BRIEFING NOTE

Developing a Lifelong Civic Learning Pathway for Canada

Civic Education Working Group · Prepared by the co-leads (Odette, Dani, Umair) · November 2026

Purpose. This note summarizes what we heard from the working group on October 14, and sets out the proposal the co-leads will present to the co-leads of the other working groups on November 3 and bring to the gathering in Winnipeg on November 10. Any additional comments/feedback are welcome.

1. What we heard: October 14 working group session

Summary:

Both breakout rooms favoured a **shared national civic learning framework or pathway** (Option B), built on mapping who does what (Option A), which was described as something that "has to happen regardless." One room also saw value in community outreach pilots (Option C), noting they need better coordination, and suggested combining C with A while working toward B. Across both rooms, participants wanted the work tied clearly to the urgency of the current democratic moment and focused on practical action that can be achieved in the near term.

Key discussion items

1. **Name the urgency**
   - Connect civic education explicitly to the current democratic crisis, and say what needs to happen.
   - One idea was a scorecard to make the urgency visible.
   - The test: what could we work on together that makes people in Winnipeg want to sign up?
2. **A shared framework that feeds into curricula**
   - A unifying framework that defines what learners need, starting early and taking young Canadians through what it means to be a citizen.
   - The framework should start from the question "**what would a dream curriculum look like?**"
   - It should link the crisis to real classroom issues, such as navigating polarization and mental health.
   - No one currently leads national advocacy on civic education. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) is a possible venue.
   - A model to borrow: $10-a-day childcare. Civil society branded it, built a national framework that provinces could adopt, and took it to the federal government for funding.
3. **Connect the field**
   - National organizations know each other, but regional and local civic educators are much less visible.
   - Election management bodies also do civic education and should be included.
   - Collaboration should draw on each organization’s particular strengths, pair organizations with complementary skills, and reflect regional diversity.
   - The coalition needs a clear membership, mandate and common goals.
   - Funding is a gap. Funders wanted a sector map but didn’t want to pay for it. Government, including election management bodies, may be a more realistic funder.

4. **Shared measures**
    - A mapping of civic skills and knowledge, and a common set of indicators: "to fix something, we need similar metrics to measure it."
5. **Focus on doing**
    - Practical collaboration ideas included an accelerator to support other organizations, a "digital public square" for engaging people online, joint digital literacy projects (one example was a game on health misinformation, built with a digital literacy partner), microgrants and shared public narratives.

Questions to explore

- What specific problem (re civic education) are we solving, and which part of the overall urgency on democratic backsliding does it address?
- How are we defining democracy? What should civic education include? Suggestions included democratic institutions and processes; the foundational principles of Canadian democracy; and the mindsets needed for active citizenship, including how to address apathy, desensitization, fear and hopelessness.
- What happens after Grade 12? How do we reach adults?
- What can we realistically achieve in the next year compared with the longer term?
- What does reach look like: who is in the room, and who isn't?
- What are organizations already doing, and how do they complement each other?
- What role should the coalition play in influencing curricula, including whether to engage in advocacy?
- Is the focus civic education specifically, or democracy between elections more broadly?

Evidence raised

- Many young people don't know what democracy means.
- A worrying share of Canadians think other forms of government would be better.

2. Our proposal: a lifelong civic learning pathway

Context

Education is essential to advancing and protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It should also be understood as a key line of defence against anti-democratic values, practices and behaviours.

This work is urgent. Participants in the working group stressed that democratic norms and institutions are under growing pressure, and that there are signs many Canadians, particularly young people, are uncertain about what democracy means and why it matters. In this context, Canadians need opportunities throughout their lives to develop the **knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours** necessary to exercise, protect and strengthen democratic rights and freedoms. This learning takes place through both formal and informal education.

The central question emerging from the survey findings is: **What should a civic education coalition coordinate to strengthen civic education (encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours) across Canada?**

Proposed response

The working group proposes developing a nonpartisan, lifelong civic learning pathway that identifies the democratic knowledge, skills and competencies Canadians need at different stages of life to participate meaningfully in a culture of democracy.

The pathway would establish a shared reference framework for what effective civic education could look like, from childhood through adulthood, and help identify how existing programs contribute to these learning objectives.

Why is this needed?

While provinces and territories have important foundations in place, civic education in Canada remains:

- **Fragmented:** approaches vary considerably across provinces and territories.
- **Limited in scope:** formal civic education largely ends with secondary school, with few pathways for adults, newcomers or informal learning.
- **Without a shared framework:** there is no common understanding – at a national level - of the democratic knowledge, skills and competencies Canadians should acquire throughout their lives.
- **Difficult to assess:** civic knowledge and competencies are not systematically measured through provincial assessments; unlike reading and math.

What would the pathway achieve?

- The pathway would provide organizations with a common reference point.
- **Inform decision-makers by:**
  - providing an evidence-based picture of what Canadians need to learn, from kindergarten to Grade 12 and into adulthood, and where current curricula and adult learning opportunities fall short;
  - supporting the case for continued public investment in civic education;
  - making the case for democratic citizenship as a theme that runs throughout K–12 and adult learning, in the same way that technology now does.
- **Strengthen existing programs:**
  - help civic education organizations, educators, libraries and community groups see where their work fits along the pathway and avoid duplication;
  - encourage collaboration.
- **Guide funders:** help funders direct their investment where it is most needed and support initiatives that complement each other.
- **Establish clear success measures:** develop clear indicators of civic knowledge and skills.

Note:

While this process asked us to consider what could be accomplished in the coming year, the co-leads have taken an approach that is both bold and realistic, recognizing that one year of work alone is unlikely to produce lasting impact. We are therefore proposing a three-year path, with each year building on the last toward meaningful change in civic education across Canada

Proposed three-year development plan

	Year 1: Develop the pathway	Year 2: Test and improve	Year 3: Embed and scale
Outputs	• Landscape map of who does what, for whom and where • Draft pathway and list of competencies, with an accompanying shortlist of evaluation indicators • Preliminary assessment of which knowledge and skills current programs cover, and where the gaps are	• Publish Pathway 1.0 • Test pilots in 2–3 settings, e.g. a school board using the pathway to plan teaching, or community organizations adapting a program to target specific competencies • Indicators tested and refined in the pilots, and a baseline measurement taken	• Release Pathway 2.0 • Launch a professional development module for educators, as a first step toward accreditation • Report on the "state of civic learning" using the indicators confirmed in Year 2 • A case to provincial ministries for including civic knowledge and skills in provincial assessments, drawing on the pilot results and baseline data
Outcomes	• A shared draft definition of the democratic knowledge, skills and attitudes Canadians need • A clear picture of who is doing what, and which competencies are covered or missing • A civic education coalition with an agreed membership and mandate	• Pathway endorsed by coalition members and partners • Evidence of early uptake, with programs redesigned using the pathway • Decision-makers made aware of the pathway • Funders begin using it to shape what they fund	• At least one province, territory or school board formally uses the pathway in a curriculum review • At least one school board uses the indicators in its own classroom or board-level assessment • More coordinated funding

Dependencies: the plan requires a lead organization or steering committee, and funding, particularly for a coordinator in Year 1.

Long-term aspiration

Beyond Year 3, the ambition would be to contribute to:

- more consistent civic learning opportunities across Canada;
- democratic citizenship embedded throughout K–12 education, and into adult learning;
- civic knowledge and skills reflected in provincial assessments;
- recognized professional development and, potentially, accreditation for educators in democratic citizenship;
- measurable improvements in Canadians' democratic knowledge, skills and participation.

Key considerations and next steps

- **Start with the framework, not a new program.** Option B, a nonpartisan framework of civic competencies mapped against different life stages and existing programs, offers a practical and achievable Year 1 deliverable.
- **Consider educators as a key audience.** The framework could ultimately support educators in understanding, developing and assessing civic competencies, building toward the professional development and accreditation goals described above.
- **Research longer-term models.** Explore what a longer-term development pathway could look like beyond Year 3.

References

Council of Europe (2018). *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*, Volumes 1–3. coe.int

Council of Europe (2010). *Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education*, Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 of the Committee of Ministers. coe.int