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# Measuring Citizen Engagement: The North Carolina Civic Index

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*Kids Voting programs, conducted in tandem with adult voting on election days, help young people get into the voting habit. Clockwise, from top left: Teens mark their ballots. A father explains the choices to his son. A six-year-old poll worker helps a peer complete his ballot. A five-year-old boy puts his ballot in the box. A five-year-old girl casts her vote. Students read their ballots while they wait to vote.*

**E**ngaging citizens is a common concern of public officials. A local government can provide numerous opportunities for its citizens to become engaged in the community, such as advisory boards, commissions, community watch groups, and public hearings. Unfortunately the benefits of these efforts are lost on citizens who choose not to participate. Many people think that they are too busy to participate or do not believe that their views will make a difference. Often, adult citizens already have formulated such attitudes by the time that they are asked to work with their community and its leaders. However, North Carolina public officials have an opportunity to shape the civic engagement of their future constituents and the state's leaders-to-be—North Carolina's youth. The findings of the 2003 North Carolina Civic Index, the first-ever statewide study of youth and adult civic engagement, offer some rays of hope for citizen involvement in North Carolina.

In May 2003 the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium announced the results of the 2003 Civic Index. It was conducted after years of preparation for a comprehensive, scientific survey of North Carolina youth and adults. New data for the index came from a statewide telephone survey about citizenship skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and opportunities. The index also drew from existing data on civic behavior in the state, including voter turnout rates, charitable giving, and diversity among public officials. This first index measures the impact of current efforts to improve civic education across the state and establishes a benchmark for future measurements of civic engagement. The index has impli-

cations for all sectors of North Carolina: government, education, business, nonprofit organizations, and the general public.

This article provides some background on the 2003 Civic Index, describes the research that went into compiling it, summarizes its findings and recommendations, and discusses important initiatives that have resulted from the study.

## Background

A volunteer work group of the Civic Education Consortium developed the Civic Index in response to a lack of comprehensive and meaningful measures of civic engagement. Existing measures, such as voter turnout rates and end-of-course test scores, offered little insight into the preparation of youth to become engaged citizens.

According to Todd McGee, a work group member and director of communications at the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners,

*Local governments in North Carolina are viewed favorably by their peers across the nation, so it is disturbing that the citizens of the state don't share those views. It is hoped the results of the Civic Index will spark a renewed debate across the state so that citizens will take a more active role in shaping the futures of their communities.*

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## Related Efforts at Civic Engagement

### Community-Level Benchmarking Projects

- **National Civic League Civic Index:** This index measures a community's "civic infrastructure," which consists of the skills, practices, and networks that communities use to make decisions and solve problems.<sup>1</sup> More information is available in the National Civic League, *The Civic Index: Measuring Your Community's Civic Health* (Denver: the league, 1999).
- **Knight Foundation Community Indicators Project:** This research-based project documents changes in the quality of life in the communities served by the Knight Foundation. More information is available at [www.knightfdn.org/default.asp?story=indicators/index.html](http://www.knightfdn.org/default.asp?story=indicators/index.html).
- **Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey:** Three dozen community foundations, other funders, and the Saguaro Seminar of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University joined together to survey nearly 30,000 adults on how connected they are to family, friends, neighbors, and civic institutions on a local and national level. More information is available at [www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/in2c.html](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/in2c.html).

### Notes

1. NATIONAL CIVIC LEAGUE, *FRAMEWORK OF THE NATIONAL CIVIC LEAGUE'S CIVIC INDEX* (Denver: the League, n.d.).
2. CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Youth Civic Engagement Project, available at [www.civicyouth.org/research/products/youth\\_index.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/youth_index.htm).

## Research

Voter registration and voter turnout in the 2000 election, per capita charitable giving to United Way, and diversity among elected and appointed officials in North Carolina served as the existing measures for the Civic Index. However, because this information did not measure the broad scope of civic engagement, the Civic Education Consortium

### Selected Civic Engagement Projects

- **The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE):** The organization maintains an extensive list of youth civic engagement organizations. The list, as well as a more comprehensive database of organizations, is available at [www.civicyouth.org/practitioners/index.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/practitioners/index.htm).
- ***The Civic and Political Health of a Nation: A Generational Portrait:*** This report of a national study, which was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, analyzes two comprehensive surveys of the nation's civic and political behavior and chronicles the differences among four generations: "DotNets," "Generation X," "Baby Boomers," and "Matures." More information is available at [www.civicyouth.org/research/products/youth\\_index.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/youth_index.htm).
- **Illinois Civic Engagement Project:** This project will measure and describe the level and forms of civic engagement of the citizens of Illinois, and help them enhance and sustain civic engagement for the betterment of their communities.<sup>2</sup> More information is available at <http://civic.uis.edu/>.

also collected data via a statewide telephone survey, polling nearly 775 non-voting-age youth.

The telephone survey focused on five areas of civic engagement, listed below along with examples of the kinds of questions posed in each area:

- **Civic knowledge:** For example, can North Carolina youth name the state's two U.S. senators? Are they

familiar with the duties of local governments?

- **Civic skills:** For example, are North Carolina young people confident in their ability to write a letter expressing their opinions? Do they feel that they are effective at weighing pros and cons?
- **Civic behavior:** For example, are the state's youth participating in service activities? Do they participate in school clubs, including political clubs?
- **Civic attitudes:** For example, do North Carolina youth trust government—federal, state, or local? Do they value diversity?
- **Civic opportunities:** For example, do the schools that North Carolina youth attend offer service opportunities? Where do young North Carolinians get their information about government? Do they talk about politics at home?<sup>1</sup>

To establish a benchmark for civic education and engagement, the Civic Education Consortium surveyed about 800 adults on the same questions.<sup>2</sup>

## North Carolina: A National Leader

The N.C. Civic Index is the first of its kind in the nation. Cindy Gibson, manager of the Strengthening U.S. Democracy program at Carnegie Corporation of New York, says, "We at Carnegie Corporation believe that the N.C. Civic Index can and should be used as a template for assessing civic participation in other states because it culls the 'best of the best' of the civic engagement surveys that currently exist."

Further, the N.C. Civic Education Consortium is becoming more prominent on a national level. Gibson continues, the consortium "is one of the country's best examples of a non-partisan partnership that effectively advocates for richer approaches to civic education in our schools and communities."

(For a description of related efforts in other states and on the national level, see the sidebar on this page.)

## Findings

The 2003 Civic Index yielded some notable findings. Of particular interest were differences between trends in youth and adult civic engagement. Often these findings mirrored those of similar national studies. However, in some instances North Carolinians surpassed their national counterparts. Following is a summary of the findings.<sup>3</sup>

***North Carolina youth have a high level of confidence in their civic engagement skills, but their levels of political involvement and knowledge of government are low.***

North Carolina youth appear to have great confidence in their civic engagement skills. Substantial majorities report being extremely or somewhat effective at each of the civic engagement skills measured in the Civic Index (see Figure 1).

However, the state's youth generally have lower levels of civic knowledge and are less involved in political activities than their voting-age counterparts (see Figure 2). A majority of youth correctly answered seven of nine questions about their political knowledge, including questions about local government duties. However, only 9 percent named both of North Carolina's U.S. senators, and only 31 percent reported that the General Assembly, or the legislature, is responsible for making state laws. Almost one-third (31 percent) of adults named both U.S. senators, and 37 percent noted that the General Assembly is responsible for making laws.

***Youth involvement in political activities is low, but their level of volunteerism is high.***

Although North Carolina youth report relatively low involvement in politics, 73 percent say that they volunteered for some type of community service in the past year. This discrepancy between community service and political involvement mirrors the pattern in North Carolina's adult population, which ranks high nationally in charitable giving but low in political involvement.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1. **Civic Skills**

(% of youth who rate themselves as effective)

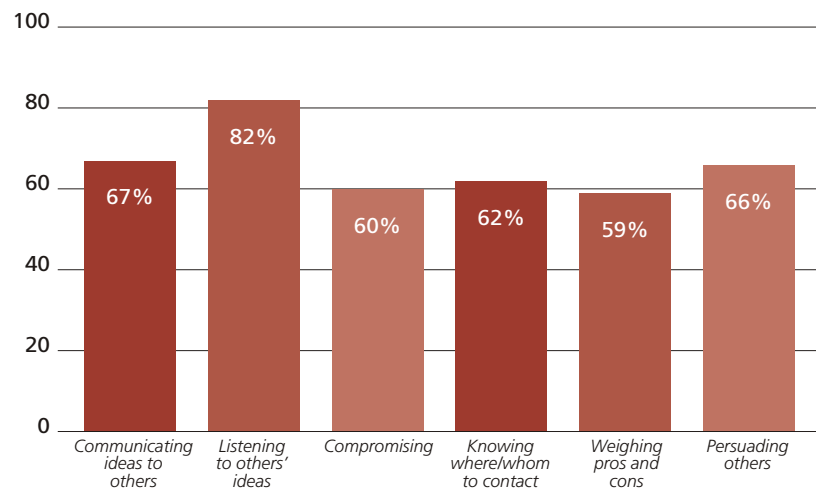


Figure 2. **Knowledge: Youth-Adult Comparison**

(% who answered correctly)

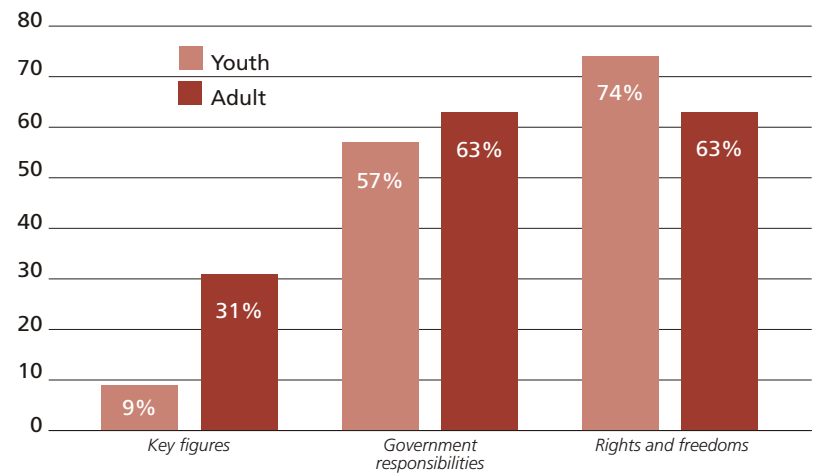
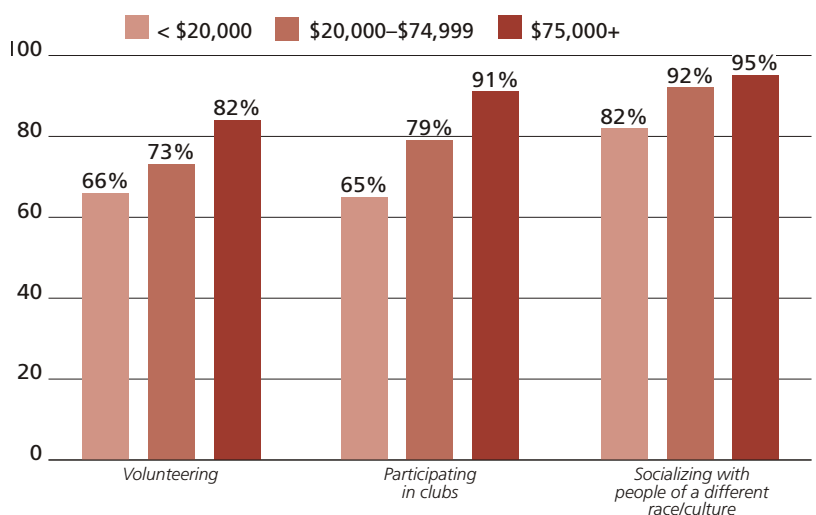


Figure 3. **Community Involvement by Income**

(% of youth who were involved in the last year)



Source for Figures 1–5: NORTH CAROLINA CIVIC EDUCATION CONSORTIUM, MEASURES OF CITIZENSHIP: THE NORTH CAROLINA CIVIC INDEX (Chapel Hill: the Consortium, 2003), available at [www.civics.unc.edu/pdfs/civicindex\\_report2003.pdf](http://www.civics.unc.edu/pdfs/civicindex_report2003.pdf).

## Successful North Carolina Programs of Youth Civic Involvement and Education

Partnerships between local governments and schools in North Carolina range from longstanding youth councils in large cities to one-on-one local government days at high schools. A *sampling* of successful programs follows.

### Youth Councils

Youth councils are typically sponsored by a city or county government. Ideally these councils provide youth with an opportunity for their voice to be heard. Some examples:

- Asheville/Buncombe County Youth Council
- Burlington Youth Council
- Cary Teen Council
- Clayton Youth Council
- Concord Youth Council
- Gastonia Youth Advisory Council
- Goldensboro Youth Council
- Greensboro Youth Council
- Hickory Youth Council
- Jacksonville Youth Council
- Kannapolis Youth Council
- Lewisville Youth Council
- New Bern Teen Council (Young Adults Active in the Community)
- Oak Ridge Youth Council
- Raleigh Youth Council
- Rocky Mount Youth Council
- Swain County Youth Council
- Tobaccoville Youth Council
- Wilson Youth Council

### Youth Representation on Other Boards

Youth also can provide an important voice on other boards. Some examples:

- Forsyth County Public Library Teen Advisory Council
- Morganton Human Relations Commission (teen members and outstanding middle and high school students of the year)
- Robeson County Junior Fair Board
- Shelby Human Relations Commission
- Thomasville Human Relations Commission (one student member)

### Local Government/School Partnerships

Local governments can partner with their school districts to provide a range of opportunities for enhancing curriculum on an as-needed basis. An example: Catawba County Government partners with high schools to provide speakers and information on local government as it fits into the curriculum. Also, in the 1980s the county helped develop curriculum on local government for third-, eighth-, and ninth-grade classrooms.

### Local Government Days

Local government days allow students to get a taste of local government through mock meetings of commissioners and other role-play activities. Some examples: East Rutherford High School in Rutherford County and Wayne County Schools offer these opportunities.

More than half (54 percent) of youth who report volunteering indicate that their schools arranged the experience.<sup>5</sup> However, youth do not seem to be making a connection between their volunteer service and community problem-solving. Although 73 percent of North Carolina youth report volunteering in the past twelve months, only 26 percent report working in their communities to solve a problem during that time.

North Carolina youth also report high rates of participation in school clubs (77 percent), but 20 percent say that their schools have no student government. The absence of this activity limits their opportunities to practice or witness political engagement. Similarly, only 26 percent say that they have met or talked with a public official through school. This finding is an indication that their classes are not typically providing such opportunities.

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***Household income is the most consistent indicator of civic knowledge and engagement. Race is a secondary factor.***

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Income is by far the most consistent predictor of civic engagement among youth and adults (see Figure 3, page 7). For N.C. youth and adults, high income is positively associated with greater confidence in civic participation skills, more frequent interaction with people of a different race or culture, and greater likelihood of being involved in community and political activities. High income also is positively associated with trust in institutions: youth in high-income households report more confidence in government, small businesses, the military, and nonprofit groups than youth in low-income households do.

More than twice as many high-income youth as low-income youth have met or talked with a government official. Also, low-income youth report fewer civic engagement activities through school and say that they have learned less about government and community issues from their classes.

Race too has some impact on civic knowledge and engagement. For instance, whites generally express higher levels of confidence than nonwhites in

most institutions, especially government and nonprofits. The racial civics gap also is evident in the lack of diversity among elected and appointed officials across the state (see Figure 4, page 10). White males hold a disproportionate share of these positions, although 25 percent of the state's population is nonwhite and more than 50 percent is female.

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***North Carolina youth and adults report a low level of trust in other people's motives; however, youth have a high level of trust in government and institutions.***

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North Carolina youth express substantially higher confidence in all levels of government and in nonprofit organizations than adults do (see Figure 5, page 10). Their highest reported levels of confidence are in the military, 79 percent; the federal government, 62 percent; and Congress, 57 percent. Comparable proportions for adults are 73 percent, 36 percent, and 28 percent.<sup>6</sup> Youth and adults have the least confidence in large corporations (30 percent of youth,



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*Top: Many North Carolina students are required to take part in service learning. Here a high school student fills bags of pasta for clients of a food distribution program. Bottom: Former N.C. Senator Howard Lee visits a university campus to participate in a panel discussion between state legislators and students.*



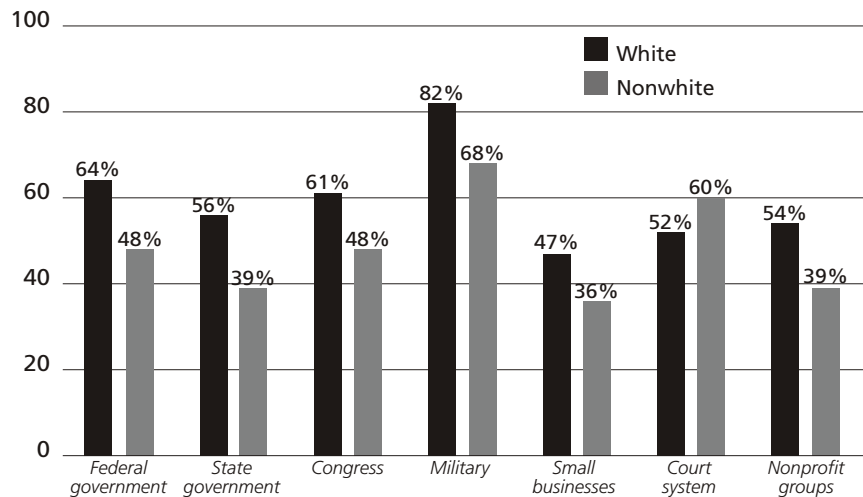
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Figure 4. Diversity in Elected and Appointed Offices

	NC Population	State House	State Senate	Council of State	Judges	State Boards	UNC Board of Gov.	County Commiss.	City/Town Council	Local School Boards
White	75%	83%	86%	90%	85%	84%	74%	84%	84%	79%
Nonwhite	25%	17%	14%	10%	15%	16%	26%	16%	16%	21%
Male	49%	77%	86%	60%	77%	75%	74%	85%	77%	63%
Female	51%	23%	14%	40%	23%	25%	26%	15%	23%	37%

Figure 5. Confidence in Institutions by Race

(% of youth who are confident)



34 percent of adults). Young people's second-lowest level of confidence is in other people's motives (33 percent), whereas adults assert much higher levels of confidence in others' motives (48 percent).<sup>7</sup>

**Meaningful classroom dialogue about current events and relevant issues positively influences youth civic knowledge, anticipated voting behavior, political engagement, and volunteerism.**

Youth whose civics classes connect studies to real-life issues report that they have learned much more about civics from those classes than do youth whose civics classes do not make such connections. However, too few students seem to be getting these opportunities through school. For example, fewer than half (49 percent) report being involved in civics classes that connect studies to real-life issues, and the same proportion say that they take no classes

requiring them to keep up with politics or current events.

Youth who have had a public official visit their classrooms are more likely to have confidence in all levels of government and more likely to view government as a career option than youth who do not report this experience. Unfortunately, students rarely get this opportunity; almost 75 percent say that they have never met or talked with a government official at school.

(For a list of some successful partnerships between local governments and schools, see the sidebar on page 8.)

**Recommendations**

According to Debra Henzey, director of the Civic Education Consortium, two broad recommendations emerging from the findings of the 2003 Civic Index merit special attention:

- We must help young people turn their complacency about the

**State Policy Summit**

With support from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the Public School Forum, and the North Carolina School Boards Association, the Civic Education Consortium will host a North Carolina Policy Summit on the civic mission of schools on December 4, 2003. This will be a small event at which state and local education policy makers can focus on ways to promote more effective civic education practices in K–12 schools. State Farm Insurance is sponsoring the event.

*current political and election systems into constructive action. Just as we must help students see that democracy is, by definition, messy and prone to disagreement, we also have to admit that young people, and many adults, have valid concerns about “politics as usual.” The political system could certainly be improved, but such reforms will not happen if young people continue to opt out of voting and other political activities.*

- We must send a clear message that it is just as important for North Carolina to prepare young people for effective civic participation as it is to prepare them for work. These two roles are not mutually exclusive in a democratic society and free-market economy. This means that we cannot afford to sacrifice one for the other.<sup>8</sup>



*High school students participate in the Youth Legislative Assembly, a mock session that follows the procedures of the N.C. General Assembly.*

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As stated earlier, the findings of the 2003 Civic Index have implications for all sectors of the state's communities: government, grass-roots organizations, schools, and parents. The simple strategies that follow offer ways in which each of these sectors can work to enhance civic engagement among young people.

**Strategies for Public Officials**  
*Engage Young People*

The positive connection between interaction with public officials and youth confidence in government means that all public officials—elected and appointed—should create opportunities to talk with young people and find effective ways of involving youth in government programs, services, and decision making.

**Strategies for Youth Programs**  
*Link Service and Citizenship*

Most of North Carolina's young people are involved in community service. Such experience will have a stronger impact on their civic knowledge and school involvement if it more clearly addresses real community problems and is more clearly connected to civics studies.

**Involve Diverse Youth**

Schools and community organizations can help close the civics gap among youth from different backgrounds by ensuring that both nonwhite and lower-income youth have access to engaging civics programs. The key is to relate studies to issues that are relevant to all young people.

**Strategies for Schools**  
*Enhance Existing Courses*

All schools, especially middle and high schools, can have a positive impact on student civic knowledge and involvement by implementing a number of basic strategies. Particularly effective ones include active current events discussions; student interactions with public officials; and service learning activities that are tied in to the curriculum and explore and address real school or community issues.

**Provide Students with a Voice**

National studies have consistently shown that involvement in student government and other leadership programs may be the strongest predictor of

lifelong civic participation, especially voting. Schools can support their civic mission by fostering strong student councils that have a meaningful role in school issues. Additionally, schools can involve students through committees, surveys, and other activities that give students multiple opportunities to voice their viewpoints.

**Strategies for Parents and Families**  
*Set an Example*

Parents and family members can help young people become active, informed citizens by discussing political and current events with their children; volunteering time or donating money to meet community needs; and engaging in political activities, such as voting and attending public meetings.

**Related Initiatives**

In response to many of the findings of the 2003 Civic Index, Senator Joe Sam Queen (Democrat, District 47) introduced legislation encouraging more civic opportunities for young people in schools. The special provision in the



## Additional Resources

The following resources will help guide communities in creating new civic engagement programs or enhancing existing ones.

- Gordon Whitaker, an Institute of Government faculty member and a founding member of the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, collaborated with the North Carolina City and County Management Association to author *Local Government in North Carolina*, a supplement on local government for the tenth-grade economics, law, and politics curriculum. To order a copy, visit the School of Government's secure twenty-four-hour online shopping cart at <https://iogpubs.iog.unc.edu>, or contact the publications office at (919) 966-4119 or [sales@iogmail.iog.unc.edu](mailto:sales@iogmail.iog.unc.edu).
- Since 1998 the Civic Education Consortium has received support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to award grants ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000 to innovative, collaborative civic education projects that develop effective citizenship among North Carolina's youth. For information on the small grants program, go to [www.civics.unc.edu/smallgrants/index.htm](http://www.civics.unc.edu/smallgrants/index.htm).
- The Civic Education Consortium's Community-Based Education Work Group has compiled a list of nonschool community-based civic education programs for young people. This information can be found at [www.civics.unc.edu/commresources/index.htm](http://www.civics.unc.edu/commresources/index.htm).
- The Civic Education Consortium also has catalogued resources for teachers, including curriculum resources, government websites, training opportunities, and community resources for the classroom. This information can be found at [www.civics.unc.edu/teacherresources/index.htm](http://www.civics.unc.edu/teacherresources/index.htm).

state budget bill, which was adopted on June 30, 2003, does the following:

- Urges all middle and high schools to have active student councils
- Urges all middle and high schools to have at least two classes per grade level that offer discussions of current events every four weeks
- Urges all schools to provide students with community service and service learning opportunities
- Encourages the State Board of Education to develop mechanisms to hold school systems accountable for civic and character education<sup>9</sup>

Although implementation of the foregoing recommendations is not mandatory, representatives of the Department of Public Instruction have stated that they will integrate the act's recommendations into existing curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

In fall 2003, the Civic Education Consortium convened eight community forums around the state to engage citizens, grassroots organizations, and local leaders in discussion about using the results of the 2003 Civic Index to improve civic education and participation in their communities. The goal was to engage communities in developing more effective strategies to improve civic participation and education. In working with the eight communities, the consortium has learned of many innovative youth civic engagement programs across the state. These programs have been compiled in a resource guide available on the consortium's website. (For a related event, see the sidebar on page 10.)

To ensure that all communities benefit from discussion of the 2003 Civic Index results, the Civic Education Consortium will publish a *Community Forum Tool Kit*, a how-to guide for communities to host their own forums. These tool kits will be available in winter 2004. *Contact the Civic Education Consortium at (919) 962-8389 or [pdexter@iogmail.iog.unc.edu](mailto:pdexter@iogmail.iog.unc.edu) if you would like to receive one.*

To document statewide trends in civic education and engagement, the Civic Education Consortium plans to conduct the Civic Index every three to four years. The consortium is currently

presenting the Civic Index at several state and national conferences. Consortium staff hope that other states will adopt this model assessment tool in their efforts to gauge civic vitality.

(For additional resources on civic engagement of youth, see the sidebar on this page.)

## Notes

1. The survey can be found at [www.civics.org](http://www.civics.org).

2. The Survey Research Center of the University of Georgia conducted the Civic Index surveys between January and March 2003. The center contacted youth and adults by telephone using a "random digit dial probability sample." Center staff interviewed 771 youth ages 13–17 (44 percent of those contacted) and 804 adults (43 percent of those contacted). Samples of this size are subject to a margin of error no greater than  $\pm 3.5$  percent, at the 95 percent confidence interval. In addition to sampling error, other sources of error can potentially influence the results of sample surveys, including error associated with nonresponse, question wording, and interviewer error. For additional details on the methodology used in this study, visit [www.civics.org](http://www.civics.org).

3. The complete findings appear in NORTH CAROLINA CIVIC EDUCATION CONSORTIUM, *MEASURES OF CITIZENSHIP: THE NORTH CAROLINA CIVIC INDEX* (Chapel Hill: the Consortium, 2003), available at [www.civics.unc.edu/pdfs/civicindex\\_report2003.pdf](http://www.civics.unc.edu/pdfs/civicindex_report2003.pdf).

4. According to United Way of America, in 2001, North Carolina ranked 11th out of 52 (50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C.) in United Way per capita giving. North Carolina's average donation per capita was \$22.75; the national average was \$16.05.

5. For more information on the civics and economics curriculum, visit [www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/socialstudies/2003-04/socialstudies.pdf](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/socialstudies/2003-04/socialstudies.pdf). There are currently no state-mandated service requirements for students. However, many local districts and individual schools have implemented such requirements. New legislation asks the Department of Public Instruction to create mechanisms to track the number of students involved in service activities.

6. NORTH CAROLINA CIVIC EDUCATION CONSORTIUM, *NC CIVIC INDEX ADULT AND YOUTH SURVEY COMPARISON* (Chapel Hill: the Consortium, 2003).

7. *Id.*

8. CIVIC EDUCATION CONSORTIUM, *MEASURES OF CITIZENSHIP*, at 3.

9. The complete act can be found at [www.ncga.state.nc.us/html2003/bills/AllVersions/Senate/S795v4.html](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/html2003/bills/AllVersions/Senate/S795v4.html).

10. Laila Wier, *State Aims to Improve Civics Instruction*, HERALD SUN (Durham), July 7, 2003, p. B-1.