



THE CIVICALLY ENGAGED DISTRICTS PROJECT

July 2022-August 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Civic Education in U.S. Schools. Schools have the potential to be powerful sites of civic learning, yet they often fail to reach this potential. Civic education within social studies classrooms can be ineffective, or even counterproductive, if it is designed without awareness of the ways that young people experience schooling and citizenship. We need new models of civic education that center youth concerns and support students’ development of the relational, communication and analytical skills necessary for engaged citizenship.

Civic Action Research. In civic action research, young people identify issues and problems within their schools and communities, learn tools of inquiry, and conduct research with the goal of informing and affecting those problems. The cross-constituency collaboration and communication in these projects assist school districts in becoming “civic ecosystems” that nurture the civic development of both youth and adults.

The Civically Engaged Districts Project. Since 2017, the Civically Engaged Districts project has brought together youth, educators, pre-service teachers, graduate students in education, and university faculty for professional development, networking, and student voice experiences to support civic action research in US classrooms.

Expansion. In 2022-2023, we created and piloted a new model for preparing teachers to integrate civic action research into their classrooms. We provided professional development and mentoring to over 40 teachers in 12 different school districts, hosted 200 students at Rutgers to share their work, and are creating an online resource. We plan to improve and expand this effort in the years to come.

HISTORY

In 2009, Rutgers GSE professors Beth Rubin and Thea Abu El-Haj partnered with New Jersey public school districts to create Youth in Action, a civic engagement initiative in which young people conduct original research and take action on youth-selected civic issues, with the guidance of GSE student teachers (first group of student teachers in top photo).

In 2017, with support from Rutgers University and the Spencer Foundation, Dr. Rubin deepened this partnership with two districts, Franklin and New Brunswick, piloting the use of civic action research to catalyze the creation of *Civically Engaged Districts* – school systems which were nurturing spaces for youth civic development, particularly those who have traditionally been underserved by U.S. schools.

In 2022, support from the Maher Charitable Foundation allowed Dr. Rubin and the Civically Engaged Districts team to create professional development, ongoing support and online resources for teachers to support the integration of this approach into social studies classrooms across the state, and beyond.



2022-2023 GOALS

- Create a model for meaningful civic learning for diverse populations in response to the new New Jersey civic education mandate
- Re-envision civic education as a process involving the development of skills, relationships and community and one that enfranchises young people as active citizens
- Expand educators' understandings of civic learning and support their capacities to integrate civic action research into their classrooms.
- Create a community of educators engaged in this more holistic approach to civic education
- Support the use of civic action research to more fully integrate students' needs, ideas and perspectives into school and district practices
- Expand the number of young people experiencing meaningful civic learning in New Jersey

Districts	DFG
Newark, New Brunswick, Union City	A
Plainfield City	B
Maple Shade	CD
North Brunswick	FG
Edison, Roxbury, Franklin	GH
Cranford, Hunterdon, Ramsey	I

POPULATION SERVED

This project reached hundreds of students and dozens of educators in 12 New Jersey school districts with student populations reflecting the rich ethnic, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity of the state. Districts include Cranford, Hunterdon County, Edison, Franklin, Maple Shade, Newark, New Brunswick, North Brunswick, Plainfield, Ramsey, Roxbury, and Union City.

These districts represent a wide range of “District Factor Groups” (DFG) – New Jersey’s A through J grouping of districts based on variables related to socioeconomic status (percent of adults with no high school diploma, percent of adults with some college education, occupational status, unemployment rate, percent of individuals in poverty, median family income), with A being lowest income and J highest.



ACCOMPLISHMENT #1 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This year we created and implemented two **YPAR in the Classroom Professional Development Workshops** for educators, primarily social studies teachers, and their supervisors. The sessions were co-developed and led with our team of YPAR Mentors, experienced practitioners who also met monthly with the participating educators. These monthly meetings were a venue for mutual sharing, feedback, and support. Educators from 12 districts participated in the professional development and mentoring activities. Civic action research was implemented in the classrooms of 8 districts, with several whole school implementations, and several other districts using the year to develop their own approach to the work with implementation planned for the 2023-2024 academic year.





ACCOMPLISHMENT #2

YOUTH IN ACTION SUMMIT

Over 200 students, elementary through high school, from 7 districts, along with over 30 educators, participated in the April **Youth in Action Summit**, a day-long fieldtrip to Rutgers University designed to engage them actively in exploring the social, cultural, and intellectual resources of the university. The day began with the **Youth in Action Forum**, during which student groups presented the results of their civic action research projects to each other and to an audience of community members, family, K-12 educators and university students and faculty.



Civically Engaged Districts Project







ACCOMPLISHMENT #3

YPAR MENTOR TEAM

Our team of five Youth Participatory Action (YPAR) Mentors were critical to the success of this initiative, bringing an invaluable range of experience to the planning and implementation of our professional development series, educator recruitment and support, and resource development. This team includes educators familiar with all levels of schooling, curriculum supervisors in social studies and language education, and school administrators, enabling us to consider our work from multiple angles as we developed the initiative and increasing our ability to connect with educators.



ACCOMPLISHMENT #4 PRESERVICE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Over 100 preservice teachers have had the opportunity to participate in facilitating and supporting civic action research at Rutgers GSE over the past years, going on to lead civic action research projects in their schools as full-time teachers. The day on campus was planned by preservice teachers from the Graduate School of Education enrolled in a special section of the GSE's "Schools, Communities and Social Justice" course focusing on youth participatory action research and taught by a YPAR Mentor. As part of this course, these preservice teachers assisted in school-based YPAR programs and planned and ran the day on campus. The project team has a road map for offering this valuable learning experience to even more preservice teachers in the future.

ACCOMPLISHMENT #5

ONLINE TRAINING AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

We are producing a 5-module online training, illustrated with video from the student groups (discussions, research, interaction with administrators, presentations, reflections) that can be shared online with a wider group of educators. We are creating introductory videos for recruitment and publicity that showcase student engagement in projects and in the Youth in Action Summit.

Dr. Rubin, in collaboration with several educators, is currently writing a book – *YPAR in Your Social Studies Classroom: Teaching and Learning for Active Citizenship* (Teachers College Press) designed to accompany these resources.



IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Civic Skills and Understandings. Students participating in civic action research projects gained communication skills, critical thinking and analysis skills, collaboration skills, and data collection and analysis skills. They also developed deeper understandings of their schools and communities and of the process of working toward change.

Civic Engagement. Students participating in civic action research projects were actively engaged in considering, studying, and advancing ideas for the improvement of their schools and communities. This was a hands-on civic learning experience that respected and engaged students as citizens, not citizens-in-training.

Civic Empowerment. Students participating in civic action research projects controlled all significant aspects of their work: they selected the issues to investigate, created their research approach, collected and analyzed their data, and produced and communicated their own findings and recommendations. Seeing this student-driven project from start to finish was an empowering experience for youth. They gained a sense of efficacy and authority on topics of concern to them.

Relationships and Belonging. Students participating in civic action research projects worked collaboratively to determine the course of the project and its results. Educators consciously cultivated a sense of community among their students, fostering supportive and open classroom environments. Working together on this student-driven project broke down barriers among students and created a sense of belonging.

IMPACT ON EDUCATORS

Understandings of Civic Learning. Educators, both pre- and in-service, gained broader and deeper understandings of civic learning.

Civic Action Research. Educators experienced the ways that civic action research can empower youth and improve schools and communities as civic spaces. They learned about and developed their own approach to civic action research.

Learning Community. Educators developed a professional learning community focused on student-centered civic education. They shared ideas, discussed challenges, probed concepts, and compared experiences while building their capacity to facilitate civic action research in their classrooms.

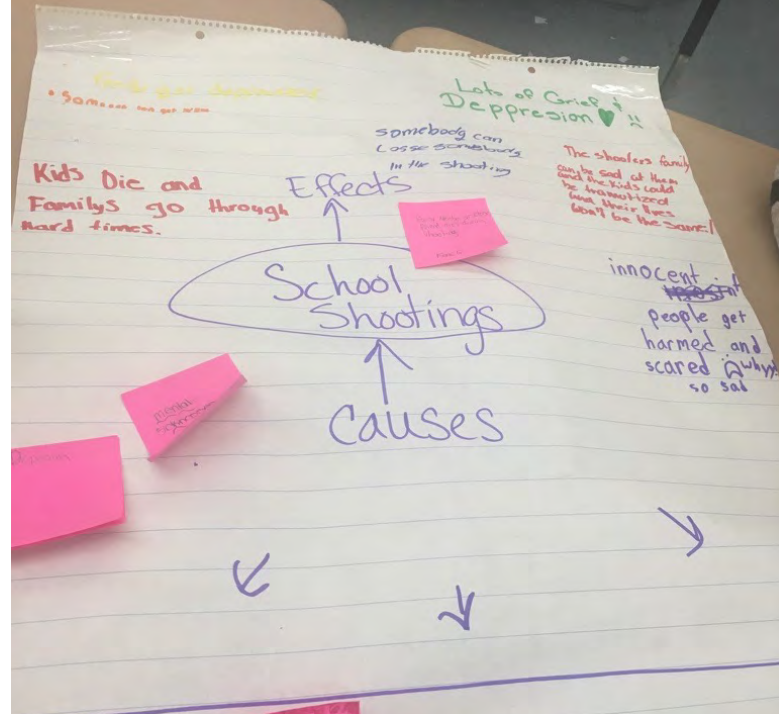


IMPACT ON DISTRICTS

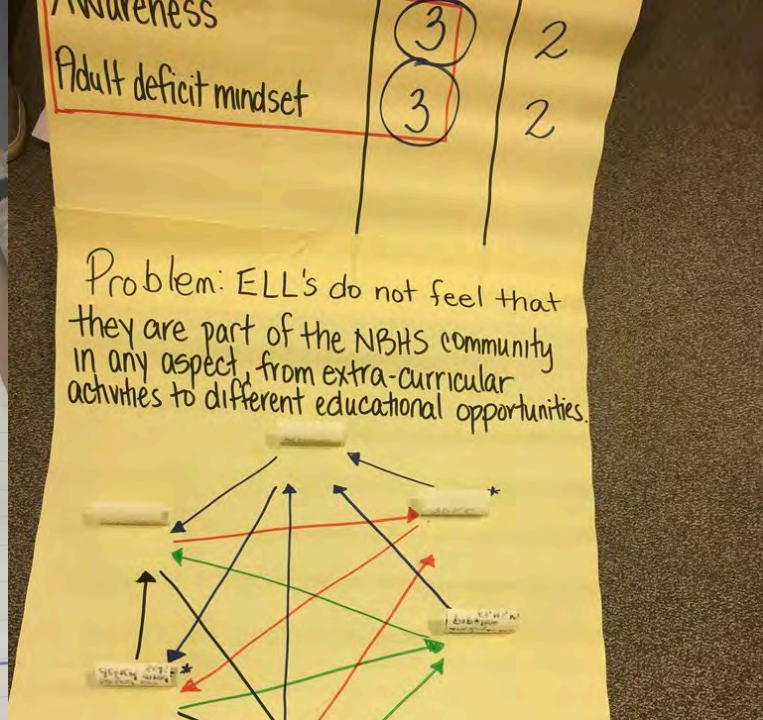
Civic action research projects catalyze civic learning across entire schools and even districts, creating a *civic ecosystem*.

As young people conduct research, share findings, and take action, they come into contact and develop relationships with new peers, teachers, school staff and leaders, and community members.

The voices and ideas of young people influence policy and decision-making in schools and districts. Adults develop new understandings of young people's experiences and capacities.



Cultural Norms	4	0
Staff Bias	4	1
Social Isolation	0	5
Program Systemness	2	2
Parental Awareness	1	4
Stakeholder Communication	3	2



Vision: people to be equal and to live peacefully.

- don't judge by color. Respectful to other people. more police patrol → not judge

- positive language (no racist words) Not judging by skin color.

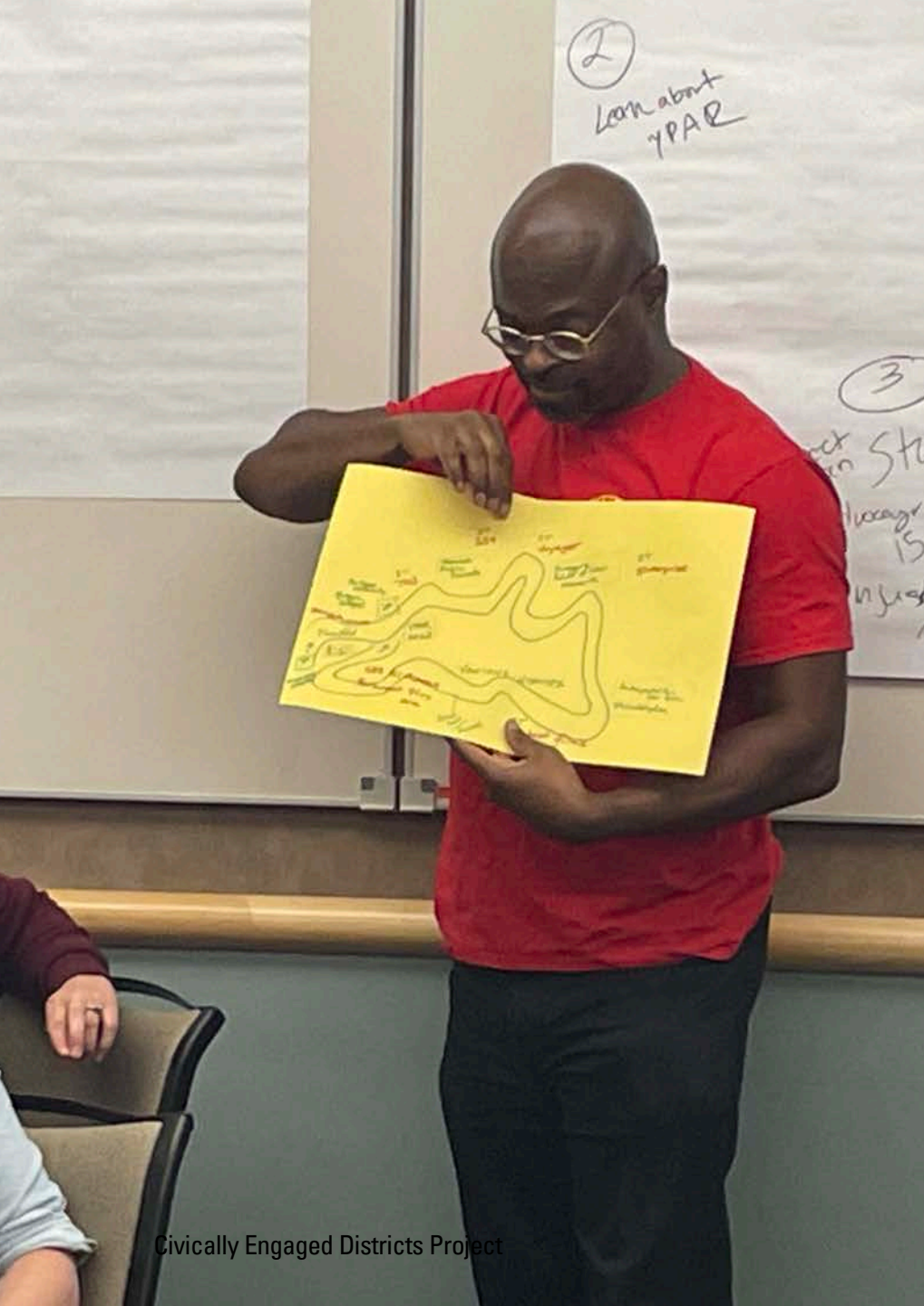
Our vision is for people to know that ^{they} people are equal ^{and} going to live peacefully.

Mission: To help people to ^{Be a part}

REFLECTIONS AND CHANGES



Reflections	Changes
First PD did not have enough demonstration lessons	Second PD included more demonstration lessons. Next year's PD will include many more demo lessons and videos of classroom activities.
Teachers benefit from on-site visits.	We will add additional mentors next year so that we can provide classroom visits.
Youth in Action Summit is powerful civic learning experience for both educators and students.	We are creating media to capture the experience so we can share it earlier in the process, and we will expand the number of students that can participate in the summit.
Participation is beneficial for preservice teachers and for the relationship between the GSE and partner districts.	Associate Dean of Teacher Education will join project as co-PI to more fully integrate these efforts into GSE teacher education program.



PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

“Students are citizens, and their voices are valuable.”

“Students crave responsibility!! Education is not the only purpose of school- building character and values are essential to creating citizens. YPAR actually empowers students.”

“I learned a lot on how to implement YPAR in the classroom as part of my 8th grade Social Studies curriculum.”

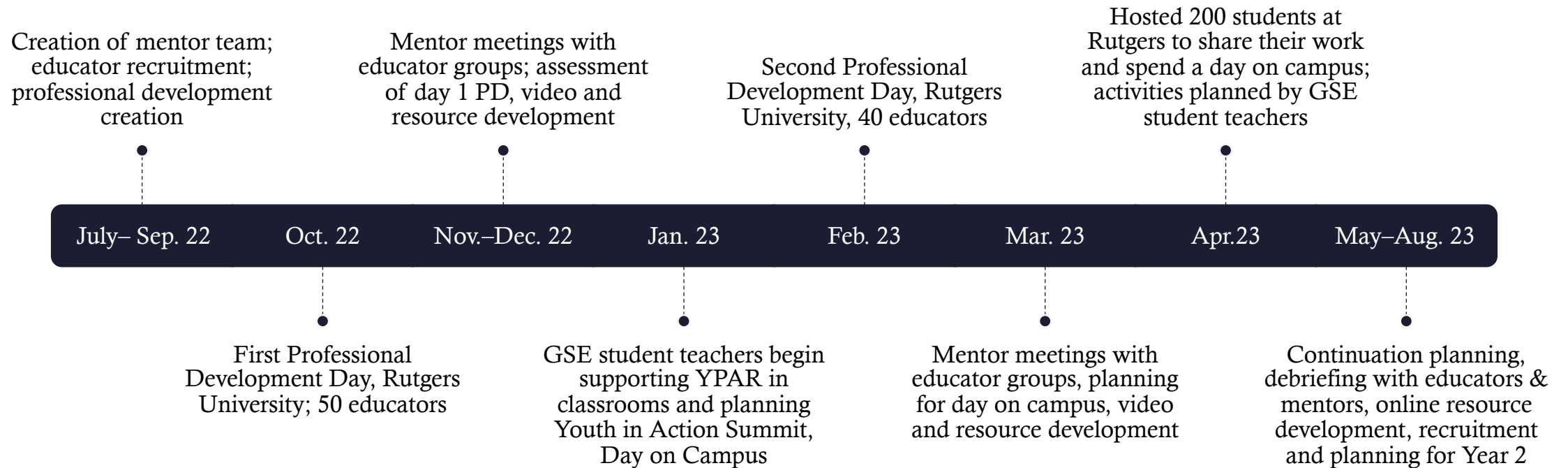
“I realized how attainable doing YPAR might actually be.”

“The professional learning experience seamlessly integrated theory and practice, providing a clear understanding of both the goal / purpose of YPAR and practical strategies for use with their students. It was wonderful to leave the session equipped not only with the knowledge of YPAR's objective, but also with actionable strategies for the classroom.”

“My students felt empowered to make an even bigger impact next year after presenting in front of the other schools and learning about the variety of projects.”

“This was an amazing opportunity, and I cannot wait for next year!”

TIMELINE OF ACTIVITIES



EDUCATORS



MENTORS

- Laura Arredondo, Ed.D; Supervisor of World Languages and ESL, Hunterdon Central
- Tristian Cox, Ed.D., Supervisor of Social Studies, Plainfield City
- Brandi Gustafson, Social Studies Teacher, Middle School, New Brunswick
- Marnie McKoy, Ed.D, Former District Leader; Professor, Kean University
- Orion Nolan, Special Education Teacher, Elementary, Manville



PROJECT TEAM

- Chloe Bellows, Graduate Student Researcher
- Deja Lee, Graduate Student Researcher
- Renee Roundy, Graduate Student Researcher
- Beth Rubin, PhD, Principal Investigator
- Katie Scrivani, Graduate Student Researcher