



Youth
Civic
Challenge



OUR APPROACH

Civics, defined broadly, is about people working together to common goals.

Youth Civic Challenge (YC²) introduces students to civic leadership through collaboration, strategic thinking tools, and hands-on exploration of community issues. The program helps young people develop their civic voice by encouraging them to question assumptions, understand how systems work, and work together to design meaningful projects that can improve their communities.

On March 12, YC² visited the Howard Gardner School in Sterling, Virginia, working with high school students from both the Sterling and Alexandria campuses.

This session served as a demonstration of the YC² model, offering students a preview of the four-week summer program and introducing them to the tools and mindset of civic leadership.



ROADMAP

The session began immediately with hands on engagement through LEGO Serious Play, allowing students to experience the YC² approach before introducing the underlying framework.

Starting with building, rather than theory, created an environment of participation, creativity, and openness, setting the tone for the day.

Following the build exercises, students were introduced to the twelve lenses of thinking, providing structure and language to reflect on what they had already experienced.

Lenses were introduced by Jerry Eisterhold, Lydia Bird, and Rachel Donovan.



TEAMBUILDING

The session began with two short introductory builds.

Build 1 Construct a duck

Build 2 Build the tallest tower

These exercises helped students become comfortable with the LEGO methodology and encouraged experimentation and creative confidence.

The most impactful teambuilding moment came during the collaborative build.

Students were divided into two groups and asked to merge their individual models into a shared representation of their community.

This required communication, negotiation of ideas, listening, and collective decision making.

Students worked together to identify what they value about their community and what they believe needs to change.

The process highlighted how different viewpoints can come together to form a more complete and meaningful understanding of a shared environment.

Facilitated by Lydia Bird, Mark Hansen, Rachel Donovan, and Melissa Bird.



COMMUNITY EXPLORATION

Students engaged in a series of LEGO Serious Play builds designed to explore identity, perception, and systems.

Build 1: Yourself in your community Students created models representing themselves within Sterling or Alexandria, reflecting their personal experiences and identities.

Build 2: Outside versus inside perspective Students built two contrasting ideas. One model represented how their community is perceived from the outside, while the second represented how it actually feels to live there.

This sparked honest discussion and revealed meaningful differences between perception and lived experience.

Build 3: Systems that shape your life Students expanded their models to include systems that influence their daily lives, such as schools, social structures, and community resources.

This introduced systems thinking and helped students begin identifying opportunities for change.

Students identified key themes including the need for more community hubs, improved transportation access, and increased availability of libraries. These themes reflected a desire for stronger connection, accessibility, and shared spaces within their communities.



ENGAGEMENT

The session included 21 high school students aged 15 through 18.

Students were highly engaged throughout the day. They were creative, thoughtful, outspoken, and willing to share their ideas and perspectives.

They demonstrated strong collaboration skills and showed a willingness to listen to one another and build on shared ideas.

The LEGO Serious Play format created an environment where students felt comfortable expressing themselves and engaging deeply with the material.



FUTURE THINKING AND PROJECT IDEATION

Through the builds and discussions, students began identifying potential areas for future civic projects.

The session successfully sparked interest in civic leadership, encouraged critical thinking about community challenges, and helped students begin envisioning ways they can create meaningful change.



CONCLUSION

The YC² demonstration at the Howard Gardner School provided a dynamic and engaging introduction to the program.

By starting with hands on collaboration and then introducing strategic thinking tools, students were able to both experience and understand the YC² approach.

The creativity, energy, and insight shown by the students suggest strong potential for deeper engagement and meaningful project development in a full YC² program.