

# TRUTH DECAY

## MEDIA USE AND LITERACY IN SCHOOLS

### CIVIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE ERA OF TRUTH DECAY

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#### DEFINING CIVIC DEVELOPMENT

Public schools in the United States play a key role in preparing students not only for college and careers, but also for civic life. Indeed, the founders of the U.S. system of public education argued that the primary mission of public schools was to develop educated citizens who would uphold the nation's democratic values,<sup>1</sup> and scholars continue to refer to the system as a “guardian of democracy.”<sup>2</sup> Schools can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to contribute to their communities and their country as adults. This set of attributes can be characterized as civic development. The need to support students' civic development is particularly important in the face of recent results from the Nation's Report Card that documented no improvements between 2014 and 2018 in students' civic scores and declines in their achievement in U.S. history and geography.<sup>3</sup>

**Civic knowledge:** an understanding of government structures, government processes, and relevant social studies knowledge and concepts, along with U.S. and global history and the ways that history affects today's government and society

**Civic skills:** abilities that allow students to engage in democratic processes in an active and informed way, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration

**Civic dispositions:** attitudes that are important in a democracy, such as a sense of civic duty and concern for the welfare of other people as well as for one's country and community<sup>4</sup>

**M**edia literacy is one means through which schools can support students' civic development and engagement.<sup>5</sup> Although definitions of *media literacy* vary, the definition provided by the National Association for Media Literacy Education encompasses the key set of competencies that most school-based approaches emphasize: “Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication.”<sup>6</sup>

Assessments of students' media literacy capabilities have shown that large majorities of this population lack the knowledge and skills needed to interpret media accurately; this work also has identified disparities by school-level socioeconomic status and urbanicity.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the field of media literacy education is characterized by a lack of clear guidance regarding curriculum and instruction to support the development of these competencies.<sup>8</sup> Students' use (and misuse) of social media creates another set of challenges for educators.<sup>9</sup>

Understanding how educators address and prioritize media literacy and the appropriate use of social media is especially important in the wake of widespread school closures in spring 2020 because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. During these closures, many students have been receiving instruction online—and others have received no instruction at all. Students are thus likely to have extra time on their hands to engage with media, which means that they might benefit from guidance on appropriate media use. It is also essential that students have the media

# TRUTH DECAY

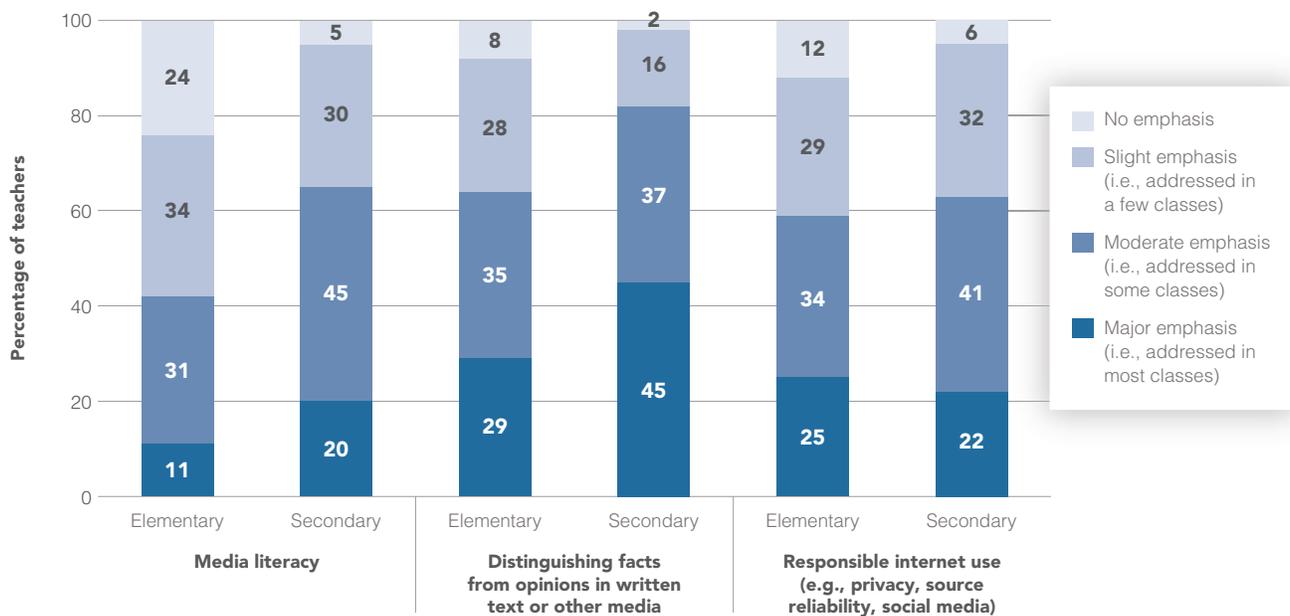
literacy competencies that they will need to determine what information sources are credible and to identify disinformation in times of heightened anxiety like the COVID-19 crisis.

This Data Note examines social studies teachers' reports regarding how they and their schools promote media literacy and the appropriate use of media by students. It also summarizes teachers' perceptions of challenges associated with media literacy and use. These findings are drawn from responses of social studies teachers to a nationally representative survey administered to members of RAND's American Teacher Panel in fall 2019. We present all results separately for elementary and secondary teachers because the typical contexts in which they work are quite different, as are the challenges associated with such factors as social media use. For more information about our methods and analysis, see the "About this Series" section on p.8.

## Roughly two-thirds of secondary social studies teachers reported at least moderate emphasis on media literacy in their classrooms, compared with fewer than half of elementary teachers.

Most social studies teachers indicated at least some emphasis on media literacy in their classrooms, but secondary teachers reported emphasizing media literacy and distinguishing facts from opinions to a greater extent than did elementary teachers (Figure 1). However, reported emphasis on responsible internet use was similar across these groups. It is noteworthy that more than eight in ten secondary teachers reported a moderate or major emphasis on distinguishing facts from opinions, which is a key media literacy competency, in their social studies classes.

**FIGURE 1** Weighted percentages of elementary and secondary social studies teachers reporting emphasis in their classrooms on topics related to media literacy and use



NOTE: The first and third sets of bars in this figure are based on the following survey item: *How much emphasis have you placed or do you anticipate placing on each of the following activities or approaches in your classroom this school year (2019–2020)?* The second set of bars is from a similar question, but it referred to "topics" rather than "activities or approaches." Both items asked about several civic education activities and approaches or topics; we only include ones related to media literacy and use in this report. Bars might not sum to 100 because of rounding.

## Majorities of teachers reported that, beyond their own classrooms, their schools emphasized media literacy and responsible internet use to at least a moderate extent.

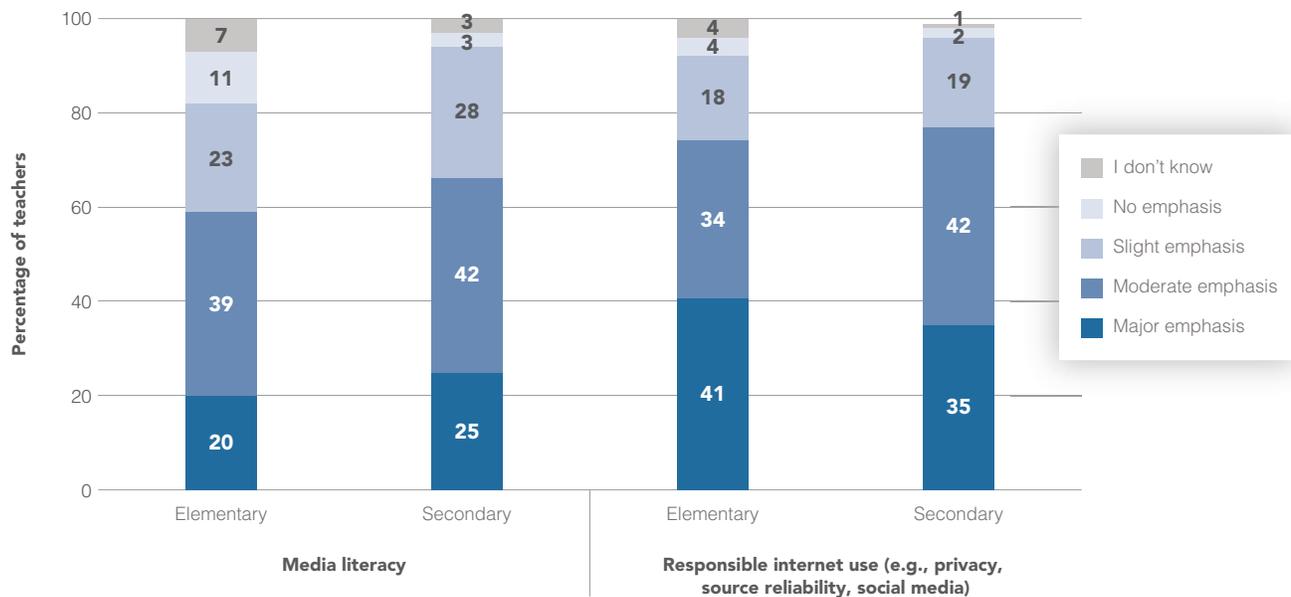
We asked teachers about the extent to which their school emphasized media literacy and responsible internet use beyond what these teachers did in their own classrooms (Figure 2). Majorities of both elementary and secondary teachers indicated at least a moderate school-level emphasis, which is consistent with a need that experts have identified to promote media literacy both in and outside the classroom.<sup>11</sup>

## Majorities of elementary and secondary teachers expressed the belief that schools should provide instruction on responsible social media use.

We shared several statements with teachers regarding media use and asked them to indicate how close, on a four-point scale, each statement came to their own views. Table 1 shows the percentages of elementary and secondary teachers who indicated that statements related to media use came “somewhat close” or “very close” to their own views.

Not surprisingly, secondary teachers placed greater priority on students’ awareness of current events; in fact, 39 percent of elementary teachers said the second statement in Table 1 was “not close at all” to their views,

**FIGURE 2** Weighted percentages of elementary and secondary social studies teachers reporting schoolwide emphasis on topics related to media literacy and use



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey item: *To your knowledge, how much emphasis is your school placing on each of the following activities and approaches related to students’ civic development this school year (2019–2020), apart from how you address civic development in your classroom?* Bars might not sum to 100 because of rounding.

compared with only 6 percent of secondary teachers. That said, more than nine in ten teachers from both groups across grade levels indicated that the statement, “Students should receive instruction in school on responsible use of social media,” came either somewhat or very close to their views. Large majorities also endorsed the statement about critically evaluating information for credibility and bias.

## Most secondary teachers reported that students made unfounded claims and shared hateful social media posts in the most recent month.

Again, secondary teachers reported challenges at higher frequencies than elementary teachers. Across all grade levels, the most commonly reported challenge was “students have made unfounded claims in class based on unreliable media sources” followed by “students shared hateful posts on social media” (Figure 3). It is likely that teachers have underreported the frequency of hateful social media posts; students generally do not share their social media activity with teachers. Beyond grade-level differences, we did not observe substantial subgroup differences.

## Most social studies teachers reported problems stemming from students’ media use.

Among our respondents, 79 percent of elementary teachers and 90 percent of secondary teachers reported unhealthy amounts of media use as a problem, with 37 percent and 60 percent, respectively, describing it as a major problem. Among secondary teachers, large majorities also indicated problems related to privacy, relationships, and poor treatment of others online. And nearly 80 percent described “limited ability to evaluate the credibility of online information” as a moderate or major problem. These percentages were lower in elementary schools, but concern about unhealthy media use was still widespread among that group (Figure 4).

## What should you make of these data?

Teachers across the United States, at all grade levels and in all types of schools, are addressing students’ media literacy and use. Elementary and secondary teachers reported different levels of emphasis on these skills, which is not surprising given the differences in media exposure and developmental levels of the students they teach. The strong commitment to media education, especially the near-universal support that teachers express for social media instruction in school, is noteworthy and suggests that educators view themselves and their schools as crucial for supporting students’ media-related competencies.

**TABLE 1** Weighted percentages of teachers reporting that statements came somewhat or very close to their own views

	Elementary Teachers	Secondary Teachers
Students must learn to critically evaluate information for credibility and bias—it’s a crucial citizenship skill	82	92
I make it clear to students that I expect them to read the news and stay informed about current events	24	68
Students should receive instruction in school on responsible use of social media	93	94

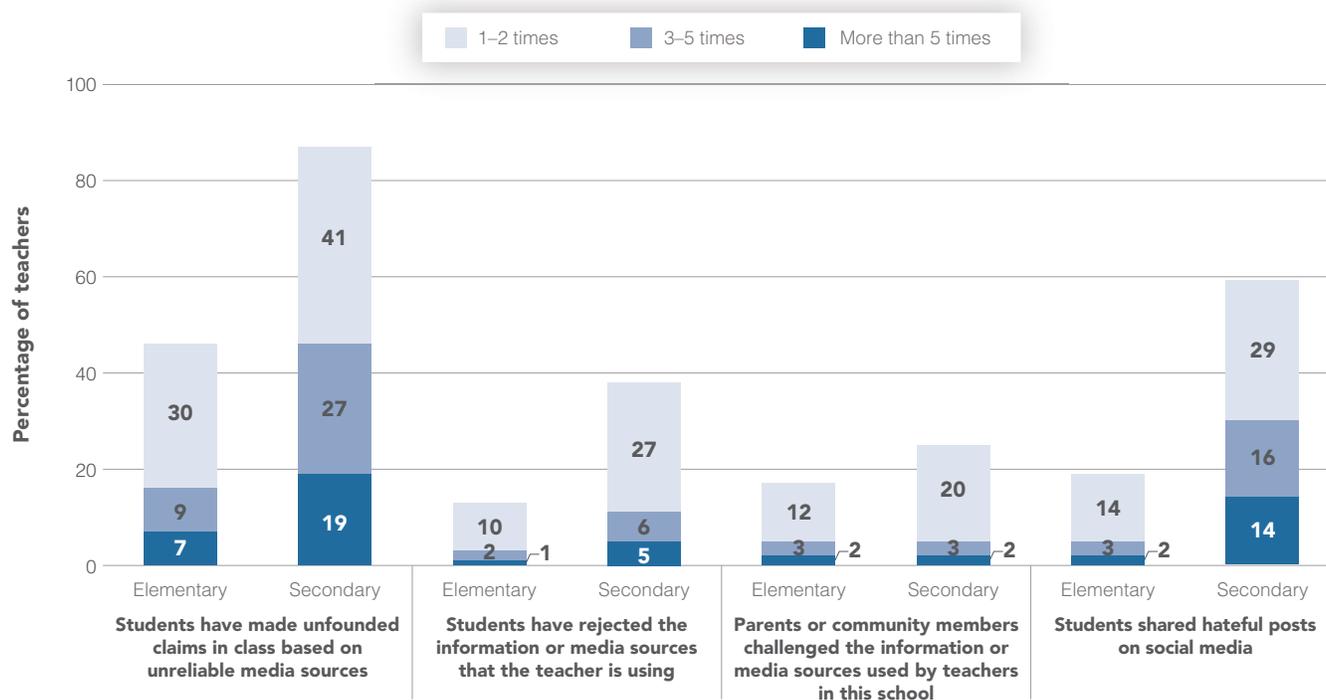
NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey item: *Here are some statements about civic education and about your own school and classroom. How close does each of the following come to your own view?* This question was borrowed with permission from a survey administered to high school social studies teachers by the American Enterprise Institute. For more information, see Farkas and Duffett, 2010.

At the same time, teachers expressed numerous concerns about students' media use and literacy, including unhealthy amounts of media use and limited ability to evaluate the credibility of online information. These findings are particularly concerning in light of the COVID-19–related school closures, which have left many students free to spend more time on social media, increasing their potential need to process and interpret large volumes of potentially stressful news. On a recent Pew survey, roughly half of U.S. adults said that they found it difficult to determine what is true and untrue about the pandemic,<sup>12</sup> so it is almost certain that many youth need more guidance to evaluate the information that they are consuming about COVID-19 and other topics.

This Data Note is not meant to provide in-depth analyses or specific policy implications, but we offer a few potential considerations:

- If you are a state or school system leader, consider how to support teachers' pressing needs with regard to media literacy. The responses to our survey suggest that teachers are addressing media literacy in the classroom yet still perceive students' media use as problematic. System leaders should seek input from school staff regarding what resources and supports they need (e.g., guidance, materials, scheduling flexibility) to incorporate media literacy instruction into their schedules.
- If you are a parent or teacher, consider ways to support students' media literacy at home, particularly in the face of school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it will be important to promote healthy approaches to social media use and help children and youth evaluate the credibility of online information.
- If you are the developer of a curriculum that addresses media literacy, consider ways to ensure that the curriculum addresses the most frequently reported challenges identified in our survey, including difficulty evaluating the credibility of information.

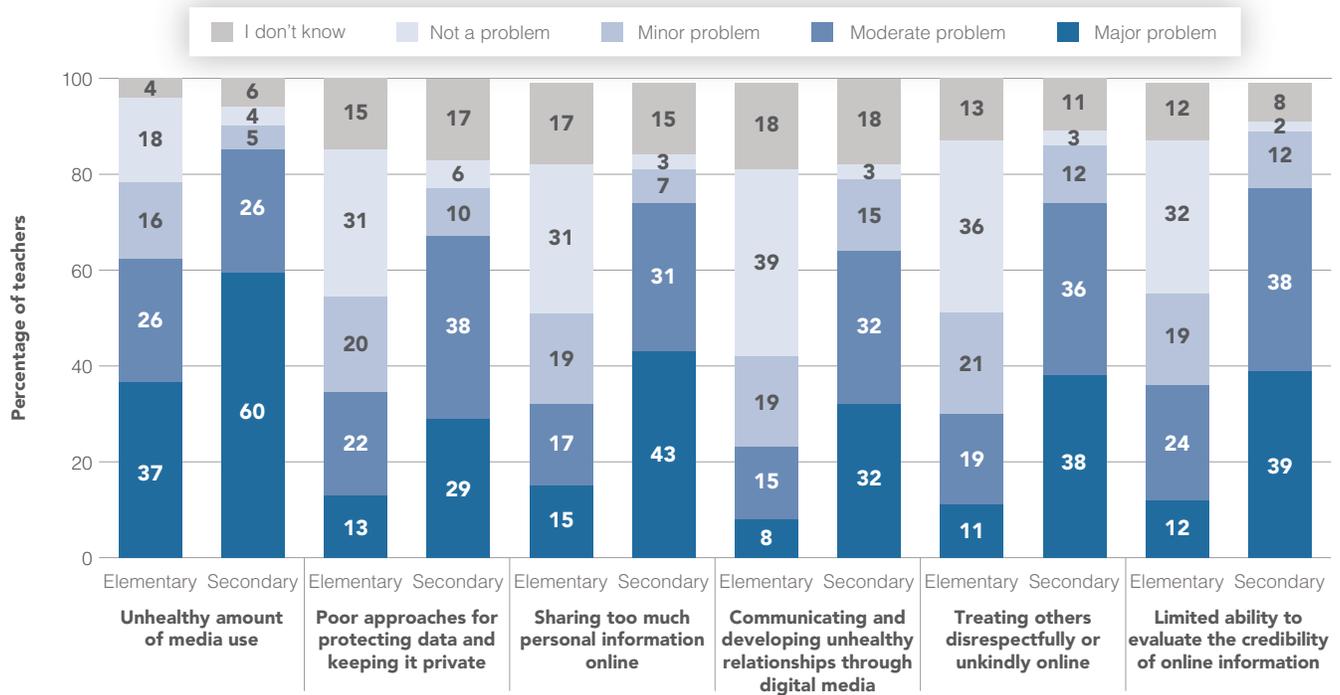
**FIGURE 3** Weighted percentages of teachers reporting challenges related to media literacy and use among their students in the past month



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey item: *Please indicate how frequently each of the following occurred among students in your classroom over the past month.*

# TRUTH DECAY

**FIGURE 4** Weighted percentages of teachers reporting issues related to media use as problems for the majority of their students



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey item: *To your knowledge, how much are each of the following issues a problem for the majority of your students?* Bars might not sum to 100 because of rounding.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mann, 1855.
- <sup>2</sup> Gould, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Hansen et al., 2018; Vinnakota, 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> Gould, 2011; Hansen et al., 2018; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> National Association for Media Literacy Education, undated.
- <sup>7</sup> Breakstone et al., 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> Hugué et al., 2019.
- <sup>9</sup> Rogers, 2019.
- <sup>10</sup> Some of the survey questions used in this report were adapted from Rogers, 2019, under a CC BY-NC license.
- <sup>11</sup> Hugué et al., 2019.
- <sup>12</sup> Mitchell, Oliphant, and Shearer, 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> Teachers were sampled to participate in this survey if they reported teaching social studies, civics, or similar material in a previous survey. Teachers were screened at the beginning of the survey to ensure that they still taught the target subject or subjects—i.e., if they indicated teaching “social studies or social science (including general social studies, geography, history, government/civics, etc.)” If they did not, they were screened out of the survey.

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Kavanagh, Jennifer, and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2314-RC, 2018. As of March 1, 2020: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2314.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html)

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country. We are extremely grateful to the U.S. public-school teachers and leaders who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand more about how to better support their hard work in schools. We thank our reviewers—Brian Gill, Alice Huguet, and Andrew McEachin—for helpful feedback that improved this report. We also thank editor Arwen Bicknell, production editor Monette Velasco, and designer Pete Soriano for their support in presenting this series.

This work is part of RAND's Truth Decay initiative (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018), which studies the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life. Through this initiative, RAND has invited researchers and engaged stakeholders to find solutions that counter Truth Decay

Levine, Peter, and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, *The Republic Is (Still) at Risk—and Civics Is Part of the Solution*, Medford, Mass.: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University, 2017.

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Vinnakota, Raj, *From Civic Education to a Civic Learning Ecosystem: A Landscape Analysis and Case for Collaboration*, Red & Blue Works, 2019.

and the threat it poses to evidence-based policymaking. More information about Truth Decay is available at [www.rand.org/truth-decay](http://www.rand.org/truth-decay).

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this report should be directed to [laurah@rand.org](mailto:laurah@rand.org) and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The AEP Civic Education Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of results from our American Teacher Panel civic education survey. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see our technical documentation ([www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1)) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email [aep@rand.org](mailto:aep@rand.org) or visit [www.rand.org/aep](http://www.rand.org/aep).

This Data Note is one in a series about how schools can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to contribute to their communities and their country as adults. The other Data Notes in this series are

- Julia H. Kaufman, Laura S. Hamilton, and Lynn Hu, *Teachers' Civics Instructional Materials: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-3
- Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, and Lynn Hu, *Social Studies' Teachers Perspectives on Key Civic Outcomes in 2010 and 2019: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-4
- Julia H. Kaufman, Laura S. Hamilton, and Lynn Hu, *Social Studies Teachers' Trust in Institutions and Groups: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-5.

A more comprehensive report on the state of civic education in America's schools is also in development.

To explore how teachers and schools promote civic development, we created a survey for social studies teachers that was administered to members of the RAND Corporation's American Teacher Panel in fall 2019.<sup>13</sup> These teachers included both general-education teachers (typically for kindergarten through 5th grade [K–5]) and teachers who reported teaching social studies exclusively or in combination with a small number of other subjects (typically teachers in middle and high schools). This Data Note is part of a series that provides some snapshots of results from this survey; it is intended to convey field-relevant findings in a brief, accessible format. We summarize responses separately for elementary (grades K–5) and secondary (grades 6–12) teachers; where relevant, we discuss differences in responses for subgroups of teachers when they are statistically significant for an outcome of interest, as indicated by regression models that included several teacher- and school-level factors as independent variables. Additional details about the survey and analytic methods, including our definitions of these subgroups and methods for testing statistical significance of differences, are available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1).

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