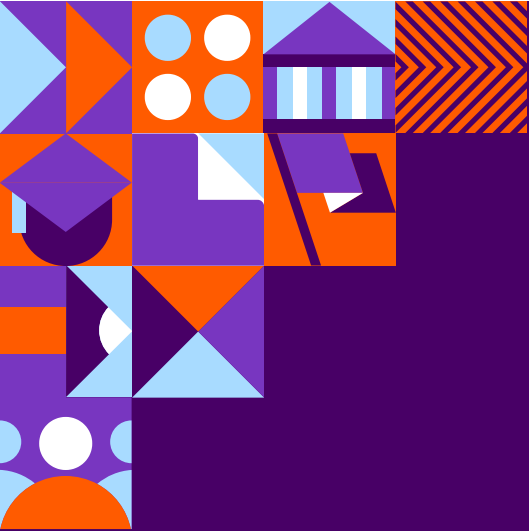




Case Study

From Pilot to District- Wide Gains: How Hamilton County Schools Strengthened Social Studies Outcomes with iCivics

iCIVICS





The Challenge

As trust in democratic institutions wavers, social studies offers a vital opportunity to reinforce civic values in the classroom. However, the field must simultaneously overcome significant underfunding and intensifying political scrutiny. **Adopting High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) and standards-aligned inquiry practices provides a strategic path forward.** This approach ensures instruction is grounded in vetted content and clear educational goals, ultimately securing more reliable student outcomes.

Hamilton County School in Chattanooga, Tenn. at a Glance



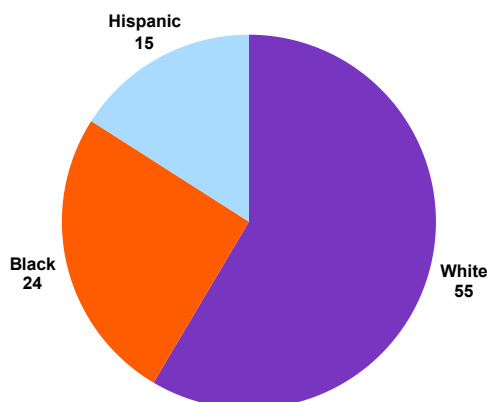
45,000
Students



3,000
Teachers



~ 50%
Economically
Disadvantaged
Students



Diverse Student Population

- **55%** White
- **24%** Black
- **15%** Hispanic
and a rapidly growing
Latino community

By 2023, HCS had made substantial instructional investments across content areas. Social studies, however, remained an area with untapped potential. **District leaders identified a need for high-quality instructional materials and professional learning that could raise rigor, support consistent practice across schools, and better equip teachers to engage students in inquiry-based learning aligned to state expectations.**

The Solution

Dr. John Rice, Director of Secondary Teaching and Learning at HCS, set out to identify a partner that could meet three non-negotiables: rigorous inquiry-based content, materials that supported meaningful student discourse, and professional learning that teachers could realistically sustain. iCivics was selected to pilot a year-long implementation in 8th-grade U.S. History classrooms.



Kids are reading and engaging in primary and secondary sources, making inferences, answering big questions, and having discussions with their peers...It's a better experience for the kids, better experience for the teachers, and kids are learning more."

- Dr. John Rice, Director of Secondary Teaching Learning at HCS

During the 2024–25 school year, iCivics partnered with HCS to implement a comprehensive pilot that combined curriculum, coaching, and professional learning. The pilot included:



- **Through Inquiry: United States History Beginnings to 1877**, an inquiry-driven curriculum emphasizing primary and secondary sources, multiple perspectives, civic engagement, and student ownership of learning.



- A full-day, in-person program launch, where teachers explored inquiry pedagogy, unpacked the curriculum, and learned best practices for implementing high-quality instructional materials.



- Ongoing instructional coaching, including monthly collaborative sessions, classroom observations, and learning walks.



- Yearlong asynchronous coursework, designed to reinforce instructional strategies and support implementation over time.

Twenty educators from 13 middle schools—approximately half of the middle schools in the district—participated in the pilot. Early classroom observations showed meaningful shifts in instruction and student engagement.

From the outset, HCS and the iCivics Learning Services team approached the pilot with sustainability and scalability in mind. The HCS team localized the curriculum materials to align with Tennessee standards and assessments and coaching support was tailored to district pacing, instructional priorities, and classroom realities. Teachers worked closely with an instructional coach to refine strategies, build confidence with inquiry-based instruction, and navigate implementation challenges. The result was not only a successful pilot, but a refined curriculum and coaching model that has since been scaled across all HCS middle schools.

The Results

To assess implementation and impact, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) partnered with iCivics and Hamilton County Schools to conduct an independent evaluation of the pilot program. **Preliminary findings indicate that the approach to pairing high-quality materials with sustained professional learning produced meaningful instructional and student outcomes.** There were promising outcomes for students in areas of political discourse, political interest, news consumption, and valuing U.S. History. For teachers, the evaluation points to increases in pedagogical effectiveness, self-efficacy, and an overwhelming willingness to continue using iCivics HQIM.



Strongest Gains of any Tested Subject

When state assessment results were released in summer 2025, 8th-grade social studies showed the strongest gains of any tested subject in the district.



7.1 Percentage Points

Scores increased by 7.1 percentage points—more than double the gains of any other content area—and it was the only subject in which Hamilton County Schools outperformed the state.

What Teachers are Saying:



Students became more confident, more independent thinkers. Even my lower-performing students wanted to talk and discuss. They were thinking.”

— Jonathan M., Teacher



Students consistently engaged in primary source analysis... moving beyond simple fact retrieval to practice critical thinking.”

— Natasha Taylor, District Content Lead



What I did notice is that students who participated in the pilot did better on the higher-order thinking questions. A lot of their test deals with primary source analysis work, and because they had to do that so much, I think they outperformed other students who weren't a part of the pilot.”

— Autumn M., Teacher

Create a similar impact in your district

Hamilton County Schools' experience demonstrates what is possible when high-quality instructional materials are paired with sustained, job-embedded professional learning. For more than a decade, iCivics has supported educators with high-quality civics and history curriculum. Today, iCivics partners with districts to design and implement comprehensive professional development pathways, workshops, and consulting services that strengthen social studies instruction at scale..

Interested in partnering with us? Let's connect!

Frank Anderson

Director of Programs

frank.anderson@icivics.org

Christina Ross

Director of Business Development

christina.ross@icivics.org

¹ Building political homes for youth: "We have the least amount of agency in our future, but the most future to live." Tufts University, Tisch College of Civic Life. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/we-have-least-amount-agency-our-future-most-future-live-youth-share-their-distrust>

² National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). American Community Survey 5-year estimates (2019-2023): Hamilton County School District, TN [Data table]. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. [Building political homes for youth: "We have the least amount of agency in our future, but the most future to live." Tufts University, Tisch College of Civic Life. https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/we-have-least-amount-agency-our-future-most-future-live-youth-share-their-distrust](https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/we-have-least-amount-agency-our-future-most-future-live-youth-share-their-distrust)

³ Coan, S. (2025, July 10). Hamilton County TCAP scores show gains. Chattanooga Times Free Press. <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2025/jul/10/hamilton-county-tcap-scores-show-gains/>

