

## Background & Study Overview

In the city of Chicago, children often live under very stressful conditions starting at a young age, confronted with issues stemming from poverty and violence. Under such conditions, it is understandable that these children grow up with very little trust in or awareness of their neighborhood and community. Citizens Now is a 12-week after-school program conceived and implemented by the Institute for Community Empowerment (ICE) to teach 5th and 6th graders at Chicago's Public Schools the skills of citizenship and the importance of participating and working with others in our democracy.

From January through May 2015, ICE carried out a pilot intervention of the newly designed Citizens Now program at Newton Bateman Elementary School located in Irving Park. As a component of the pilot, ICE conducted an assessment to explore the effects of the program on students' knowledge of their community, attitudes towards community engagement, and communication with adults and friends about community issues.

For 27 years, ICE has taught Chicago residents the skills of community organizing to ensure that they can participate fully in addressing the issues that matter most in their communities and their lives. ICE believes that all residents in a democracy, starting with our youngest members, have the capability and the right to **Initiate** change, **Combat** injustice, and **Empower** themselves and their communities.

## Methods

An 18-item, paper-based questionnaire was administered to 10 students from grade five and six (average age 11.07 years). Questions were adapted from the Civic Engagement Scale.<sup>1</sup> McNemar's chi-square test and paired-sample t-tests were used to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes, and communication between the first and final days of the program. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with Citizens Now participants, and four in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted, involving the program facilitators (2), the assistant school principal, and a community leader who served as guest speaker. FGDs and IDIs were recorded and transcribed and thematic analysis was performed. Structured participant observation was conducted by facilitators at 24 sessions.

## Quantitative Findings

### Communication and Knowledge

Quantitative analysis showed strong evidence of improvement in participants' communication with peers about their community ( $p < 0.01$ ) (Table I). Results also demonstrated very strong evidence of improvement in participants' knowledge of the community in which their school is located ( $p < 0.01$ ). No improvement was seen in participants' knowledge of the structure of government (local versus federal) or of the differences between public and private spaces. Baseline knowledge of the age to vote was high (90% correct at pre).

**Table I: Pre/post changes in participants' communication and knowledge (questionnaires completed by 10 participants)**

Communication		Pre	Post	
Question		% Correct	% Correct	p value
I have talked about my community with an <b>adult</b> in the past two months.		50%	70%	0.48
I have talked about my community with a <b>friend</b> in the past two months.		20%	80%	0.01
Knowledge		Pre	Post	
Question		% Correct	% Correct	p value
Bateman School is in Irving Park.		20%	100%	0.005
The government of the United States of America is a dictatorship.		30%	40%	0.56
Each community in Chicago elects a local Alderman.		30%	30%	1.00
Citizens can vote when they are 18 years old.		90%	100%	0.31
McDonald's is a public space.		10%	20%	0.32

**Abbreviations:** Pre=pre-questionnaire; Post=post-questionnaire

**Notes:** Unadjusted estimates are presented. Differences assessed via McNemar's chi-square test, accounting for the paired nature of the data.

**p value key:**  $p \leq 0.05$ =weak evidence,  $p \leq 0.01$ =strong evidence, and  $p \leq 0.001$ =very strong evidence of change between pre- and post-questionnaire responses

### Attitudes

Strong evidence of a change in participants' attitudes about being informed on community issues was observed ( $p < 0.01$ ) (Table II). Findings further demonstrate evidence of improvement in participants' willingness to help members of their communities ( $p < 0.05$ ) and participants' self-esteem ( $p < 0.05$ ). Participants showed high sense of personal responsibility to improve and make a difference in their community at both pre and post.

**Table II: Pre/post changes in participants' attitudes (questionnaires completed by 10 participants)**

Attitudes		Pre		Post		
Question (desired response for all questions = 1, "strongly agree")		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p value
I participate in conversations that bring up issues in my community.		2.20	0.79	2.00	1.15	0.68
I <b>help members of my community</b> .		2.10	0.57	1.60	1.2	0.05
I feel responsible for my community.		1.75	0.89	1.50	0.53	0.35
I believe that I should make a difference in my community.		1.50	0.85	1.50	0.71	1.00
I am committed to improving my community.		1.40	0.52	1.50	0.71	0.67
I <b>believe that all citizens have a responsibility to be a part of their community</b>		1.90	0.74	1.40	0.7	0.05
I <b>believe that is important to know about community issues</b> .		2.10	0.99	1.20	0.42	0.01
When working with others, I make positive changes in my community.		1.63	0.74	1.50	0.53	0.59
I have an older person in my life that I can go to for advice.		1.75	0.89	1.40	0.52	0.28
I <b>feel good about who I am</b> .		1.67	0.5	1.22	0.44	0.04
I can reach my goals in life.		1.30	0.48	1.40	0.52	0.59

**Abbreviations:** Pre=pre-questionnaire; Post=post-questionnaire; SD=standard deviation.

**Notes:** Unadjusted estimates are presented. Mean scores assessed on a four-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=disagree; and 4=strongly disagree). Differences in means assessed via a paired sample t-test.

**p value key:**  $p \leq 0.05$ =weak evidence,  $p \leq 0.01$ =strong evidence, and  $p \leq 0.001$ =very strong evidence of change between pre- and post-questionnaire responses

## Qualitative Findings

Four main themes arose during FGDs, IDIs, and observation: self-efficacy, communication, leadership and school performance, and commitment to community engagement. In addition, study participants made several suggestions for future program implementation.

### Self-efficacy

Participants showed increased self-efficacy to improve their community, express their opinions, and work as team. In particular, participants expressed the desire to keep their community clean, especially related to picking up trash.

*"So I used to look around and maybe I would see a piece of trash and pick it up. Now, I think of the problem and the causes of the problem... This helps us find solutions" - Participant*

The curriculum content, program structure, and support from the school administration were highlighted as key components central to building participants' self-efficacy.

### Communication

Participants felt more comfortable talking about their community and discussing what they were learning in Citizens Now with family members, teachers, and peers.

*"I talked with my mom about voting. My mom didn't know how old you had to be and I told her you have to be 18 years old. She said, 'Oh!'" - Participant*

Participants believed that Citizens Now helped them improve their relationships with their parents and siblings.

*"The first sessions, we didn't get homework, but we had short activities to take home and ask your parents about things, like how they've been resilient in their lives and how young people can improve their community. This helped us be more connected with our parents and communicate more with them." - Participant*

### Leadership and School Performance

Participants valued the program's emphasis on leadership, which they viewed as an important factor in their decision to join the program and stay in the program.

*"This program is good because it teaches you how to be a good leader and how to speak up. In the future, when you are trying to solve something with a team, you can show how you actually feel without being judged by others. Maybe you can even get help from others." - Participant*

Participants felt that the program presented and explained difficult topics and concepts in an easy to understand way, which helped them when they were learning about similar topics and concepts in school (e.g. learning about democracy in social studies class).

### Community Engagement

Participants expressed increased understanding of what it means to be an engaged community participant and how the local government can support its community members.

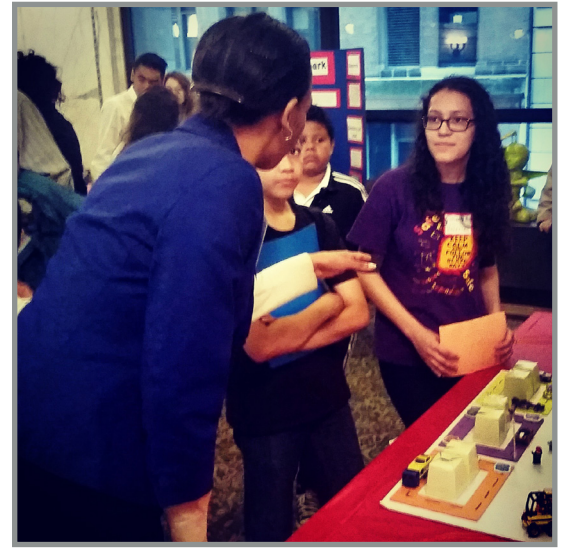
*"At Horner Park, there is a basketball court. We were thinking it would be fun to play there, but there are many teenagers there. You barely see kids our age play basketball there. We think it would be a good idea to talk with our Alderman to build another court at the park that is just for younger kids." - Participant*

### Suggestions for Future Program Implementation

Study participants recommended introducing more activities-based games that require participants to move around. Additionally, participants suggested adding more activities that allow participants to spend time in their community, outside of the classroom. Study participants suggested making the program available to more children and more schools.

*"Ideally, in my dream, the Citizens Now program would be available for every student." - Assistant Principal Efrain Martinez, Newton Bateman Elementary School*

Citizens Now facilitators cited the need for a more structured, in-person training.



*Citizens Now participants explain their award-winning research to a judge at the Mikva Challenge's Action Civics Showcase*

## Conclusions

This pilot study offers encouraging evidence that Citizens Now presents a promising and innovative approach towards improving participant's knowledge, attitudes, self-reported behaviors, and communication around community engagement in the short-term. Given the nature of the study as an evaluation of a pilot program, pre/post questionnaire results were based on a small sample size, which limited our ability to carry out sub-analyses (e.g. of gender differences in outcomes), calculate adjusted effects, or generalize findings beyond the Citizens Now classroom. Further evaluation should be conducted to assess the effects of Citizens Now in a larger sample of participants, over a longer time period, and, where possible, more rigorously investigating changes in behaviors. This study suggest that the Citizens Now program could be effectively incorporated into larger efforts to raise students' awareness of the value of community engagement and enhance their own community involvement across Chicago public schools.

## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Newton Bateman Elementary School and Assistant Principal Efrain Martinez for making this pilot a possibility for their students. ICE would like to acknowledge the Mikva Challenge for the advice and support during the program development, and for including the Citizens Now students at the Action Civics Showcase.