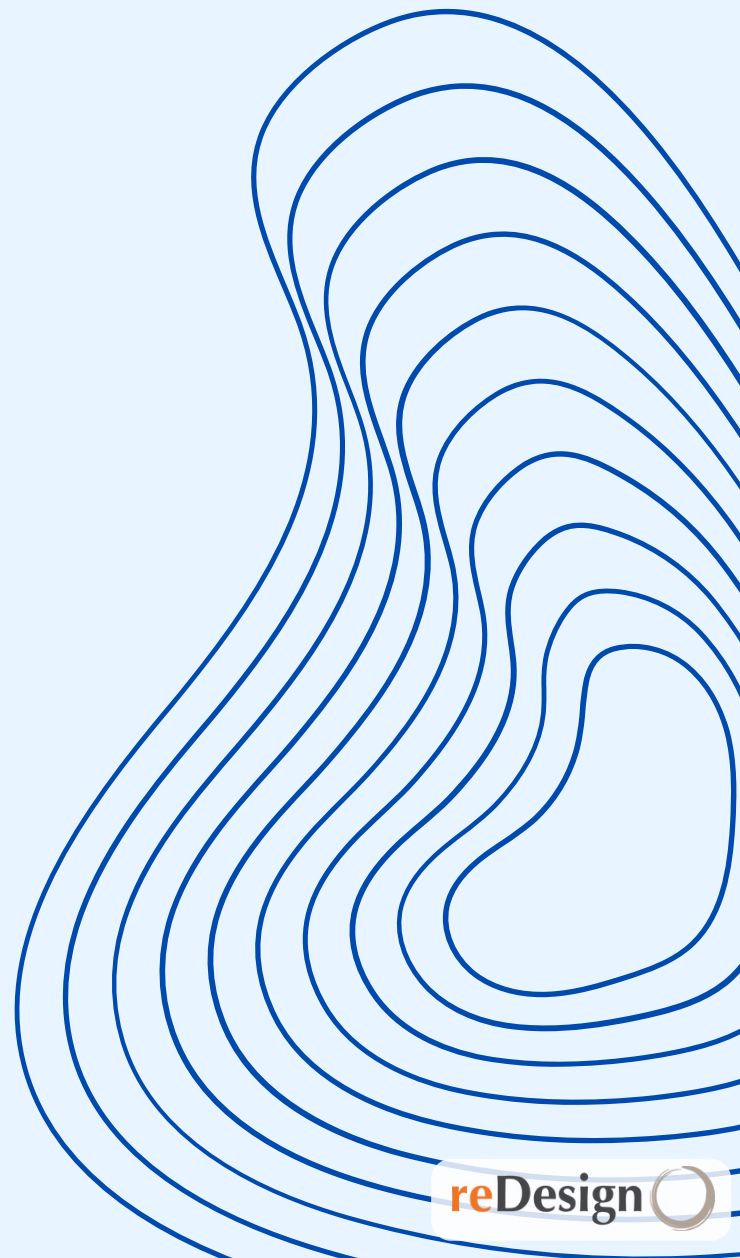
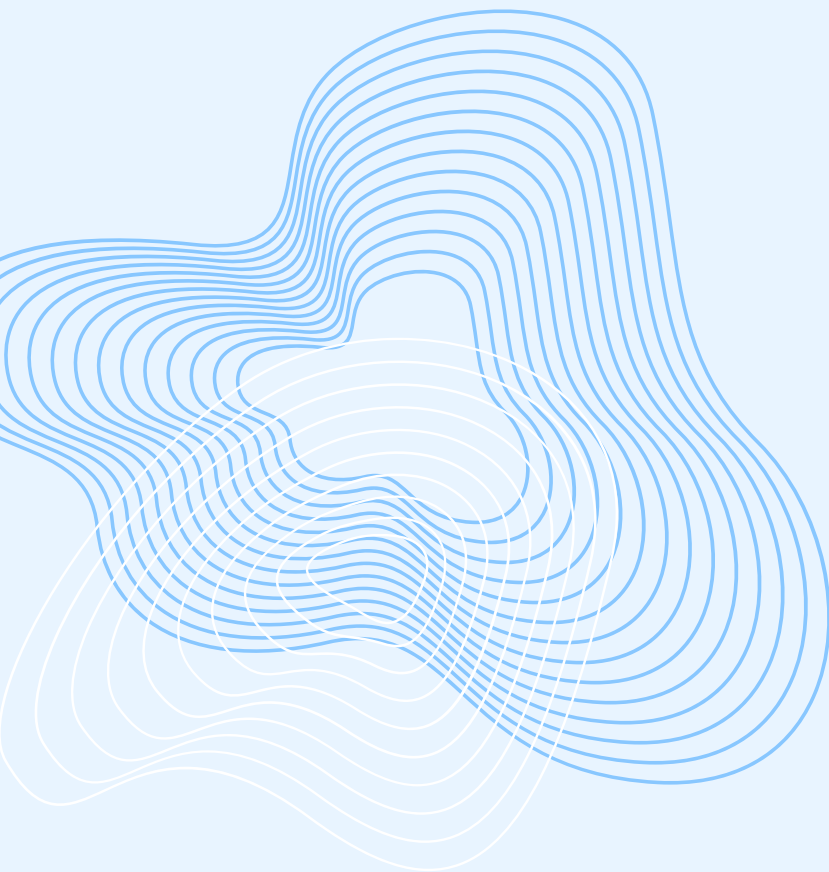


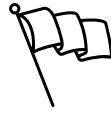
# LEARNING, TO PROTECT DEMOCRACY

by Rohan Menon

Underlying the quiet, but fatal erosion of democracy in our country is a stark reality — Americans have forgotten what democracy feels like. We need a new hub for civic education and democratic participation... **why not schools?**



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*“It may be an easy thing to make a Republic; but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans\*”; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion.”*

Horace Mann

\* "Republicans" refers in this context to citizens of a republic, rather than the modern-day political party.

## Introduction

Friends, our democracy is in crisis. Sorry — no easing in, no clever one-liners to get you warmed up. Instead, I'm frantically (but politely) demanding your attention right here, right now. Why? Well, let me put it in bold - **our democracy is in crisis**. And I'd like us all to do something about it. Quickly.

Domestically, and abroad, the concept of democracy as an organizing structure for society is waning in popularity. According to the folks that study this kind of thing, the quality of American democracy has shown a clear and consistent downward trend in recent years, and its trajectory is being mirrored by democracies globally. We are now living in a nation where roughly one in five Americans is open to the idea of military rule. And democracy's biggest skeptics, by far, are our youngest generation.

Which begs the question... *Why is this happening?*

Well, aside from declining institutional trust, increasing polarization, rampant disinformation, antiquated governance structures, and of course, an ongoing plague (all of which are very good and correct answers), I'd offer another: **A waning commitment to democratic values, norms, and processes**. This presents a fatal problem for our democracy's health. And although frightening, I find it to be highly understandable.



The unfortunate truth is that for many Americans, our democracy has rarely delivered. The promise of governance by all people, for all people, has been left remarkably unfulfilled for many of our fellow citizens since the founding of our country. It took almost 100 years for Black Americans to secure their right to participate in the democracy they helped build. It took another 50 for that right to be extended to women. And even today, we see widespread evidence that having the right to vote and being able to fully participate in our democracy as an equal citizen are two very, very different things.

Democracy, then, sounds nice in the textbooks, but appears to many of us as dysfunctional at best, and hollow at worst. Even for those of us who are lucky enough to have an easy time voting, the experience is far from invigorating or re-affirming. Sure, when we leave the poll booth every four years, we **know** we've just participated in our nation's democratic process. But **knowing** is different from **feeling**.

Most Americans are familiar with democracy as a *noun*, but not as a *verb*. We know the names, the labels, the ideas, but very few of us get to regularly *experience* democracy in action. Voting rarely, if ever, **feels** like participating in a democratic process. And that's the problem. **I believe our democracy is in crisis partially because most Americans have such few opportunities to meaningfully experience it.** Without regular, meaningful, felt experiences of participating in democratic processes — how can we expect our fellow Americans to believe it's worth fighting for?

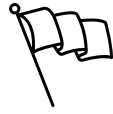
The answer here is clear. Our communities need a new hub for civic education and democratic participation — one that counteracts our country's history of exclusion, disconnection, and disempowerment. Why not schools? Our education system is our strongest tool for building the future of our society as we wish it to be. If democracy is in crisis, we ought to use that system to strengthen its essential elements in the hearts and minds of our fellow Americans — if that's something we still value as a nation.

To protect democracy, I propose that the future of education should offer learners meaningful opportunities to experience and participate in democracy as a verb. It should also support learners over time in developing competency with the skills, cognitive strategies, and social dispositions that are crucial



for democracy to survive — reDesign’s *Whole-Child Competency Framework* offers a blueprint for such an approach. Finally, it should thoughtfully and intentionally focus on educating learners about the intricacies of representative democracy in this country — from the hyper-local to the national — as a fundamental mechanism for dismantling institutional oppression, and realizing the latent potential for civic engagement in our nation.

Re-imagining civic education, and the role of schools in every community, is a small but crucial step towards reversing the backslide of democracy in our nation and beyond.



*"Little democracy, at its best, recognizes that we all have a shared interest in flourishing, and that each of us has inherent and unique value to the decisions we make as part of this common effort."*

## Big and Little Democracy

To see the merits of schools as a hub for civic education and democratic participation, I find it helpful to think about democracy in two ways — **big democracy** and **little democracy**.

**Big democracy** is what most of us are familiar with. It's the campaigning, the voting, the White House, the *"Breaking News"* coverage with those shiny red and blue graphics, that whole thing. Big democracy happens at the scale of nations, and (in theory) involves hundreds of millions of people. It has an enormous, if subtle impact on all of our lives — it's the kind of thing you might not notice until it's been replaced with authoritarianism. And it's exactly what's in crisis right now.

The problem with big democracy, frankly, is that it's infuriating. At a surface level, big democracy in our country **feels** more like entertainment than a democratic process. We think about our deeply nuanced beliefs only long enough to translate them into a binary choice for president; then we sit back, and watch a red, white, and blue carnival of media buzz, data visualizations, and electoral college math on our corporate news network of choice. In all honesty, election night has become gamified to the point where many of us feel highs and lows like a gambler each time a state's votes are finalized! At times, big democracy feels as much like a night out at Dave & Buster's as it does our national process of electing a leader.



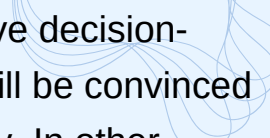
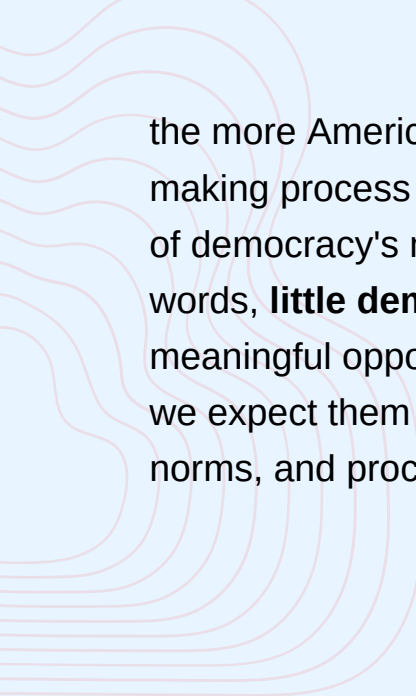
But the real insult isn't just the circus — it's that underneath the circus, big democracy feels like it isn't really working for us, **all of us**. The harsh truth is that to many Americans, our votes don't feel like they matter, and this beautiful notion of "democracy" we've grown up hearing about seems to be nothing more than a vague, distant concept that smells sweet, but we are yet to taste. If you are one of the millions of Americans for whom our country has rarely delivered, **big democracy just feels like an unjust, dysfunctional system wrapped in shiny red, white, and blue packaging.**

**Little democracy**, on the other hand, is less familiar, but more accessible to most Americans. Little democracy is your family, debating passionately about where to eat. Little democracy is your JV lacrosse team, deciding together who would be the captain for the season. Little democracy is your local mutual aid network, your church group, your school's Parent-Teacher-Association (PTA), all committed to making decisions together and incorporating everyone's ideas. **Little democracy is the process of collective decision-making in which every single community member actively contributes their perspectives, and together, establishes a consensus on important issues through rational argumentation.** And it mostly exists at the scale of a small group of people — individuals within a community.

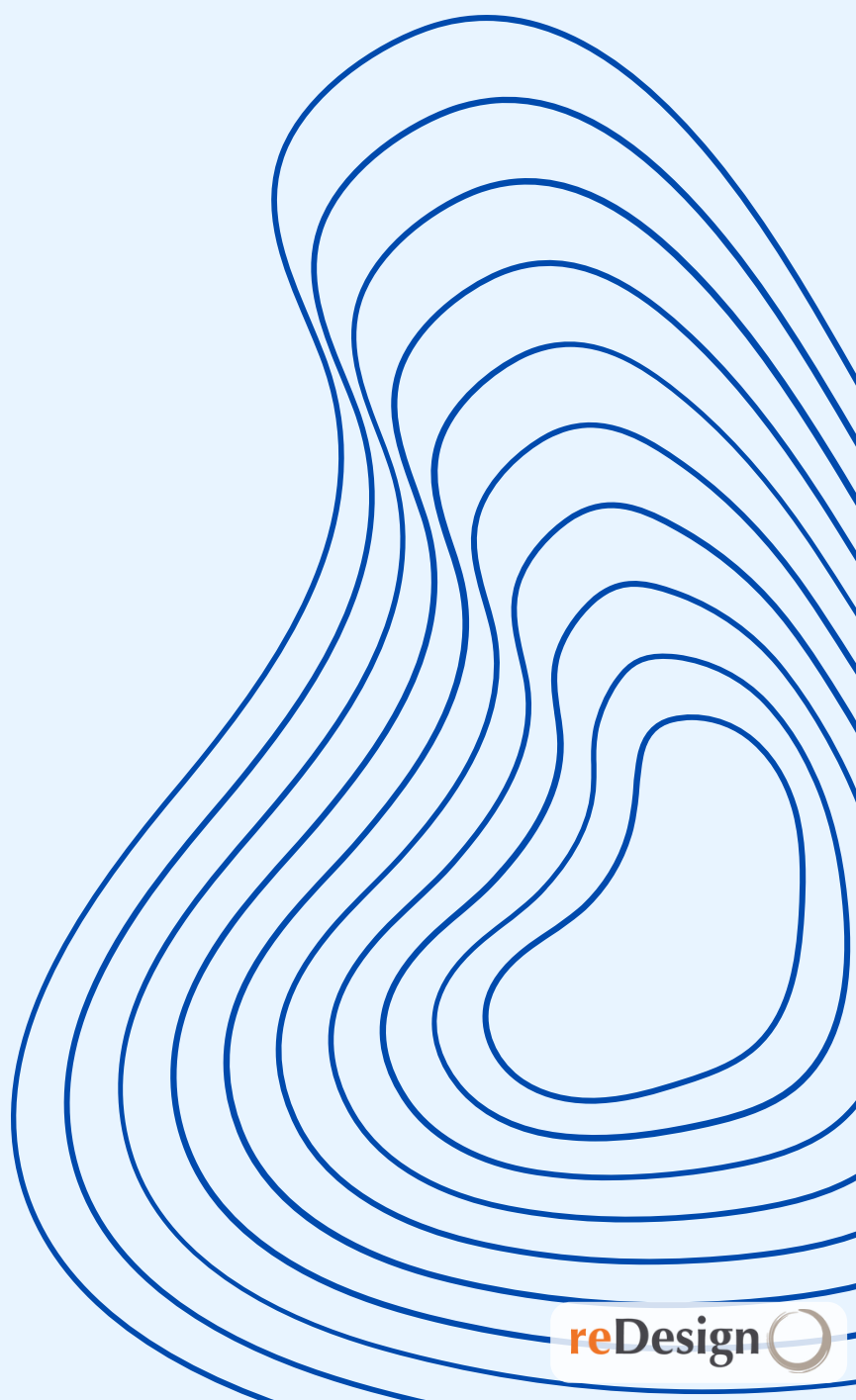
For those of us lucky enough to have experienced it at some point in our lives, **little democracy is an exhilarating, rewarding, deeply human experience.** It can nourish a feeling of connectedness with your fellow decision-makers, while also affirming your individuality. It can strengthen your resolve to share your opinions, and also convince you to listen to others. Little democracy can be a profound thing to participate in, even if that's not the label you gave to the experience.

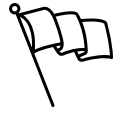
But it's not easy. Little democracy demands connection across lines of difference. It demands argumentation in good faith. It demands trust, vulnerability, and listening. Little democracy, at its best, recognizes that we all have a shared interest in flourishing, and that each of us has inherent and unique value to the decisions we make as part of this common effort.

So even though **little democracy** and **big democracy** are the same thing at their core, just applied at different scales — they **feel** different. And since feeling is ultimately what drives our behavior,



the more Americans that get to experience that unique collective decision-making process that **feels democratic**, the more Americans will be convinced of democracy's merits as an organizing structure for our society. In other words, **little democracy protects big democracy**. Without giving people meaningful opportunities to feel democracy working in their own lives, how can we expect them to maintain a steadfast commitment to democratic values, norms, and processes at the scale of an entire nation?





*"For young people to believe in the merit of democracy as an organizing structure for our nation, and human societies more broadly, they need to experience democracy regularly and meaningfully."*

## Protecting Democracy: Big and Little

Unfortunately, most of the arenas in which American life takes place are not organized around **little democracy**. Most of us grew up attending schools in which adults made the decisions, and students were expected to work hard, be obedient, and not ask questions. Upon graduation, those of us lucky enough to find employment found a familiar organizing structure in the workplace, in which our bosses made the decisions, and employees were expected to work hard, be obedient, and not ask questions. For many Americans, even family life follows this pattern of organization, with a strong patriarchal element. On all of these stages, upon which the majority of American life unfolds, we participate in systems that resemble authoritarianism more than democracy.

And worse, we're moving in the wrong direction. Americans have less and less opportunities to meet with each other, discuss pressing issues, and work together to address problems. Matthew N. Atwell, John Bridgeland, and Peter Levine call communities experiencing this lack of opportunity "civic deserts", and estimate that 60 percent of all rural youth, and 30 percent of urban and suburban youth, live in these deserts. At the same time, religious organizations and labor unions, two of the social institutions that have historically served as hubs for this kind of civic participation, are declining in popularity, especially with younger Americans.



Ironically, while this is the trend for folks who have historically been well-served by our political system, our fellow Americans who have instead been systematically disempowered, disenfranchised, and disappointed by this system for as long as it's existed, are often at the forefront of reversing this trend. Grassroots activism, hyper-local organizing, mutual aid networks, and a host of other community-based efforts to respond to the dire conditions facing most working-class Americans, are quickly becoming oases in the midst of these "civic deserts".

Here, I suggest a re-imagined civic education as a complement to these bottom-up, organic hotbeds for little democracy. Learning, to protect democracy, should:

- A** Offer learners meaningful opportunities to **participate** in and **experience** "little democracy".
- B** Support learners in **developing the skills and dispositions** necessary to meaningfully participate in "little" and "big" democracy.
- C** Educate learners about the intricacies of representative **democracy in this country** — from the hyper-local to the national.



## Offer learners meaningful opportunities to **participate** in and **experience** "little democracy".

For young people to believe in the merit of democracy as an organizing structure for our nation, and human societies more broadly, they need to experience democracy regularly and meaningfully. Students need to have opportunities to shape democracy, transform it in front of their eyes. While some schools (like the Sudbury Valley School) are built entirely around this principle, opportunities for democratic participation abound even in more traditional learning environments.

Within the classroom, learning experiences that involve collaboration, discussion, self-agency, and critical thinking can contribute to an experience of democratic procedures and thought processes. Group projects can offer students the experience of working together with others towards a common goal, while opportunities for debate and deliberative discussion, especially around controversial topics, can help students develop their ability to have constructive disagreements in a democratic spirit. And such experiences need not come at the cost of deep learning — in fact, the opposite seems to be true. Students are likely to experience more meaningful, joyous, and effective learning as a result of a more democratic approach to learning.

Opportunities to participate in democratic processes don't end at the classroom door, either. Connecting students with service learning or community engagement opportunities, especially at local organizations where they can be given legitimate responsibilities, can be another way of bringing democratic experiences into students' hands. Extracurricular opportunities in general, such as sports and other clubs, are also likely to positively impact future voting behavior and civic engagement. Students might also participate in collaborative decision-making with their administration about school policies, and structures like "student government" can be set up to give students real, meaningful power over such decisions. Too often, decisions are made on an administrative level without putting learners at the center. Meaningfully involving students in decisions that will impact their daily experiences can have a profound effect on school culture, while also creating authentic opportunities for students to participate and experience "little democracy".

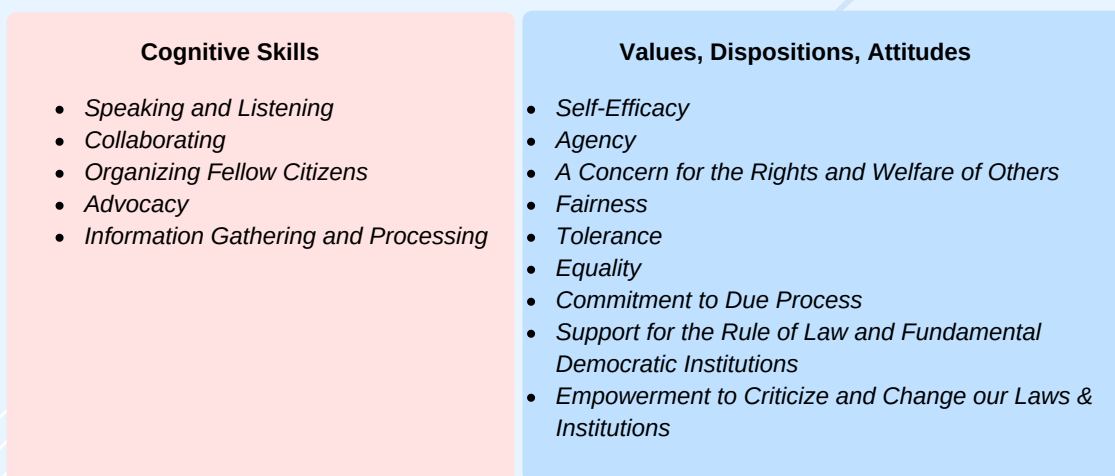


Support learners in **developing the skills and dispositions** necessary to meaningfully participate in "little" and "big" democracy.

As learners develop a belief in democracy, so too should they be developing the skills and dispositions necessary to participate meaningfully in real-world democracy, **in all its forms**. A so-called "civic skillset" is essential for participating not only in our electoral system, but also in the kinds of organic community-based efforts described earlier.

So what makes up this ideal "civic skillset"? What are the crucial skills and dispositions that learners need to develop competency with in order to protect our democracy, and make their voices heard? Across many of the major frameworks for civic education that exist, a few common items emerge — [CivXNow](#), a national cross-partisan coalition of over 100 organizations, offers a clear and concise list of these items **[Figure 1]**.

### Civic Knowledge and Skills



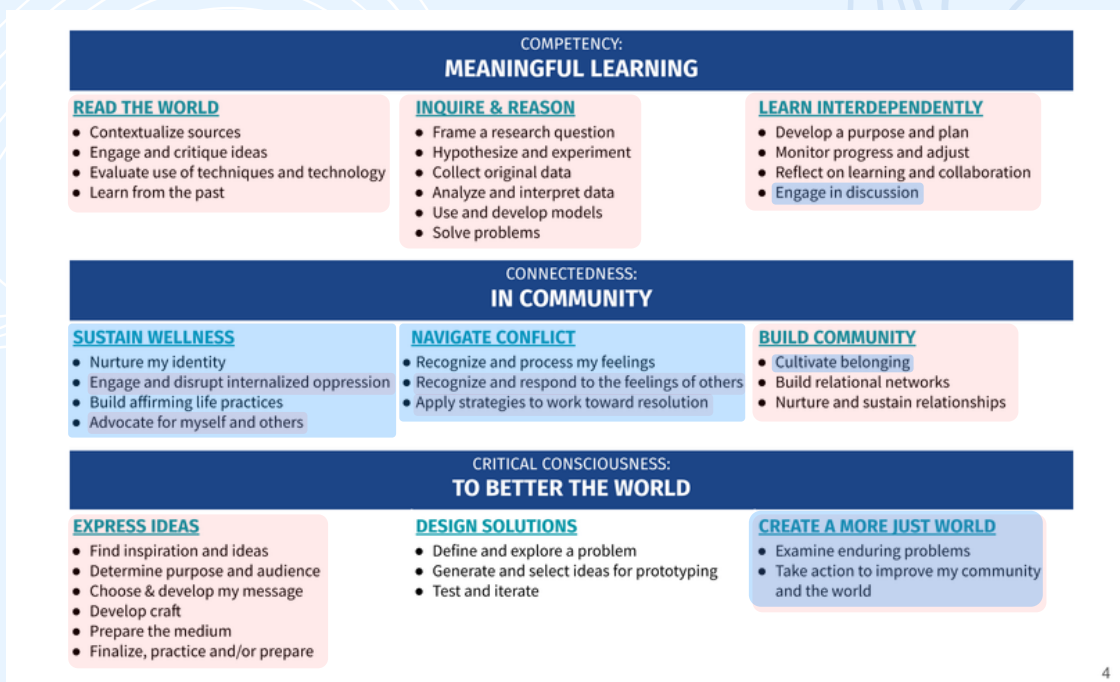
**Figure 1: The "Civic Skillset"**

Source: [CivXNow & Center for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University](#).

For learners to develop these crucial skills and dispositions, upon which the safety and strength of our democracy and civil society rests, they need multiple opportunities to practice, develop, and demonstrate their competency with each of the various aspects. These skills and dispositions need to be skillfully embedded into learning across subjects and content areas, so that students develop a flexible, interdisciplinary skillset. For example, regular opportunities to develop *speaking and listening* skills might take the form of an ongoing debate series that replaces traditional 5-paragraph essay assignments — students might use such a platform to demonstrate their learning in various subjects, while practicing their abilities to listen carefully to others arguments, while constructing and delivering their own.

If this sounds like a dramatic departure from our traditional, industrial model of education, that's because it is. Content-heavy learning is becoming insufficient to meet the needs of our modern world, and needs to be replaced by an approach to learning that develops **competency** in complement to **content-knowledge** — nowhere is this more true than for civics education. Having spent many years creating, designing, and revising frameworks for competency-based learning, reDesign's **LCC Competency Framework** reflects our best thinking, and the most contemporary research, about the skills and dispositions learners need to flourish in this rapidly-changing world. In the context of a "civic skillset", our **LCC Competency Framework** also contains many of the essential skills and dispositions identified by civic education experts [Figure 2]. We believe it can be used to build a future for civics education that will protect our democracy, by empowering the next generation to make it theirs.

### Civic "Skillset"



**Figure 2: Connections between the "Civic Skillset" and reDesign's Whole Child Competency Framework**

Source: *CivXNow & Center for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University* and *reDesign's Whole Child Competency Framework*





Educate learners about the intricacies of representative **democracy in this country** — from the hyper-local to the national.

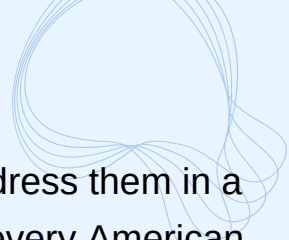
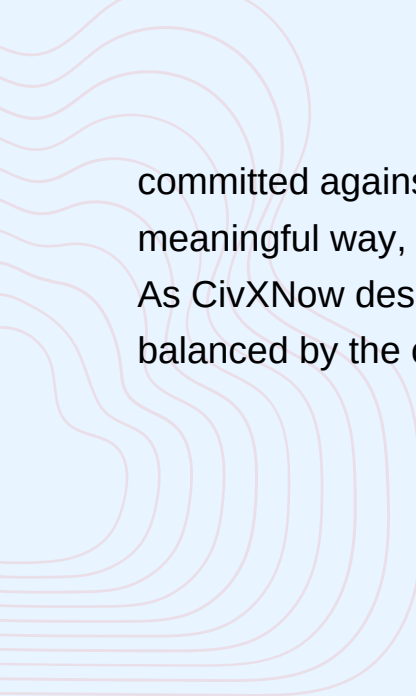
When it comes to designing a future for civics education that will strengthen and protect American democracy, a "civic skillset" needs to be complemented by interdisciplinary content that can help learners understand the inner workings of our democracy, identify threats to it, and address those threats effectively. The time has come to move beyond the basics of our three branches of government, the names of our senators, and memorizing the Constitution.

The next generation of Americans must understand the inner workings of American democracy, the ways it impacts our lives, and the ways it can be twisted and weaponized to dismantle democracy itself. The hard truth here is that right now, many of the most consequential battles over the future of American democracy are dull, bureaucratic, and unsexy — **and also frighteningly high-stakes**. Although the violent insurrection on our Capitol in January 2020 caught everyone's attention, a quieter insurrection on our democratic norms, procedures, and legislation is simultaneously unfolding in the background.

Notably, the faction intent on quietly dismantling our democracy is following a well-established "playbook" used by authoritarian regimes around the world. As we combat the threat now, we need to think seriously about how to avoid this kind of dire situation in the future. One answer lies in the fact that **preventing threats to our democracy is easier than fighting them off** once they gather strength.

The civics education of the future, then, must include a thorough exploration into the characteristics of authoritarianism, the identifiable features of authoritarian movements, and successful historical examples of fending those movements off. Similarly, it ought to encourage Americans to understand their particular flavor of representative democracy within its appropriate historical, cultural, and philosophical context — to identify what's working, and what's not. Propagandizing history is not only oppressive and untruthful, it's annoyingly short-sighted. Ignoring the past and present atrocities this country has





committed against specific groups of people will not help us address them in a meaningful way, and move forward into a future that works for every American. As CivXNow describes it, support for our existing democratic institutions must be balanced by the capacity to criticize and change them.

# Staying True to Our Vision

If we look back to one of our nation's founding documents, it's easy to see that a major overhaul of democratic and civics education is far from a radical proposition. **In many ways, the original purpose of a public education in this country was to protect and strengthen our democracy, and ensure every American was granted their birthright — the ability to participate in it.** Add to that our democratic system's present state of fragility, and the fact that it's undeniably under siege by an extremist faction within our own country, and it's startlingly clear that we need a new vision for the future of civics education that lives up to those original ideals.

reDesign's vision is one in which learners have meaningful experiences of participating in democratic processes, multiple opportunities to develop competency with the skills and dispositions to participate in real-world democratic processes, and a deep and thorough understanding of our democratic systems, structures, and institutions, as well as their threats. This vision also demands a shift from our traditional industrial model to a competency-based learning approach. Our **Whole Child Competency Framework** offers a starting point from which the future of a civics education to protect democracy might be designed. We envision educators using these tools to adapt learning for their specific communities, focusing on essential strategies and skills in ways that are responsive to their learners' development as citizens.

Even with these promising ideas about how to move forward, re-aligning our country with its foundational commitments is sure to be an endless, ongoing endeavor. But the promise of schools as an oasis in the desert, a spring from which democracy can flow in every community... what could be more worth our efforts?