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IGC DESCRIPTIVE REPORT

Florida Civics and Debate Initiative: Descriptive Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Florida Civics and Debate Initiative (FCDI) expands access to high-quality civics education, debate programs, and teacher support across the state. Created in response to Governor Ron DeSantis's 2019 executive order and initially funded by a gift from the Marcus Foundation, the initiative is administered by the Florida Education Foundation. It now includes partner schools in every Florida school district. This descriptive report draws on student-level data provided by the Florida Department of Education.

- **Most FCDI participants were enrolled in high school.**

In 2025-2026, 75% of participants were enrolled in high school with the largest numbers being in 10th (22%) and 11th grade (20%).

- **FCDI participants differed demographically from non-participating students..**

In 2025-2026, participants differed from their non-participating counterparts. They were more likely to be female (62%), more likely to be Asian or White, and had lower rates of English Language Learner status or free-reduced-price lunch eligibility.

- **FCDI participants performed substantially better than the statewide average on Civics and U.S. History exams.**

On the state's Civics exam, FCDI participants scored more than one standard deviation above the statewide average.

On the state's U.S. History exam, FCDI participants scored approximately three-quarters of a standard deviation higher than the state average.

These findings show that FCDI is reaching motivated students who demonstrate strong civic knowledge, as measured by state standardized tests, while steadily expanding opportunities statewide.

INTRODUCTION

Florida has consistently sought to strengthen civic education for students. In support of this effort, Governor Ron DeSantis issued an executive order in 2019 that called on the Commissioner of Education to “identify opportunities to equip high school graduates with sufficient knowledge of America’s civics, particularly the principles reflected in the United States Constitution, so as to be capable of discharging the responsibilities associated with American citizenship.”¹ A year later Gov. DeSantis announced the creation of the Florida Civics and Debate Initiative.² The initiative was made possible by an initial commitment of \$5 million from the Marcus Foundation to the Florida Education Foundation. Created by the Florida Legislature, the Florida Education Foundation is a direct support organization to the Florida Department of Education. The foundation continues to operate the Florida Civics and Debate Initiative today.

According to the FCDI website, “the mission of the Florida Civics and Debate Initiative is to create access and opportunities for all students to have the best civics education including curriculum, debate programs, and high-quality teachers that are catalysts for students becoming great citizens who can preserve our constitutional republic for future generations.” Since its creation, the FCDI has grown to include students from every school district in Florida..

The FCDI provides schools with the resources and support needed to establish and grow their own debate chapters. Schools can start programs by applying at the FCDI website as a partner school. When applying, schools are considered for four-levels of financial assistance, including waived team membership fees and team stipends.³ After applying, schools are notified of their acceptance as a FCDI partner school. Following this acceptance, schools can start recruiting students to become a part of their debate team and attend tournaments. The FCDI targets middle and high school students. Coaches of FCDI partner schools are equipped with a new coach timeline that outlines what a coach should do from the inception of their team through the end of the season.⁴ The timeline covers a range of topics, from advertising a new debate team to hosting an end of year banquet to celebrate successes. Overall, the FCDI offers a wide variety of support for schools seeking to start their own debate programs.

In this brief, we provide a descriptive report on the participants in the FCDI during the 2025-2026 school year. These student-level data were made possible thanks to a partnership with the FCDI and the Florida Department of Education (FL DOE). Participant information was shared with the FL DOE by the FCDI, which then matched the students to state student records, including demographic information and test scores. The FL DOE also provided a set of matched-comparison data, which included deidentified student records for students who attended the same schools as the FCDI participants. No names or personally identifiable information was shared with the Institute for Governance and Civics.

1 DeSantis, R. (2019). Executive Order Number 19-32. Executive Office of the Governor. https://www.flgov.com/eog/sites/default/files/executive-orders/2024/EO_19-32.pdf

2 Executive Office of the Governor. (2020, January 27). Governor Ron DeSantis announces Florida Civics and Debate Initiative with The Marcus Foundation. [Governor Ron DeSantis Announces Florida Civics and Debate Initiative with The Marcus Foundation | Executive Office of the Governor](#)

3 Florida Civics and Debate Initiative. (n.d.). How to join. <https://www.civicsanddebate.com/join>

4 Florida Civics and Debate Initiative. (n.d.). New coach timeline. https://www.civicsanddebate.com/files/ugd/ec3230_0a44a7c7320e4f04974bc54c1d74b32e.pdf

A descriptive report looks at averages, percentages, totals, and differences between groups. This analysis is not causal. Instead, it helps readers understand the main patterns in the data. It is a type of report that presents information, such as statistics on student demographics or test scores, as they are. As such, this report does not make any causal claims.

The goal is to describe students who have participated in FCDI. In other words, this report is a snapshot of the students who participated in the FCDI program during the 2025-2026 school year.

This descriptive report answers three main questions:

- *What grades participate in the Florida Civics and Debate Initiative?*
- *What are the demographic characteristics of FCDI Participants?*
- *How do FCDI participants compare to non-FCDI participants on test performance?*

WHAT GRADES PARTICIPATE IN THE FLORIDA CIVICS AND DEBATE INITIATIVE?

The data provided to us by the FL DOE, contained records for 4,159 FCDI participants.⁵ This number may not reflect the complete total as some records may not have been matched. Nevertheless, we expect these numbers provide a representative number of FCDI participants. According to these data, the majority of FCDI participants were enrolled in high school grades (75%), with 10th grade having the most participants (Table 1). The data indicate FCDI participation begins with relatively low numbers in 6th grades and builds over time.

Table 1. Number of FCDI participants by grade, 2025-2026

Grades	Number of Participants	Percent of Participants
6	185	4%
7	367	9%
8	488	12%
9	675	16%
10	910	22%
11	831	20%
12	703	17%
Total	4,159	

⁵ The data contained 19 records of students in grades 1-5. They are not included in this analysis.

WHAT ARE THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FCDI PARTICIPANTS?

In this portion of the analysis, we compare students who participated in the program with students who did not participate. We provide statistics for the randomly selected comparison group provided by the FLDOE as well as state averages. These comparisons provide information as to how similar or dissimilar FCDI participants were to their in-school counterparts and the average Florida student.

Specifically, we examined race, gender, English Language Learner (ELL) status, Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) participation, and whether students were Exceptional Student Education (ESE) participants. By comparing these groups, we gain important insight as to what students are being reached by the program. Overall, students who participated in FCDI were different from students who did not participate in every demographic area.

For example, Asian students made up one of the smallest racial/ethnic groups statewide at a population makeup of 2.9 percent of students and 3.6 percent of within-school comparison students, while 12.4 percent of FCDI participants were of Asian descent.

FCDI students were less likely to be black or Hispanic than their non-participant counterparts. Nearly half, 46.5 percent of FCDI participants were white. This is compared to 39.7 percent of students in the within-school comparison and 33 percent of students statewide.

FCDI students were also much more likely to be female. More than 60 percent of FCDI participants were female, while 38 percent were male. The FDE-provided comparison group was 49.1% female while the state public school population was 48.7% female.

When looking at English Language Learner (ELL) status, we were able to calculate whether students are presently (as of 2026) or were in the past categorized as ELL. For the state population, we only had access to the present number. Among FCDI participants, 8.3 percent are now or were in the past categorized as ELL, meanwhile 19 percent of their within-school counterparts were or are now ELL students. In comparison, 12.3 percent of students state-wide are presently classified as English language learners.

Free or reduced price lunch status is often used as a proxy for poverty. The percentage of FCDI students who participated in the lunch program, 26.1%, was substantially lower than their within-school counterparts (42.4%) and the statewide average (65.2%).

Table 2. Demographic statistics of FCDI participants, a within-school comparison group, and FL state averages, 2025-2026

Demographic	FCDI Participants	FCDI Comparison Group	Florida State Averages ^{6,7,8,9}
Race/Ethnicity			
Asian	12.4%	3.6%	2.9%
Black	12.8%	18.1%	21.0%
Hispanic	22.5%	33.8%	38.2%
Multi/Other	5.9%	4.9%	4.9%
White	46.5%	39.7%	33.0%
Gender			
Male	38.3%	50.9%	51.3%
Female	61.7%	49.1%	48.7%
ELL			
Now or in the past	8.2%	19.0%	12.3%
Poverty Status			
Free or Reduced Price Lunches	26.1%	42.4%	65.2%

HOW DO FCDI PARTICIPANTS COMPARE TO NON-FCDI PARTICIPANTS ON TEST PERFORMANCE?

Using the data provided to us by the FL DOE, we were able to calculate the scale score students received on the state's Civics and U.S. History exams. These data include both FCDI participants and a within-school comparison group. Additionally, we provide statewide averages.¹⁰ On both exams, students participating in the FCDI scored substantially higher than their within-school counterparts and the average Florida student. Students who participated in the Florida Civics and Debate Initiative scored 1.1 standard deviations higher than the statewide average in Civics and 0.77 standard deviations higher in U.S. History. In short, FCDI participants scored substantially higher than their non-FCDI counterparts.

⁶ Florida Department of Education. (n.d.). Membership in Florida public schools, 2025–26 [Data set].

<https://www.fldoe.org/file/7584/2526MembInFLPublicSchools.xlsx>

⁷ Florida Department of Education. (n.d.). Advanced reports: Student enrollments. EduData.

https://edudata.fldoe.org/AdvancedReports_Tableau.html?StudentEnrollments=true

⁸ Florida Department of Education. (n.d.). Advanced reports: Student enrollments. EduData.

https://edudata.fldoe.org/AdvancedReports_Tableau.html?StudentEnrollments=true

⁹ Florida Department of Education. (2026). Lunch status by district (for federal funding), 2025–26: Final Survey
[Florida Department of Education, Lunch Status by District \(for Federal Funding\) 2025-26, Final Survey 3.](#)

¹⁰ Statewide averages come from the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST), Benchmarks for Excellent Student Thinking (B.E.S.T), and Science & Social Studies Statewide Assessments, 2024–2025; Volume 4 Evidence of Reliability and Validity.

Table 3. Civics and U.S. History Assessment Outcomes by Student Group

Test	Statistic	FCDI Participants	FCDI Comparison Group	Florida State Averages
Civics	Scale Score	443.3	414.2	411.3
	Standard Deviation	21.7	29.0	29.3
	Number of Students	396	22,339	180,599
U.S. History	Scale Score	438.6	413.7	414.3
	Standard Deviation	23.0	31.0	31.4
	Number of Students	745	61,912	185,904

CONCLUSION

This descriptive report offers a snapshot of the students who participated in the Florida Civics and Debate Initiative during the 2025–26 school year. Drawing on matched student-level data from the Florida Department of Education, it compares FCDI participants with both their classmates in the same schools and statewide averages.

The findings show that FCDI participants in 2025-2026 differed in meaningful ways from their peers. They were more likely to be female and to identify as Asian or White. They were less likely to be classified as English Language Learners or to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Most notably, they demonstrated substantially stronger performance on Florida’s Civics and U.S. History assessments—scoring more than a full standard deviation above the statewide average in Civics and roughly three-quarters of a standard deviation higher in U.S. History.

These patterns do not suggest that the program excludes any group of students. FCDI remains open to all, and it now reaches every school district in Florida. Rather, the data indicate that the initiative currently attracts motivated students who already bring strong academic preparation and a readiness to engage in rigorous civic learning and debate.

As Florida continues to invest in civic education, the FCDI stands out as a program that is successfully engaging capable young people in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to citizenship. The students participating today are demonstrating high levels of civic knowledge. Expanding access to these opportunities remains a promising path for preparing the next generation of informed and engaged Floridians. To ensure that more students across the state can benefit from these opportunities, deliberate efforts to expand access, particularly among underrepresented groups, should remain a priority.