

DEVELOPING YOUNG PEOPLE'S SKILLS IN LEADING POLICY SOLUTIONS

As a part of our Democracy Lens tools, for each state in our region, we report a data snapshot about democratic activities (ranging from funding, voter participation and candidate demographics) and case studies (called Bright Spots). These Bright Spots illustrate the scope and story of philanthropic support for civic engagement. You can access these data and Bright Spot stories for the other Northwest states on the [Democracy Lens webpage](#).

[Humanities Montana](#) is the state's humanities council, one of 56 organizations across the country funded by the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) as a grantmaker that also conducts programs to support civil society.¹ Divisiveness and lack of civil discourse among Montanans has been a concern in recent years, according to Kim Anderson, director of programs and grants. Humanities Montana determined that one way to address the issue was to develop young people's skills in discourse around civic issues.² This idea was inspired by [Teens Leading Change](#),³ a project of the Los Angeles Public Library that teaches young people how to make positive impacts in civil society. A funder of the Los Angeles project, the New York-based Charles Engelhard Foundation, agreed to fund this work in Montana,⁴ and the Los Angeles Public Library provided training for Humanities Montana's pilot program.⁵



The Democracy Project

Montana's version of the Los Angeles program is the [Democracy Project](#). The goal of this statewide nonpartisan initiative is to increase Montanan teenagers' government knowledge, information literacy and leadership abilities. By developing these skills, young people will be increasingly able to create positive changes in their communities. As part of the Democracy Project, they will exercise these skills through group projects that address a civic problem.⁶



Each project will include meetings with a community organizer and a librarian to help identify and research a community problem, though the program participants are the decisionmakers. Actions are not oriented toward community service, according to Anderson, but instead focus on the teens determining how to directly tackle the root causes of a problem. Humanities Montana has employed two community organizers to support the work across four libraries.⁷

Finding Participants

Anderson noted that philanthropies and organizations that center cultural activities sometimes find it difficult to reach young people and, as a result, programs often attract participants within a default demographic, age or income range. Humanities Montana has taken steps to address this barrier. While students self-select into the Democracy Project, the organization is working with [Forward Montana](#) – a youth voter registration organization⁸ – and other civic engagement groups to attract participants who may not normally be reached with other programs.⁹ The Democracy Project is also free to attend with no application required. Lastly, the four places selected for the pilot program include two rural and two urban libraries, to ensure that the work is not concentrated in cities (see Map of Pilot Locations).¹⁰ Pairing the rural and urban locations within a reasonable drive from each other, the Democracy Project intends for groups based in different locations to interact, leading to more connections between students from different areas of the state.¹¹



Above: Map of Pilot Locations¹⁰

Anticipated Launch

The Democracy Project will reach 50 to 75 students per year, with each project taking five to six months. Since much of the program relies on in-person activities, the start date for the first cohort depends on the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pilot funding will last two years and, if successful, Humanities Montana hopes to scale up this project to reach more areas. The Democracy Project could also serve as an example to grantmakers seeking to support the next generation in efforts to improve democracy.¹²

Through interviews with participants before and after their project, Humanities Montana can measure how the project changed their attitudes toward civic engagement. In the long run, according to Anderson, the Democracy Project hopefully convinces young people about the importance of civic duties such as voting, and encourages them to stay involved in institutions like libraries. In turn, developing these traits could lead to a stronger civic infrastructure in Montana.¹³

Endnotes

1. “Our Story,” Humanities Montana, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.humanitiesmontana.org/our-story/>.
2. Kim Anderson, phone interview with author, April 29, 2020.
3. “Teens Leading Change,” Los Angeles Public Library, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.lapl.org/teens/teens-leading-change>.
4. “Democracy Project,” Humanities Montana, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.humanitiesmontana.org/democracy-project/>.
5. Anderson, interview.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. “About FMT,” Forward Montana, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://forwardmontana.org/our-work/about-fmt/>.
9. Anderson, interview.
10. “Democracy Project,” Humanities Montana, accessed June 30, 2020, <https://www.humanitiesmontana.org/democracy-project/>. This is also the image source.
11. Anderson, interview.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.