SUPPORTING SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN OAKLAND HIGH SCHOOLS
EDDA Research Summary No. 3
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Prepared by Ellen Middaugh

As any educator will tell you, students often wonder, "Why do we need to learn this?" Teachers in the Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age (EDDA) initiative have been developing strategies to make that question self-evident. By connecting classroom instruction to learning about and addressing pressing community issues and integrating the digital tools and practices that are central to teens' lives, EDDA teachers are finding ways to make schooling more relevant and engaging. EDDA teachers work in teams with EDDA coaches throughout the school year to integrate three core elements of civic education—issue analysis, civic action, and reflection—into the core humanities curriculum. Furthermore, they look for ways students can use digital media for each of the three core purposes.

Like students in many urban school districts, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) high school students face many barriers to completing their high school education. Civic education is one way to help students see schooling as a way to be part of the solution to the problems in their community. Furthermore, by integrating digital media into civic education, students have the opportunity to take the tools and networks that they know how to use so well in their social lives and leverage that expertise for academic and civic purposes.

> *I'm proud that I honestly was motivated for a bit. The fact that I realized that I matter in the school was pretty cool to understand and to realize. –11th Grade Student*

A central question for the EDDA research project has been to examine the impact of digital civic learning opportunities on student engagement. Through surveys of graduating seniors, classroom observations of students engaged in EDDA activities (issue analysis, civic action, and reflection using digital media for research, communication, and production), and interviews with EDDA teachers and students, the EDDA research team found the following:

Civic and Digital Medial Learning Opportunities Support Engagement in School.
Civic and digital media learning opportunities are significant predictors of students' overall school engagement (sense of school as interesting, meaningful, and relevant for later in life) as well as their reported opportunities to exercise agency in school (make important decisions, navigate challenging tasks). These relationships were statistically significant even after controlling for demographic variables, mother's education, academic aspirations, and indicators of academic achievement[1]. Additionally, graduating seniors in EDDA classes reported significantly higher levels of school engagement than their peers.

For example:
- ❖ 58-63% of students who reported high levels of opportunities to analyze civic and political issues reported experiencing opportunities to exercise agency (assignments were challenging,

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[1] All analyses control for gender, race, plans to attend 4 year college, mother's education, highest level math course taken, and home internet access.

required responsibility, and allowed for decision-making), compared to 31-36% of those who reported low levels of such opportunities. Qualitative data suggest that students particularly valued learning about how issues were relevant to themselves and others. See more…

❖ 48% of students who engaged in high levels of civic action agreed that the things they learned in school are "important for later in life" compared to 25% of those who experienced low levels of such opportunities. Additionally, those who experienced high levels of opportunities for civic action were more likely to agree that they had assignments where they made important decisions (64% v. 35%). Qualitative data suggest that students felt motivated by presenting information to an outside audience and feeling they can make a difference in civic and political issues. See more…

❖ 63% of students reporting high levels of exposure to digital media learning opportunities agreed their "school work is meaningful and relevant" compared to 39% of those with low levels of such opportunities. Qualitative data suggest that students' particularly enjoyed opportunities to reach an authentic audience through publishing work online to collaborating with and connecting to peers in the classroom. See more…

> *Student 1: As students we don't really think about the political and our economy and stuff that's going on around us.* **But when we're doing projects like this it makes you have to look into what you really like about the politics or the economy and what you want to change….** *It makes us get involved*
> *Student 2: Yeah.*
> *Student 1: And a lot of students don't. So here's their chance to and here's a chance to try to also make a change about what they believe in instead of always having adult opinions and kids don't know too much.* **And [people think] kids really don't care, but yes we do. We just don't have a big enough voice.**

Analyzing and Acting on Civic and Political Issues

Oakland students need little education to become aware of or concerned with issues in their community. They live with them every day. 75% of OUSD students qualify for free and reduced lunch[2]; they live in neighborhoods with high rates of homicide and violence with accompanied high rates of PTSD[3]; and they struggle to find work during an historic dip in youth employment[4]. In the face of these struggles, it is perhaps not surprising that 1 in 6 10th and 11th grade students are chronically absent[5].

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[2] https://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/App_Resx/EdDataClassic/fsTwoPanel.aspx?#!bottom=/_layouts/EdDataClassic/profile.asp?tab=1&level=06&ReportNumber=16&County=1&fyr=1314&District=61259#specialprograms

[3] http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2014/05/16/hood-disease-inner-city-oakland-youth-suffering-from-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd-crime-violence-shooting-homicide-murder/

[4] http://www.insidebayarea.com/ci_25340558/study-shows-bay-area-teens-struggle-find-work

[5] https://oaklandachieves.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/oakachattendance_executive-summary.pdf

What students are less likely to know is how these conditions come about, in what ways they and others can act to improve their conditions, and how education can play a role in their efforts to make their communities better.

Figure 1. Relationship between opportunities to analyze civic issues and school engagement
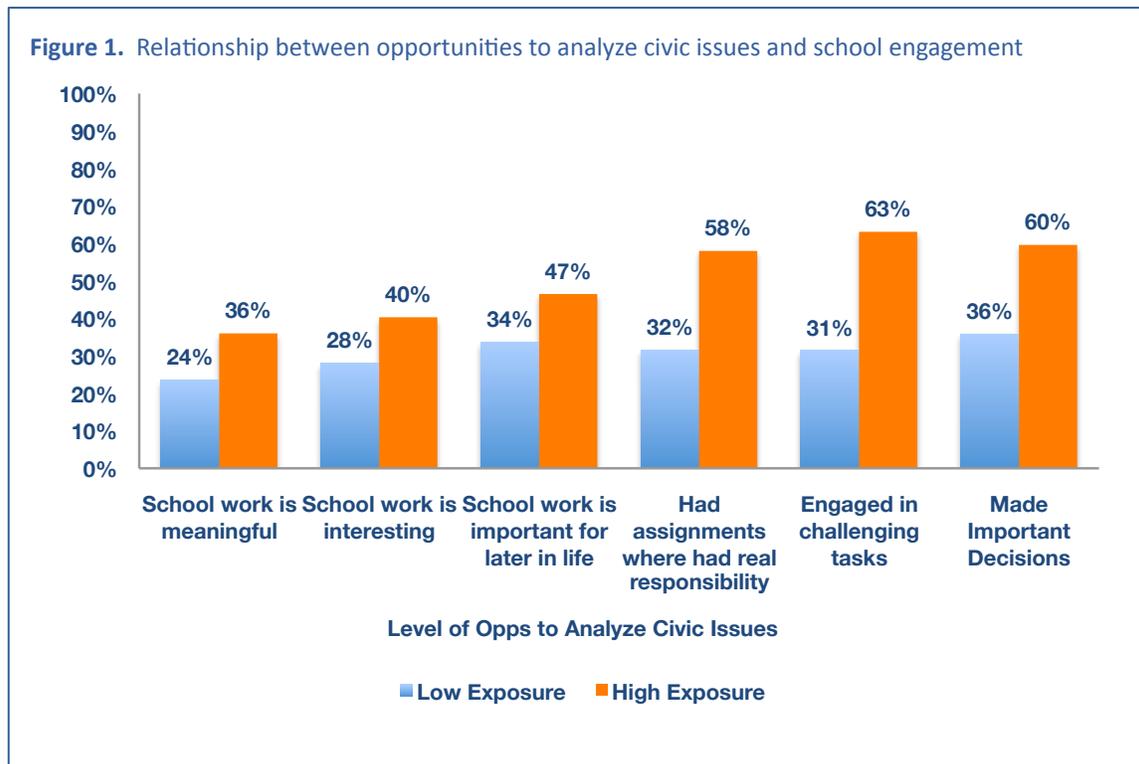
The EDDA project draws on best practices in civic education which suggest that students are most likely to benefit from civic engagement when they are able to engage in thoughtful action, through issue analysis, action, and reflection. Furthermore, the project draws on research in positive youth development, which suggests that for youth facing numerous community stressors, educational opportunities to understand and work towards positive solutions can help build a positive attachment to the community, greater sense of agency, and goal orientation for the future.

> *I guess over the year I realized how relevant a lot these issues are to our lives, and this class definitely made me a little more skeptical towards what I hear in advertisements and speeches.*

Towards this end, EDDA teachers engaged students in questions such as "What is the Civil Rights Issue of Our Time?" as a vehicle to teach research and writing skills; analysis of the civic, economic, social, and political health of countries as a mechanism for placing world history in current context; and reading and researching water rights as a way of both understanding the implications of government policy in response to the drought but also learning about careers in law and government, among other projects.

> *Just like reading about how Congress is appropriating budget for federal aid and whether or not there will be Pell grants. That's relevant to me. I'm gonna get a Pell grant.*

In line with this, the EDDA research team examined the relationship between opportunities to analyze and act on civic and political issues in the classroom and students' overall attachment to schooling and sense of school as providing opportunities to exercise agency. Graduating seniors were asked to rate how often they experienced opportunities to engage in a range of "issue analysis" activities, ranging from learning about issues in the community, to learning how they can become involved in government, to examining the perspectives of difference groups.

> *And for the research we're doing, like the topics [classmate] did it on, immigration, like she – that's her question. She gave out health surveys to do and I read through it and I'm, as an immigrant I read through all the questions and just like, "Oh wow, this is actually about me." Like all the questions they asked, just like, "Ooh, that's me."*

As seen in Figure 1, students who reported high levels of exposure to opportunities to analyze civic issues (the top 1/3) were more likely to agree with a range of indicators of school engagement. For

> *Well my interest level [in research on water rights] was kind of low at first but then I found out the Asian and Pacific Islander thing [referring to statistics on how many Asian and Pacific Islanders go without plumbing] so that like just made me … think about my race, African Americans, like what about us? And that's when I looked for an African American politician on water. I looked up statistics of how African Americans sustain water their self. So it all connects back to the person and how they view things.*

example, 36% of students in the high exposure group reported that schoolwork was meaningful and relevant to their lives compared to only 24% of those in the low exposure group. Furthermore, these students were also more likely to report opportunities to exercise agency, with 60% saying they were regularly involved in projects where they "made important decisions" compared to only 36% of those in the low exposure group.

Why do students find opportunities to analyze issues so engaging? Learning about issues that are relevant to themselves and their communities.

At the end of Years 1 and 2, the EDDA research team conducted interviews and focus groups with teachers and students to learn more about how students responded to opportunities to analyze issues in their community. A common theme that emerged among students was the discovery that the things they were learning about through their research and analysis impacted them directly.

> *I felt like it gave us a good opportunity to know what presenting feels like and to know that all the information we gathered wasn't for nothing; it was to share with our audience and whoever was listening.*

For example, when asked what they found interesting about examining political issues as part of their US Government course, students reflected on the connection between political issues and their lives.

In a different setting, a Junior English class, a student echoed the same sentiment, noting their enjoyment of the class research project had to do with learning about not only the issues they chose, but the issues that other students were researching when they realized that they touched on matters that related to them personally.

Similarly, in a Junior Law class where students did not get to choose their own topic, but rather as a class explored the topic of water rights (a full year before the CA drought became big news), students noted that their interest in a topic that initially seemed dry and irrelevant increased when they were able

Figure 2. Relationship between opportunities to engage in civic action and school engagement
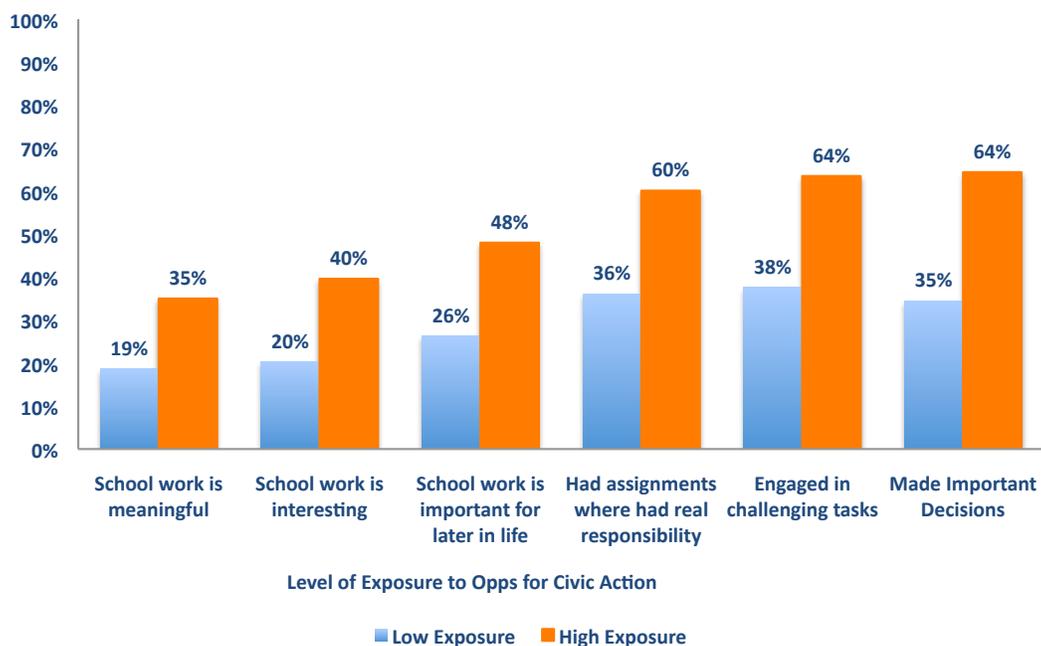
to make connections to the impact of the issue on people in low income communities and those who share circumstances they relate to.

Using the information for a purpose with civic action

One of the more challenging aspects of civic education for teachers is the integration of civic action into the curriculum. Finding the resources and time to take students outside of the classroom is not easy in many schools. Furthermore, there are concerns about engaging students in action that may not align with their own or their family's political views. On the other hand, if students simply learn about issues facing the community without

[W]hen we talked to Bonta we were talking to him about water, and he seemed kinda surprised that we knew as much as we knew. So maybe it was for us to realize that we are actually learning a lot, and our time isn't just being wasted on the subject. And then when we talked to [the consultant to senator], he told us some stuff that we already knew. So that again to let us know that we are learning stuff and that it is important, it is an important issue that our representatives and people working for the government are really looking into.

connecting those ideas to what can be done, we run the risk of simply creating a feeling of helplessness.

In the EDDA initiative, teachers are encouraged to think of civic action on a spectrum, considering how they can connect students to the community in small and large ways. For example, at the end of a research project, rather than having students simply write a paper to share with the teacher to be graded, students are asked to share the information they learned with a broader audience (through presentations, social media, posters, blogs, etc.) At the other end of the process, students who previously did solely academic research might be encouraged to do field research as well, to learn how the issue manifests in their community.

As with analyzing civic issues, survey data suggests that acting on civic issues helps students see schooling as meaningful, interesting, and important as well as leading them to see school as providing opportunities to exercise agency. (See Figure 2.)

One of the differences in their reflection on civic action vs. issue analysis, however, is the focus on doing the work for a purpose. Even small acts of civic engagement—raising awareness through presentations—led students to reflect on how they felt like they were doing the work for a purpose, as the student quoted above said, "[A]ll the information we gathered wasn't for nothing; it was to share with our audience."

Additionally, students noted feeling a certain level of efficacy or importance when they connected to the community and politics. For example, a student discussed being part of a project where students in a US History class (after studying political movements) gathered information from their classmates about needs in their school, with the ultimate goal of presenting the information to the school's leadership. While the project did not ultimately go as planned, the process of discussing with the class, interviewing and collecting information, and being taken seriously as a collaborator led this student to reflect, "I'm proud that I honestly was motivated for a bit. The fact that I realized that I matter in the school was pretty cool to understand and realize."

Similarly, students who researched water rights in CA used that information to inform a discussion with their Assembly Member. They later reflected on how the process of connecting with politicians and experts on an issue they studied provided them with the experience of seeing how what they learned prepared them to be part of a larger public conversation.

Digital Learning for Civic Engagement

Throughout the EDDA initiative, teachers have been working to integrate digital media into the classroom for the purposes of civic issue analysis, civic action, and reflection. For example, when students learn about civic issues, teachers

> *Interviewer: In [teacher's] class did you learn how to use technology in the classroom?*
> *Student: Well I wouldn't say learn how to use it 'cause everybody in the class since we're like a different generation technology is useful already so we use it. But what we did learn in class is like different ways to go about it. **So it's like instead of using [technology] to talk to somebody [we] use it to make power, create power basically.***

provide scaffolds for online search and assessment of the credibility of information thereby encouraging students to develop the skills to search for their own sources and judge for themselves what information is trustworthy and relevant.

This stands in contrast to what some EDDA teachers reported in previous years where they gave students the sources or a limited set of allowable resources. Other current practices include having students use online collaborative tools (Google docs) to comment on each others' work, engaging in social media campaigns to raise awareness about issues, and publishing their perspectives online using a moderated academic social network site (YouthVoices.net).

Digital Learning Opportunities are Associated with Higher Levels of School Engagement
At the end of Year 2 (2014), graduating seniors were asked about their experience with a battery of 15 digital learning opportunities ranging from discussing strategies for search and credibility, using collaborative tools, using digital media for discussion, or sharing perspectives about social issues.

As seen in Figure 3, students who had more classroom experiences with digital media were significantly more likely to report high levels of engagement in school as well as opportunities to exercise agency (have responsibilities).

Figure 3. Relationship between digital learning opportunities and school engagement
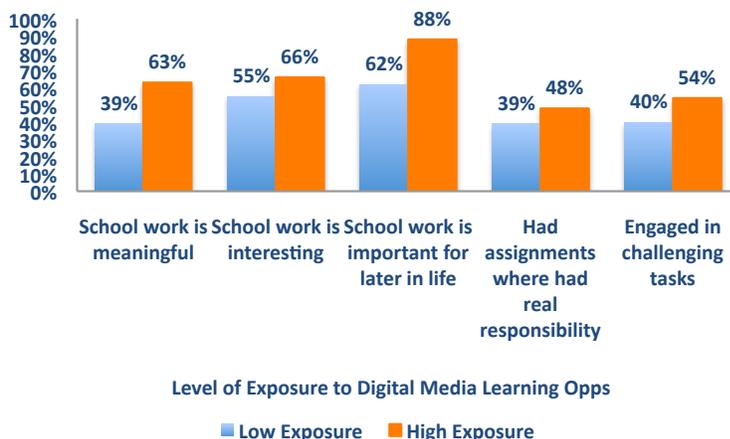
Student: When [teacher] started this project, I [saw] t hat students started coming more.
Interviewer: Coming more to class?
Student: Yeah, coming more to class and then getting in their groups right away before she even tells them to. They would just come in, take the laptops right away, log in and start working, continue to work and they would do the same thing every day.

- 11th grade student reflecting on experience with a group research project using digital tools to research and publish perspectives on the "civil rights issue of our time."

For example, 88% of those who reported high levels of exposure to digital learning opportunities (those in the top third) agreed that the things they were doing in school were important for later in life, compared to only 62% of those with low levels of exposure (those in the bottom third). Furthermore, 48% of those experiencing high levels of digital media learning opportunities reported that they had "regularly" been involved in projects where they had real responsibilities.   These relationships held even after controlling for demographics, mother's education, college aspirations, and level of math course (as an indicator of achievement).

In addition to surveys, the research team conducted classroom observations and student and teacher interviews in classrooms where teachers were integrating digital media into their efforts to support civic issue analysis, action, or reflection.

Reaching an Authentic Audience

In several classrooms, teachers used social media as a mechanism for students to share their perspectives on social and political issues with an outside audience. Mechanisms ranged from having students share perspectives on Twitter in collaboration with KQED's "Do Now" Program, providing students with the option to develop a "social media campaign" by putting videos on You Tube, creating Facebook pages as part of a civic action project, or posting perspectives on YouthVoices.net—a moderated social network site hosted by teachers and including students around the country (including New York, Utah, California, etc.).

> [We go on] Youth Voices, when we talk about something that we want other people to read about it. So I was talking about just obesity and animal cruelty and animal brutality, and then just **people commenting on mine made me feel kinda good about myself, like, my first time ever feeling like an author kind of 'cause I didn't like writing**. But when I write about something I want, like I wanna learn, it's better to write it out on the Internet so people can read it. **It just feels like you're somebody 'cause somebody's reading it**; somebody likes it, and I got a lot of comments on it….

Teachers and students noted that having an authentic audience and getting comments from people they did not know was highly motivating.

Enhancing Classroom Community

Another area where digital media appeared to facilitate student engagement was through opportunities to see what other students think through collaborative tools and social media. In some cases, students used Youth Voices to reach an outside audience, but, at other times, they used it as a tool to provide feedback and commentary to other students. Students also used Google Docs as a mechanism to give feedback and collaborate.

> [Student talks about commenting on each others' blogs in class]. They would comment on it, what we could do better, what we have to change and then we would go and comment on other people blogs that we like and what they could improve, what they could have them better, what they could change. … [T]hat one really gets us motivated. It makes us do more.
> Interviewer: In what way?
> Student: Like just by go and comment on people blogs and reading it. "Oh I have this topic. They have this other topic." You really learn from other people things and they learn from yours because once you comment on their blog then they can comment on yours. Then they read it and they tell you what you have to change or what to keep the same or what they liked about it.

Students noted gaining motivation from collaboration and learning more about what their classmates think and are doing in their projects.

Additionally, students noted gaining a certain level of emotional connection through the process of reading their classmates' perspectives through blogging and commenting.

These opportunities are not limited to blogging, but the public and networked nature of the platform invites sharing and commentary in a way that is not invited through submitting papers to the teacher.

> *OK, one of my friends…he's always about himself. He always thinks about himself, and then [describes process of researching issues, posting online and commenting] when I was helping him on his essay [commenting on youth voices] and I read it, I'm like "Oh, wow, you do have a good side."*

> *Interviewer: And what about – is there anything about the youth voices blog platform that you feel like you learn something new about blogging from?*
> *Student: That it's good for some people to have their opinions because other people might agree with them.*
> *Interviewer: And what's good about that?*
> *Student: **That it lets people know that they're not alone, and some person might feel the same way you feel.***

Conclusion

The data collected thus far lead us to conclude that opportunities to analyze and act on civic issues support students' feelings that schooling is relevant, interesting and meaningful (school engagement) and that they are being given opportunities to navigate challenges, make important decisions, and take on responsibilities (agency). Furthermore, integrating digital media can enhance these opportunities by supporting students' access to outside audience and supporting collaboration.