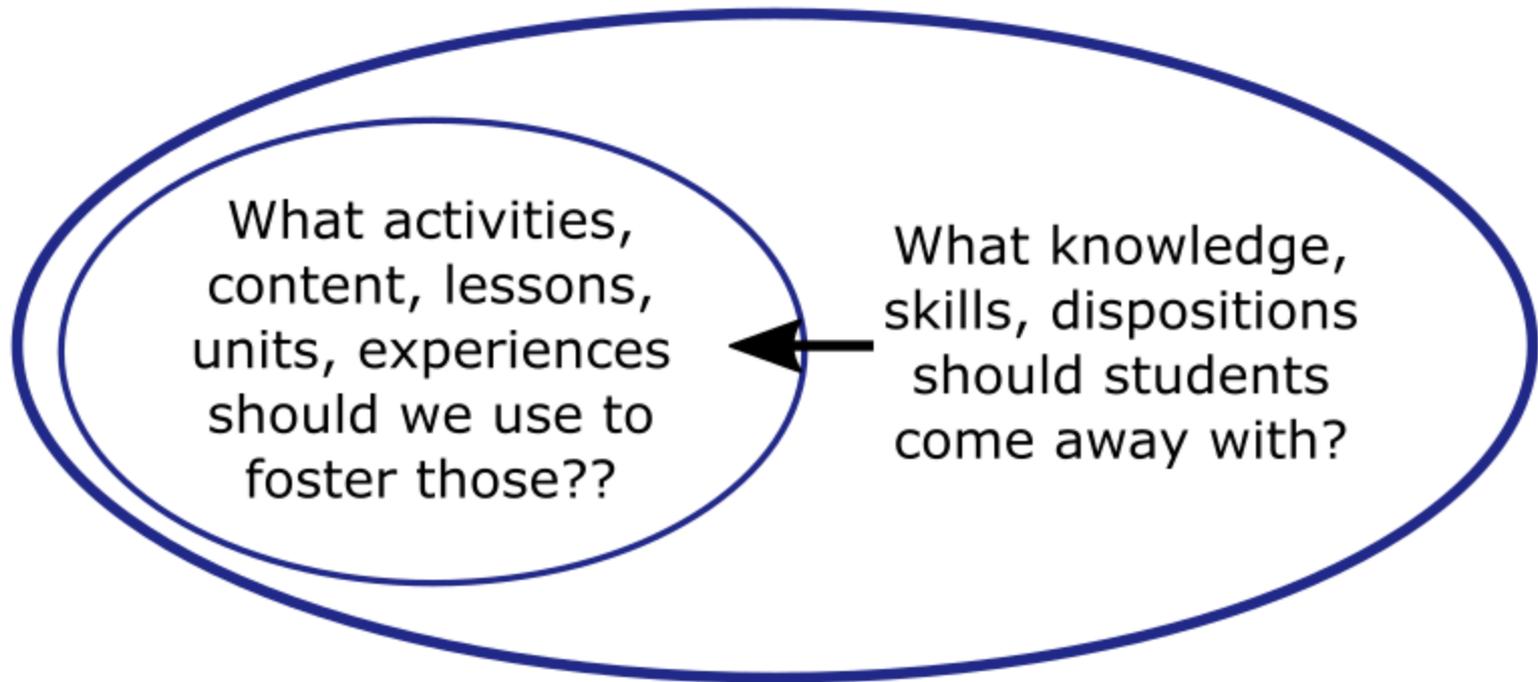
# Typical Scope of Design



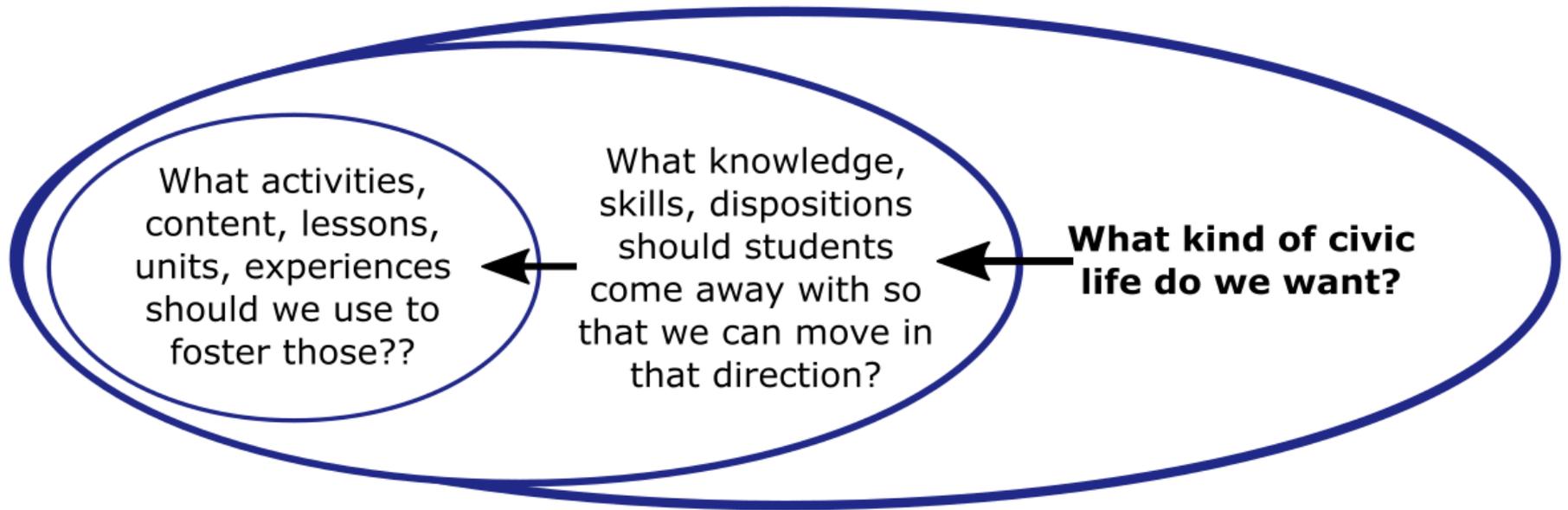
What activities,  
content, lessons,  
units, experiences  
should we use?

...to meet civics standards x, y, z

# Starting with Learning Outcome **Better**



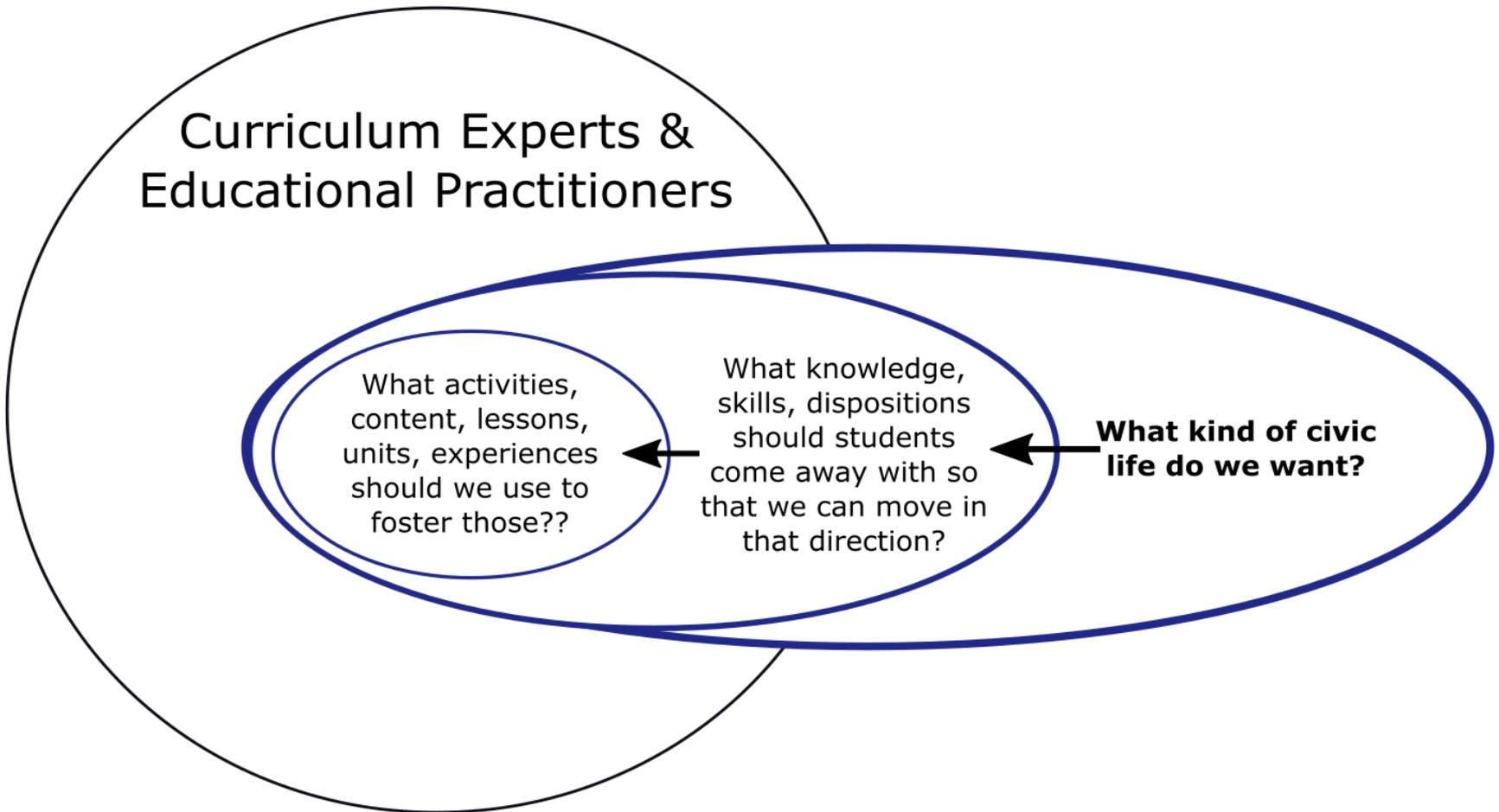
# Starting with the ultimate reason/purpose **Best**



# Who does the designing?

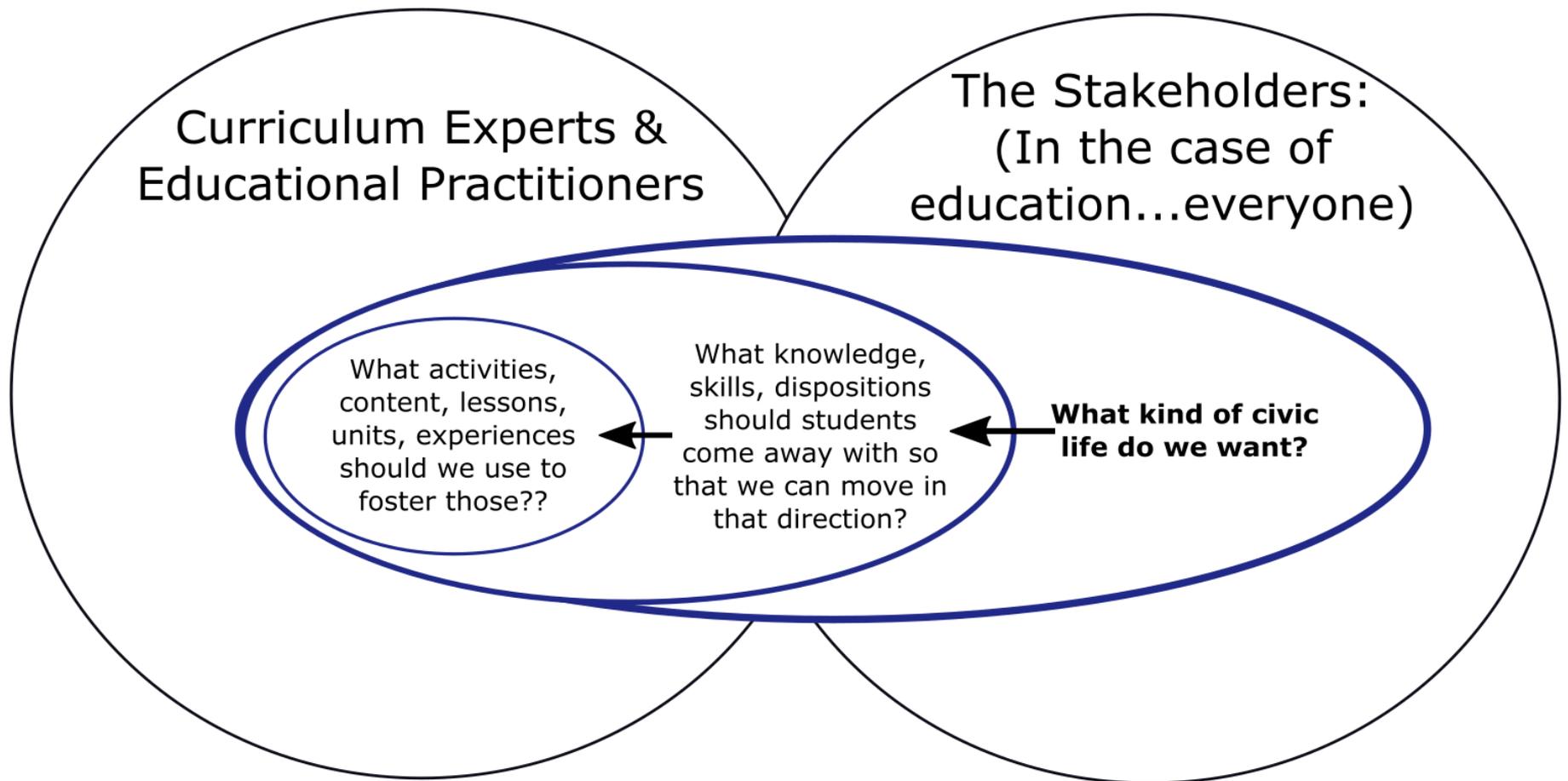
(Who has the right to answer these questions?

Who is *qualified* to answer these questions?)



# Who needs to do the designing?

*Start from the outside and work inward*



# Interweaving Participatory and Expert-Based Design

Engage the community to design the image  
of a desired civic life\*



Engage the community to identify the knowledge, skills, and  
dispositions needed to bring about that desired civic life



Educational experts (in consultation with the community)  
design the program that cultivates the needed knowledge  
skills, and dispositions.

*“Civic life” defined here as how we think together and act together  
about things that affect all of us.*

# Diversity and Inclusion in the Design Groups

- Participatory design must strive to represent and integrate the **diversity of the community of stakeholders**.
  - Consider the “dimensions” of diversity that are the most meaningful & salient in this context (income, race, gender, age, political inclinations...?)
- **Sufficient numbers** are important to carry weight, amplify the experience across the community
- **Care, desire, and interest** are essential for commitment to the process and strong contributions
- **Selection Process**
  - Snowball sampling? Random outreach? Wide outreach within specific groups & communities? A combination?
- All of these considerations apply to both the design groups and to wider groups who might participate less directly, via surveys, etc.

# Proposed Process (Hi Level)

Each phase builds on the findings of the previous

Phase	What	Who	How	Year
1	Define the image of a desired civic life	Public	Focus groups & surveys	1
2	Define the knowledge and skills needed	Public	Focus groups & surveys	1
3	Research & Idea-Generation	Public + Task Force	TBD	1-2
4	Assess strengths/opportunities and weaknesses/hindrances in the current system	Task Force	Focus groups & surveys	1
5	Design	Task Force	TBD	2
6	Implementation	District-Wide	TBD	3+

How shall boys and girls who for years have had most of the details of their lives arranged and controlled for them by adults be expected straightaway to adapt themselves to the life of responsible adult citizenship?

- Frank Watts (1920)

**What might be the implications of this for identifying Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Hindrances to civic learning in our schools?**

# Guiding Questions

Working from outside to inside, general to specific:

1. What should be the defining characteristics, core values, core ideas of our image of a desired civic life\* for our community and society? *This sets the backdrop, the ultimate purpose.*
2. What knowledge and skills (and perhaps dispositions) will students need in order to help us realize our desired civic life for our community and society? *This defines the educational (learner) outcomes.*
3. What experiences would develop that knowledge, skills, and dispositions? *This is the part that involves research and creativity.*
4. What are the strengths and opportunities, weaknesses and hindrances of, and in, our schools that can help (or can hinder) our ability to foster the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed, or to provide the experiences needed? *This takes into account where we are today.*
5. *What do we need to do to provide those experiences? What has to be changed to remove hindrances?* *This informs the design of curriculum and instruction, policy and procedure, both formal and informal, in-classroom and outside of classroom*

In order to be complete and not “under-conceptualize” the full context, the Focus/Design groups would consider all of these dimensions of the image of a desired civic life:

### **The Individual**

Markers related to the role of the individual in our desired civic life.

### **Community**

Markers related to “community” in the context of our desired civic life.

### **Leadership**

Markers related to how we define, expect, and cultivate leadership in our desired civic life.

### **History**

Markers related to the role that history should play in our civic life.

### **Education**

Markers related to the role that education should play in helping to bring about and sustain our desired civic life.

## **Dimensions of the Image of Our Desired Civic Life**

(“Desired Civic Life” =

How we want to be able to think and act together about things that affect all of us)

### **Government**

Markers related to how we should define and sustain government that is “of the people, for the people, and by the people” in our desired civic life.

### **The Future**

Markers related to how we relate to the future in our desired civic life.

### **Diversity & Inclusion**

Markers related to how different needs, identities, and voices are treated in our desired civic life.

### **The Media**

Markers related to the role that the media (mass or social) should play in our desired civic life.

### **Politics**

Markers related to how we’d like different interests, groups, perspectives, and individuals to interact around public issues.

### **Conflict**

Markers related to how conflict is viewed, addressed, or used in our desired civic life.

# A Big Lift, but a Critical One

- We are, in effect, seeking to engage communities in the design of their future.
- How do you do that when the dominant conception of democracy is based around voting as the primary civic act?
- The best we can do:
  - Ensure institutional commitment to the process
  - Work to ensure representativeness of the community among the designers
  - High quality facilitation
  - Transparency of process and results
  - Maximize “vicarious participation” in the process for those not directly involved
  - Design for continuous design
- In the long-term, we are **building a design culture**.
  - This is the 2<sup>nd</sup>-level education afforded by the process.

## Next Step

- **Find opportunities to pilot the process**
  - Ideal would be a school district committed to get behind the process.
  - Smaller scale pilots are possible.
- **Audiences & potential sponsors and partners**
  - School districts
  - Organizations supporting improvement in civics education (and who are open to transformational approaches)
  - Foundations with a focus on civics education
  - Other?

If our schools don't teach for democracy and active civic life (both through the written and the unwritten curriculum), they teach for the opposite.

**Citizenship is not to be learned in good government classes or current events courses or lessons in civics. It is to be acquired only through those modes of living and acting which shall teach us how to grow the social consciousness...**

The aim is to **create such a mental atmosphere for children that it is natural for them to wish to take their part**, to make them understand that citizenship is not obeying the laws nor voting, nor even being President, but that all the visions of their highest moments, all the aspirations of their spiritual nature can be satisfied through their common life, that only thus do we get “practical politics.”

Mary Parker Follett, *The New State*

## Contact

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