



# Equity in Civics: Racial Equity Interview Series Brief



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*The Equity in Civics initiative is generously funded by the Hewlett Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, and the support of individual donors committed to advancing culturally relevant democracy education.*



## Overview: Equity in Civics Initiative

The challenges American democracy faces today are urgent and systemic, given both the immediacy of our crises and the historical under-resourcing of communities of color. Though racial inequity and oppression have plagued America for centuries, the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 elevated racial injustice and reinvigorated a movement to examine the role race plays in all factors of American life. This movement energized a broad spectrum of civic learning organizations to see our work not only as a founding tenet of American education, but also as a beacon of hope for addressing some of the deeply ingrained and multifaceted issues facing our communities today.

Civics education has long suffered from both uneven quality and unequal access. As a result, students from systemically underserved communities have often been excluded from comprehensive democracy education that would support their cultivation of their full civic potential. Building a more equitable democracy requires civics education to explicitly address historical and current political realities and, in doing so, to clearly tie understandings of democracy's relevance to students' identities, histories, and communities.

As stated in our 2020 Equity in Civic Education White Paper, we define equitable civic education as:

*“inclusive, representative, and relevant. It promotes diverse voices and draws on students’ lived experiences and perspectives in order to engage them in understanding social issues, the power dynamics that cause them, and the ability that young people have to bring change.”*

With generous support from the Hewlett Foundation, Generation Citizen and iCivics began examining the lack of equity focus in civics education in 2018. We convened a national Equity in Civics Steering Committee of practitioners, researchers, and educators to further provide advice, help lead this process, and map out solutions. The Steering Committee seeks to promote equitable civics education through its three working groups, which are respectively focused on community-level stakeholder engagement, strategic communications, and centering racial equity among civic learning organizations.



The Racial Equity Working Group focuses specifically on building fieldwide support and creating actionable resources that civic learning organizations can adopt to better incorporate racial equity into civics education and engagement. The primary project of the Working Group to date has been a Racial Equity Interview Series, which seeks to develop a fieldwide sense of how some of the leading civic learning and democracy education organizations are operationalizing their commitments to culturally relevant civics, both internally and externally. After conducting interviews with eight organizations in May - August of 2022, the Working Group developed a Racial Interview Series brief, released on the basis of those interviews.

Our hope for the Racial Equity Interview Series brief is to catalogue best practices and promising approaches for fostering racial justice in civic education organizations so that the work of all groups can be elevated and refined. The guide aims to be a gift to the field. We recognize that realizing racial equity is a journey of continuous improvement for all organizations. We therefore hope that this practitioner-focused resource can serve as inspiration, can provide mutual understanding of the common challenges facing the field as a whole, and can serve as a field-wide benchmark for how to make progress toward a practice-based ideal of racial equity.

## Executive Summary

The racial equity interview series (REIS) brief applies a qualitative, practice-based method to assessing the best practices and common challenges of civic learning and educational equity organizations seeking to strengthen their repertoire of actions as a pathway towards racial equity.

The premise of the REIS brief is that deep consideration of real-world examples and practitioner-oriented stories can yield applicable insights that reflect the ebbing and flowing, yet essential process of strengthening organizational commitment to racial equity.



Eight organizations from the field of civic learning and educational equity participated in the interviews for the REIS brief. Of those eight, one of those organizations, Each One, Teach One (EOTO) is based in Berlin, Germany. To ensure lesson drawing from analogous contexts while also retaining the comparative insights from examining a U.S. context and civic education in a more international setting, the U.S. based civic learning and education equity groups are grouped together and form the basis of the analysis for the best practices and common challenges section; insights from the EOTO interview are included in a separate appendix segment, following the best practices and common challenges, in order to differentiate between the environmental context the U.S.-based and Germany-based groups. We believe this procedure of arrangement preserves both the integrity of the analysis for each interview, while also fostering an integrative analysis of civic education across differing operating contexts.

To facilitate in-depth reflection, the sections of this brief are designed for use in small- and large-group settings such as staff calls, strategic planning retreats, and board meetings, and other inflection points in the life of civic learning and educational equity organizations. In particular, we hope that the best practices and common challenges segments will prove both familiar and generative to organizations and their stakeholders, as well as community members, seeking to develop concrete practices to strengthen racial equity in K-12 civic education.

## Best Practices

Strengthening racial equity practices of civic learning, educational equity, and youth voice organizations takes intentionality, a willingness to draw lessons from both successes and failures, and identifiable steps to involve directly impacted education stakeholders — educators, students, and parents or caregivers — as advisers or consultants on the strategy and operations of institutions seeking to embody racial equity.



In order to help the civics education field move further towards establishing racial equity practices, this section of the brief elevates best practices and promising areas of racial equity among field-facing organizations. Some of the most recurring areas which emerged during our interview series are included below.

## Intentional Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement of students, teachers, and community members, appears correlated with organizations that are further along in their racial equity journey. Civic learning and educational equity organizations that took intentional steps to create structures of feedback, input, and recommendations for their stakeholders, in many instances, contained a stronger overall set of practices, metrics, and culture for building racial equity. The following quotes capture some of the themes which arose on the topic of intentionally engaging stakeholders:

*“We created an advisory board, comprised of our alums, to provide recommendations directly to the CEO. It’s a way for them to be more present, visible and actively involved. It also lets us call on the advisory board for input and to get recommendations”*

*“Our student agenda is our North Star. It’s created by students and represents the opportunity to make a new normal...to make a youth- and equity-centered vision of education systems”.*

## Equity focus in guiding documents

Articulating a clear emphasis on racial equity in at least one guiding document - such as a mission statement, organizational values, or theory of change - is a practice adopted by many of the organizations that reported making tangible progress on their racial equity journeys. While the process of fostering deliberation and consensus-building around the norms and language for centering racial equity is not an easy one, it also brings the benefit of indicating a definite stance from the organization to staff, board, and stakeholders. It also provides a reference point that can help outline and define organizational commitment to centering racial equity in civic learning and educational equity in the ethos of the organization -- in everyday moments such as launching and concluding projects, reflection points for team retreats, and strategies for communicating the values of the organization.



Notably, the events of summer 2020, including but not limited to: the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the associated protests generated by those incidents, both accelerated the urgency and provided stronger justification for civic learning and educational equity organizations to clarify their commitment to racial equity.

This pattern indicates something of a best practice in itself: organizations which center racial equity often utilize current events and social movements as a learning opportunity and touchstone against which organizations in the civic learning and educational equity field can further define and articulate the work they intend to do in the world.

The quotes below encapsulate some of the themes which arose on the subject of emphasizing racial equity in guiding organizational documents:

*‘Our values, vision, and theory of change have all been updated in the past 1.5 years and explicitly call out racial equity...’*

*‘We started and began in the fall of 2019 when the strategic plan was being created. The work continued and was finalized into a 5 year strategic plan in Spring 2020. It accelerated [our] work. On a journey before, but the protests allowed individuals within the organization to speak more openly about injustices within the organization and speak more critically about aspects of the organization through a racial justice lens’.*



## Common Challenges

Restructuring an organization to prioritize racial equity is profoundly meaningful and important work; however, it is not without its challenges. The following section of this brief will explore three of the recurring obstacles some of the field's premiere civics-oriented organizations faced while endeavoring to enhance the extent to which they provide high-quality civic learning experiences in an equitable manner.

The purpose of this exploration is, in part, to highlight areas of consideration that other organizations might take into account as they design their own racial equity strategies.

### Operationalizing Racial Equity Within the Organization

While all of the participating organizations expressed a strong commitment to racial equity, a recurring challenge many of them identified was operationalizing it. Several of the organizations we interviewed reported that they were in the process of exploring strategies to ensure racial equity was codified explicitly in core documents (ex. mission statement, strategic plan, hiring policies) in order to move from an ethos of equity to an ecosystem marked by it.

In the addition to questions of implementation, questions of defining and delimiting the scope of what precisely constitutes racial equity also emerged.

*'The challenge is making [racial equity] part of the institutional muscle. The will and commitment are there, but operationalizing it is different.'*

*'It's necessary that [racial equity] is fully woven into the organization and interactions among stakeholders.'*

*'The commitment is there 100%, but it's a work in progress.'*

*'The summer of 2020 (presented an opportunity) to create a normal...to define what's the agenda for education'.*





In the absence of comprehensive systems or dedicated staff members equipped to address racial equity issues, several organizations noted the emergence of informal “champions” of the work—individuals or ad hoc groups who would assume responsibility for racial equity efforts in addition to their formal roles. While these “champions” helped their organizations develop temporary solutions to immediate issues, their effectiveness was limited by capacity. Because such structures often arose to address immediate or emergent issues, they remained tactical in nature, rather than strategic.

### Recommendations and Reported Responses

- Incorporating equity measures into a strategic plan increases accountability and follow through
- Co-creating a shared definition and set of goals (informed by input from stakeholders at various levels) for racial equity.
- Hiring staff members specifically tasked with advancing racial equity goals. Examples include: Director of Inclusion and Diversity, DEIBJ Specialist, DEI Manager, and DEI Coordinator.
- Establishing partnerships with external organizations (or hiring consultants) to facilitate the evaluation and implementation of organizational changes

### External Resistance to an Explicit Focus on Racial Equity

Several of the participating organizations shared that they have had to tread a fine line between standing firmly behind their values and managing relationships with funders and legislative bodies. While this is unsurprising, given the increasingly polarized historical moment our nation is navigating, the extent to which the perception of partiality or partisanship has become a factor in leaders’ strategic thinking is a matter of significant concern.

*“America has shifted in a direction that is increasingly antagonistic to [our organization’s] goals; the biggest challenge is remaining nonpartisan and reflecting [our] commitment to racial equity while folks are saying that caring about racial equity is a partisan issue.”*

*“The resistance tends to happen externally. It happens in various forms, from leaders/influencers/partners being reluctant to explicitly center racial equity in systems/policy work, to funders who fail to walk the talk on supporting organizations led/driven by people of color.”*



Because honest conversations about racial equity and racial justice are believed by some to be in close proximity to Critical Race Theory, many of the organizations we interviewed expressed anxieties about being labeled as politically radical for promoting values and practices that they view as benign and ethically responsible.

Such a categorization could potentially result in a maelstrom of negative press, the loss of financial support from current and prospective donors, or restricted access to students and staff in states with more stringent regulations for educational programming. Rather than retreating or compromising on their values, all of the participants for whom this was a concern set their focus on selecting the proper phrasing and framing to describe their work, as well as adopting a slower, more deliberate approach to designing and delivering public-facing messaging and programming.

The realities of external resistance to an explicit focus on racial equity, given the factors named above, is a critically important issue that necessitates an ongoing - rather than one-time or episodic - examination of an organization's messaging, values, and operational context.

Conducting continuous examination can facilitate continual improvement in embedding racial equity within the organization, and ultimately help organizations determine how to revise, or where needed devise, a strategic plan and accompanying practices that center racial equity.

### Recommendations and Reported Responses:

- Establishing a firm, organization-wide understanding that the term, “nonpartisan” does not necessarily mean apolitical. All education, especially civics, is inherently political work, and therefore, organizations will (at times) need to stand behind their values.
- Coordinating core messaging to stakeholders about organizational values, ensuring that all executive leaders and managers are expressing similar sentiments about racial equity.
- Ensuring there are clear systems for public-facing communication to put forth coherent and brand-aligned messaging.
- Adopting a statement of values and referring to it regularly.
- Examining local legal policies to understand if limitations exist that impact programming.

## Representation and Equity Commitments in Governance Structures

Given that the primary function of a governance board is to provide oversight by shaping and evaluating policies, the ultimate success of an organization's racial equity efforts depends upon a board that is committed to equity oriented institutional practices and representative of its stakeholders.

Several of the participants in this interview series noted that board diversity/investment was one of their primary focus areas; the makeup did not reflect the diversity of the populations they served. Moreover, in some cases, participants reported that board members were at times slow to embrace some of the proposed shifts in organizational culture and practices.

*"It is a common occurrence in this sector that a Board can reinforce the same hierarchies that the organization is trying to dismantle."*

A broad range of approaches were adopted to address this area of concern.

- For a majority of the organizations interviewed, the first step was simply recruiting more diverse board members—with one group taking the additional step of establishing a set of concrete goals related to the makeup of their board.
- It is worth noting that while *racial* diversity was a primary factor, several of the participants described an equal commitment to generational diversity (recruiting alumni to serve as board members) and diversity of ideas (intentionally seeking candidates with a variety of strong political affinities).
- In addition to attempts to change the composition of their boards, other organizations described strategies such as: offering diversity training to board members, creating more opportunities for board members and stakeholders to interact with one another, and refreshing board governance handbooks and bylaws.



## Recommendations and Reported Responses:

- Ensuring that there is diversity within the board of directors.
- Examining board bylaws and making amendments to include the addition or removal of board members.
- Engaging in targeted board member recruitment efforts.
- Creating board pipelines that focus on community members whose experiences and identity are reflective of the constituents the organizations serves.



## Appendix

Over the course of our interview series, we had the opportunity to speak with Each One, Teach One—a Black-led and fully African diasporic staffed grassroots civic institution doing groundbreaking work in Germany. Our findings from that interview are included in this section in order to contextualize the opportunities and challenges we encounter in the United States and to underscore some of the commonalities groups face while advancing equitable civic learning.

Each One, Teach One (EOTO) was founded with the mission of empowering young black people in Berlin. One of the organization’s core beliefs is that civic learning is a core part of any social movement, and as such it began as a neighborhood afternoon care program, offering Black youth homework help, safe spaces for facilitated discussions, and project-based learning opportunities. As the organization matured and broadened its fields of expertise, it expanded its operations to include community educational work, counseling, and research. Of particular note is EOTO’s collection of data on the experiences Black Africans in Germany. Due to conflicting perspectives on the ethics of using the German term for race (rasse), the nation does not explicitly collect racial statistical data, instead using migration status and migration experience as informal ethnic markers. Given that the absence of racial data makes it virtually impossible to speak quantitatively about the impact of public policy on specific subsections of a population, EOTO carried out the nation’s first census that explicitly inquired about racial positionality of Black people and people of African descent.

In the United States, the uprisings for racial justice during the summer of 2020 generated a greater urgency around the importance of taking collective action to address racial disparities across a broad spectrum of fields. In Germany, the ripple effects of the uprisings for justice created a space for the nation to engage in some of its first true reflections on the role of racial disparity in public life. As a result, Each One, Teach One reported a marked increase in the number of requests they received for support, press interviews, consulting, and conference presentations. Public interest in their work had risen so significantly that it became necessary for them to restructure their work to manage the quantity of requests they were receiving. EOTO leveraged the momentum surrounding racial equity to bring core topics pertaining to race into the public agenda. Along with other like-minded organizations, they seized the opportunity to shape the national conversation about race, steering it away from questioning whether racial disparity existed to discussing the implications of its manifestations and actionable steps to address them.



## Appendix

While many of the organizations that participated in this interview series reported that they were striving to assemble a staff that better represents the populations they serve, Each One, Teach One is fully representative of its target audience—it is composed of an entirely Black staff and contracts work with primarily Black or BIPOC freelancers. In order to balance representation with diversity, the organization applies an intersectional lens to their hiring practices, recruiting and hiring staff members across a spectrum that reflects the lived experience of Black Germans—Black LGBTQIA+ communities, recently immigrated Black Germans, Black Germans who do not speak the national language, and more.

EOTO has been the subject of some criticism because of its staffing model, with a few claims that is is “racist” for focusing on hiring Black staff members; however, the organization (one of the nation’s largest Black employers) maintains that is essential to defend the spaces they are creating for themselves, as well as the spaces they are facilitating. This entails decentering whiteness in order to center Blackness.

While discussing their staffing model, EOTO also commented that traditional notions of “professionalism” have effectively excluded otherwise talented applicants from the job market. Discussing the distinctions between bona fide job requirements and the preferences and traditions which are often encrusted around those requirements, but not essential to performing them is difficult parse but worth delineating with care, curiosity, and precision, in order to create a genuinely inclusive team environment. EOTO described how they had encountered many people (particularly Black people) who would not have been offered a position if they had applied for a similar position within another organization that was not Black-run.

Two other participants in this interview series shared similar sentiments and reported that while evaluating candidates, they would remove key identifying factors from their resumes and focus instead on performance tasks and other means of evaluating how candidates could advance the work that the organization was doing. Indeed, a core component of racially equitable hiring is balancing consideration of one’s formal job qualifications and credentials with some of the less quantifiable qualities they can bring to the organization.



## Appendix

Similar to our findings with multiple participating organizations in the United States, EOTO shared that in order to ensure continued funding to support its operations, there is a constant need to consider carefully the framing and language they used in public facing documents and presentations. As an organization that is fully government funded, they bear the added responsibilities of both helping officials understand the scope and scale of the racial equity work they are doing and presenting the information in a manner that is simultaneously honest and generally palatable. EOTO noted further that state funding in many ways means state control—it is difficult to overtly confront and challenge institutional violence while also receiving funding from that same institution.

## Methodology

The process for creating this Racial Equity Learning Guide began with a series of interviews with questions devised by and interviews conducted by the Equity in Civics Racial Equity Working Group. The organizations represented in this Working Group are Democracy Prep, Generation Citizen, and Mikva Challenge. The interviewers were Rashid Duroseau of Democracy Prep, Dylan Morrissey of Generation Citizen, and Andrew Wilkes of Generation Citizen. The organizations that were interviewed (“participants”) were Junior State of America, Democracy Prep, the Center for Civic Education, iCivics, Our Turn, Student Voice, Generation Citizen, and Each One, Teach One.

Participant organizations were each given the opportunity to identify the best person or people to be interviewed. The roles represented amongst these participants encapsulated governance, strategic direction, and project oversight perspectives. The questions posed were divided into five content areas: mission and core documents, internal organizational practices, school culture and systems, influence of larger movements and current events, and process of transformation. The interviewees received these content areas in advance, then participated in 60 minute interviews conducted over Zoom. Any questions not discussed in the Zoom interview were sent by email afterward to give each participant an opportunity to respond to the full slate of questions. While interviewee names and positions were made anonymous in order to encourage candid and open conversations, detailed notes were taken to capture key learnings and insights. These findings were then analyzed in order to inform the best practices and common challenges shared in this guide.



## Areas for Further Research

The Racial Equity Interview Series raised a number of important questions that landed outside the scope and timeline of this project. In particular, after the majority of interviews were completed, the Supreme Court released a number of notable decisions, including but not limited to: Miranda rights, reproductive justice, and the quality of the environment.

The Equity in Civics Steering Committee consequently grappled with maintaining its commitments to nonpartisanship at a time when the equity landscape is shifting around these organizations' firmly planted stake in the ground.

The civics learning field would be served well by further study into how organizations should navigate equity and nonpartisanship. Furthermore, while this Working Group focused specifically on racial equity, the far-reaching results of recent Supreme Court decisions will directly, and unequally, impact the lives of students with whom civic education organizations work. We anticipate that further research will be needed to explore how the experience of civic power or oppression are shaped by dimensions of identity such as gender, class, and sexual orientation, as well as the ways in which civic learning organizations can play a supportive role.



