



NAPA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION
California State Seal of Civic Engagement

Student Handbook

Everything you need to earn your seal

What is the State Seal of Civic Engagement?

The California State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) is an official recognition that appears on your high school diploma or transcript. It honors students who have demonstrated civic knowledge, taken real-world action, and shown genuine commitment to their communities.

Earning the seal is not a class - it is something you build through your own experiences and document through an application process managed by the Napa County Office of Education (NCOE).



Why it matters

- Appears on your diploma and official transcript
- Recognizes real-world civic action, not just grades
- Strengthens college applications and resumes
- Shows who you are as a community member

Who is eligible

- Any Napa County junior or senior high school student
- Students on track to graduate or complete high school
- Students with a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher
- Students on alternative pathways - ask your counselor

How to Use This Handbook

This handbook walks you through each of the five criteria you need to meet to earn the seal. For each one you will find:

- The California state criteria - what the state of California requires
- The Napa County requirements - specifically how NCOE implements those criteria
- What you need to do and what to submit
- Tips, examples, and guidance along the way

Your civic engagement project, Criteria 3, is the heart of the seal. That section includes the full process guide, the step-by-step framework you will use to plan, carry out, and document your project. The application form is where you will upload and complete the required documents.

Get started in three steps

- Review the [NCOE SSCE](#).
- Read through this handbook so you know what to expect before you start.
- Talk to your school counselor about Criteria 1 and 2 early - their forms take time to process.

Questions? Contact: Katherine Pineda Brooks (kpineda@napacoe.org)

Criteria 1	California State Criteria Be engaged in academic work in a productive way.
Napa County Requirements	To earn the seal in Napa County, you must: • Be on track to graduate or complete high school based on your school's requirements. • Have a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher. If your GPA has improved significantly over time, that growth will be considered. • Complete and submit a counselor verification form (one form covers both Criteria 1 and Criteria 2a).

What to Do

Request that your school counselor complete this [State Seal of Civic Engagement Counselor Verification](#) form. This single form covers both Criteria 1 and Criteria 2a - your counselor signs off on both at once.

Tips for this step

- Ask your counselor early in the semester - forms take time to process.
- Ask your counselor what timeline works best for them.
- On an alternative pathway or academy? Ask your counselor how your progress is reported. NCOE will work with schools to identify the right approach for you.

Example: Marcus is a junior who transferred schools sophomore year and was worried about his GPA.

- *He talked to his counselor early and learned his GPA had climbed from a 1.8 to a 2.4 over three semesters.*
- *His counselor noted his growth trend on the verification form.*
- *His application was approved because NCOE considers significant improvement, not just a snapshot GPA.*

Criteria 2	California State Criteria Demonstrate a competent understanding of U.S. and California constitutions; functions and governance of local governments; tribal government structures; the role of the citizen in a constitutional democracy; and democratic principles, concepts, and processes.
Napa County Requirements	To earn the seal in Napa County, you must: • 2a. Have enrolled in and passed World History, United States History, and American Government (or equivalent courses) - verified by the counselor on same form as Criteria 1. • 2b. Attend one civic meeting (in person or online) and complete a short written reflection using the form provided on the NCOE State Seal of Civic Engagement Application.

Part A: Coursework

Your coursework requirement is confirmed by the same counselor form as Criteria 1. No extra steps needed.

Part B: Attend a Civic Meeting

Attend one public meeting where civic discussion or decision-making takes place. After attending, complete a short reflection form on the NCOE SSCE application.

What counts as a civic meeting? • City council or county board of supervisors • School board meeting • Town hall or public forum • Tribal government meeting • Community planning or advisory committee • State legislative hearing (in person or livestream) <i>NCOE will provide a list of upcoming local meetings on the website.</i>	Your reflection will cover: • What meeting did you attend and what was it about? • When did you attend the meeting? • What was the most surprising or unexpected thing you noticed about how the meeting was run or how the attendees behaved? • Identify one specific issue or agenda item that was discussed. What were the different perspectives presented, and how did the council or board attempt to resolve it? • How did attending this meeting change or impact your understanding of your local community and your own role in it? <i>Submit the reflection form through the NCOE SSCE application after attending.</i>
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Example: Sofia lives in Napa and attended a Napa City Council meeting online one Tuesday evening.

- *She watched the council debate a proposal to add crosswalks near her high school.*
- *She recognized two people from her neighborhood speaking during public comment.*

- *In her reflection she wrote about how public comment works and why it surprised her that anyone could speak at the meeting.*

Criteria 3	California State Criteria Participate in one or more informed civic engagement project(s) that address real-world problems and require students to identify and inquire into civic needs or problems, consider varied responses, take action, and reflect on efforts.
Napa County Requirements	To earn the seal in Napa County, you must: • Follow the IPARD service-learning cycle (Investigation, Preparation, Action, Reflection, Demonstration). • Document your process and choices at each stage, in a format of your choice. • Share your final project artifact by uploading it through the NCOE SSCE website. • Projects can be individual or group, school-based or community-based, new or ongoing.

This is the heart of the seal. Your civic engagement project is your chance to take real action on something that matters - to you and to the people around you.

Your project can happen in many different settings

- In a classroom as part of a unit of study
- Through a club, interest group, or extracurricular program at your school
- As a member of a community organization engaged in civic action
- As an individual taking action on your own

Your Guide to the IPARD Cycle

IPARD is the five-stage service-learning framework you will use for your project. Each stage builds on the last. Work through them in order and document as you go.

I	Investigation	Explore a real-world problem or need and possible solutions
P	Preparation	Develop a plan of action
A	Action	Implement your plan
R	Reflection	Reflect on your impact, successes, and challenges
D	Demonstration	Share your project with others

Before you start: a few questions

- Will I work alone or with a group?
- Is there an adult - teacher, mentor, or community partner - who can support me?
- Is there a community or school issue I already care about?
- Is there a group or organization I am already connected to that does civic work?

You do not need all the answers before you start. Part of the process is figuring things out as you go.

Investigation

What to Do

Explore a real-world problem or need in your school, community, or the broader world. The goal is to understand the issue well enough to take meaningful action.

How to complete this stage

- Identify an issue or need that matters to you and affects real people.
- Research the issue: who is affected, what has been tried, what the root causes are.
- Talk to people with lived experience of the issue if you can.
- Identify possible solutions and consider which ones are realistic for you.
- Narrow your focus: you cannot solve everything, so pick something specific.

What to document to assist writing your final reflection:

- Notes or a summary of your research
- A description of the problem in your own words
- A list of possible actions you considered, and why you chose the direction you did

Example: Priya noticed that students in her school rarely knew about local ballot measures, even in election years.

- *She researched why youth civic participation is low and talked to her social studies teacher.*
- *She found that most students had never heard candidates speak about local issues.*
- *She identified three possible actions: a student voter guide, a candidate forum, or a classroom presentation series.*
- *She chose the candidate forum because it would reach the most people.*

Preparation

What you do

Turn your ideas into a concrete plan. A good plan does not have to be perfect, but it should be specific enough that you can actually follow it.

How to complete this stage

- Define your goal: what does success look like?
- Identify who is involved and what each person will do and by when.
- List the specific steps you will take, in order.
- Identify resources you need: people, materials, time, access.
- Set a realistic timeline with key milestones.
- Think through potential challenges and how you might handle them.

Planning Considerations:

- *What is the specific goal of my project?*
- *What are the key steps I need to take, and in what order?*
- *What resources do I need and how will I get them?*
- *Who else is involved and what are their roles?*
- *What might get in the way and how will I respond?*

Example: Priya's preparation for the candidate forum.

- *She emailed three candidates for city council and secured two who agreed to participate.*
- *She recruited two classmates to help moderate and created a shared doc for planning.*
- *She booked a classroom, made a flyer, and set a date six weeks out.*
- *Her backup plan: if a candidate cancelled, she would substitute a recorded interview.*

Action

What you do

Carry out your plan. This is where the work happens. It may not go exactly as planned and that is okay. What matters is that you are genuinely trying to make a difference.

How to complete this stage

- Follow your plan, staying flexible when things change.
- Keep track of what you are doing as you go, so you remember it later.
- Make sure to document with photos so you can share during your demonstration step.
- Note when your plan changes and why.
- Pay attention to how your work is affecting others.
- Check in with your adult support person if you run into obstacles.

Ways to take action

- Community service or volunteer work
- Organizing an event or drive
- Awareness Campaigns (health fairs or reporting on research on a community issue)
- Advocacy (letters, petitions, attending meetings)
- Creative projects (art, video, social media)
- Tutoring, mentoring, or teaching others
- Student government or community group work

Ways to document your action

- Journal or running log of what you did
- Photos or video (with permission)
- Sign-in sheets, flyers, or event materials
- Emails or correspondence
- Notes from conversations or meetings
- Hours log if relevant

Example: Priya held the candidate forum on a Thursday afternoon in the school library.

- *Forty-two students attended. Both candidates participated.*
- *One candidate had to leave early - Priya's co-moderator smoothly led that portion.*
- *She kept a running doc during the event with notes on questions asked and student reactions.*
- *She took photos (with student permission) and saved the sign-in sheet as documentation.*

Reflection

What you do

Think critically about your experience - what you did, what happened, and what it means. Reflection is not a summary. It is where real learning happens.

How to complete this stage

- Look back at your original goal. Did your project go as planned?
- Think about what worked well and what you would do differently.
- Consider the impact on others and yourself.
- Connect your experience to bigger civic ideas: community, fairness, democracy, responsibility.
- Be honest. Good reflection includes what did not go as hoped.
- Review the Reflection questions on page 11 and be ready to answer them in your application.

Example: Priya's reflection after the candidate forum.

- *She wrote that she was surprised how nervous even the candidates seemed answering student questions.*
- *She reflected that local elections felt abstract before - now they felt personal.*
- *She noted that next time she would promote the event two weeks earlier to get higher attendance.*
- *She connected the experience to what she had studied about public discourse and civic engagement.*

Priya's reflection after the forum:

- *She was surprised the candidates seemed nervous too. Answering questions from students may have felt different for them.*
- *Before the forum, local elections felt hard to connect to. Afterwards, Priya felt like she had an important role and responsibility in the local elections. She felt connected to the process.*
- *She would promote the event earlier next time, two weeks ahead instead of one, to get more students to show up.*
- *Things she had read and talked about in class made sense once she had actually done them. The real world experience engaged her and wasn't just a far away experience.*

Demonstration

What you do

Share your project with others. This is your opportunity to communicate what you did, what you learned, and why it matters.

How to complete this stage

- Choose a format that works for you and the story you want to tell.
- Make sure your demonstration captures all five stages of IPARD - not just the Action.
- Think about your audience: who will see it and what do you want them to understand?
- Upload your final artifact through the NCOE SSCE portal.

Demonstration formats - choose one or more

Written: Report, reflection essay, portfolio with annotated artifacts, blog post, or letter to a community leader

Verbal: Presentation to your class, school board, or community group; recorded speech or podcast

Video: Short documentary, project recap video, or recorded presentation with voiceover

Art / Creative: Photo essay, infographic, mural, zine, or any creative piece that tells the story of your project

Example: Priya's demonstration.

- *She created a four-page written portfolio with sections for each IPARD stage.*
- *She included her event flyer, a photo of the room during the forum, and her sign-in sheet as artifacts.*
- *She wrote a one-page reflection tying the project to her interest in public service.*
- *She uploaded the portfolio PDF through the NCOE portal.*

Track Your Progress

This is an optional tool that could be helpful to track your progress. If desired, use this table as you work through IPARD.

Stage	What I Did	How I Documented It	Done?
Investigation			
Preparation			
Action			

Reflection			
Demonstration			

Criteria 4	California State Criteria Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through self-reflection.
Napa County Requirements	To earn the seal in Napa County, you must: Complete the NCOE self-reflection questions in the application, answering all six questions in your own words.

After completing your project, you will fill out a short self-reflection form on the NCOE website. This is your chance to make meaning of your experience - to explain what you did, what you learned, and how it changed the way you think about your role in your community.

The six reflection questions:

1. What problem or need did you identify and why does it matter to you?
2. Who is most affected by this issue?
3. How did your project address this issue?
4. What did you learn through your research that surprised you?
5. Did your project turn out the way you hoped? What would you do the same, and what would you do differently?
6. How did your project shape your understanding of your role in the community, and what is one realistic step you (or your group) can take to continue addressing this issue?

Tip: Your reflection notes from the IPARD cycle are your best starting point. You have already done the thinking - now translate it into answers for these six questions.

Example: How Priya approached the self-reflection in the application

- *She opened her reflection notes alongside the application.*
- *For question 1 she wrote about how nervous she felt emailing candidates for the first time, and how proud she was when they said yes.*
- *For question 3 she named her two co-moderators and the social studies teacher who helped her reach out to candidates.*
- *She was honest in question 5 that attendance was lower than she hoped, but that she learned early promotion matters.*

Criteria 5	California State Criteria Exhibit character traits that reflect civic-mindedness and a commitment to positively impact the classroom, school, community, and/or society.
Napa County Requirements	To earn the seal in Napa County, you must: • Submit one Civic-Mindedness Reference Form. • Your recommender must speak specifically to your civic-mindedness - not just describe your project. • Recommendations may come from an educator, mentor, co-worker, supervisor, or civic partner or leader.

What Is Civic-Mindedness?

Civic-mindedness means caring about your community and taking responsibility for making it better. It shows up in how you treat others, how you show up for your school or neighborhood, and how you respond to issues that affect the people around you. It is not just what you did - it is who you are becoming in the process.

Tips for asking for a recommendation

- Ask early - give your recommender at least two to three weeks.
- Share this handbook with them so they understand what the seal is about.
- Give them one or two specific examples of your civic-mindedness to remind them of your efforts and commitments.
- Follow up politely if you have not heard back a week before your deadline.

Example: Priya asked her school librarian, who had supported the candidate forum planning.

- *She emailed the librarian the Civic-Mindedness Reference Form link six weeks before her application deadline.*
- *She attached a one-paragraph summary of her project and mentioned two moments the librarian had witnessed.*
- *The librarian completed the Civic-Mindedness Reference Form describing Priya's persistence in organizing the event and her care for students who had never thought about local elections.*

Submitting Your Application

All materials are submitted through the NCOE SSCE portal. Use this checklist to make sure you have everything ready before you submit.

#	Item	Criteria	How to Submit	Done?
1	State Seal of Civic Engagement Counselor Verification	<i>Criteria 1 & 2a</i>	Request from your school counselor; upload via the final application	
2	Civic meeting reflection questions	<i>Criteria 2b</i>	Reflect after attending a meeting and complete in the final application	
3	Project artifact	<i>Criteria 3</i>	Upload via the final application	
4	Project Reflection Questions	<i>Criteria 4</i>	Complete in the final application	
5	Letter of recommendation or endorsement form	<i>Criteria 5</i>	Upload via the final application	

After you submit

- NCOE will review your application and reach out if anything is missing or needs clarification.
- Approved applicants will be notified and the seal will be noted on their official transcript.
- Questions about your submission? Reach out to NCOE at kpineda@napacoe.org.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does my project have to be big?

No. Projects can be small and focused. A well-documented individual action can be just as meaningful as a large group project. What matters is that you went through the IPARD process thoughtfully.

Can I use something I am already doing?

Yes. If you are already involved in a community organization, school group, or civic activity, you can document that work using the IPARD framework.

Can I work with other students?

Yes, group projects are welcome. Each student in the group submits their own application, including their own reflection, so make sure you can speak to your individual role and learning.

What if my plan changes?

That is normal and expected. Document what changed and why. Adapting your plan when circumstances shift is actually a sign of good civic thinking.

What counts as a civic engagement project?

Almost any action that addresses a real need in your community. It should involve identifying a problem, taking action, and reflecting on what you did. If you are not sure whether your idea qualifies, ask your teacher, guidance counselor or reach out to NCOE.

My GPA is below 2.0. Can I still apply?

Talk to your school counselor. Students who have demonstrated significant academic growth over time are considered on a case-by-case basis.

I am on an alternative pathway. Does that affect eligibility?

Not necessarily. NCOE will work with your school and counselor to identify how your progress is documented and whether equivalent verification applies.

Where do I submit everything?

Through the [NCOE SSCE portal](#). Your teacher or counselor can help you access it, or contact NCOE directly at kpineda@napacoe.org

Questions? We are here to help.

Contact the Napa County Office of Education SSCE team or speak with your teacher or school counselor.

NCOE contact Barbara Thorsen bthorsen@napacoe.org
https://napacoe.org/seal_civic_engagement/