



INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

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Creating an Expectation of Service Hearing:
“Civic Education and Service in Schools”

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It was spring of 2018. My students were about to start their weekly Student Leadership Council meeting when I overheard a number of students talking about how this school “sucks.”

Their complaints were justified but beyond the scope of the school’s control. When I asked what was going on, one student replied, “It has been four months since we had access to drinking water on the fourth floor.” This led to the discussion of their rights and responsibilities as members of our school community. As a result of those conversations, they set up a meeting with the Principal to express their grievances.

This became more than just a complaint about the need for drinking water on the fourth floor as the students learned some valuable lessons about the bureaucratic complexities of New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). The school had exhausted its options in demands for the New York City Department of Education to expedite the process of fixing the broken pipes that have led to the shutting down of the water. Upon learning this, the students took action.

Members of the Student Leadership Council wrote a letter to the NYCDOE officials signed by everyone on the council explaining the hardship that the students have been shouldering without access to drinking water. Within 48 hours, the NYCDOE sent 20 ten-liter gallons of water to our school. What this demonstrates to my students is far more than I could have taught them about living in a democratic society. But, at the very least, they understood the power of taking action. As one student eloquently stated, “I believe we can now do anything.” My favorite education philosopher John Dewey said, “Education is not the preparation for life. Education is life itself.” My question is: if education is life itself, what meaning are we giving to that life?

The purpose of education is two-fold, as stated by Martin Luther King. “Education is about intelligence and character.” At the core of these two elements lie the crucial part of education, which is civic education. The ability of our citizens to become effective and contributing members of our society require them to be empowered through knowledge of their government and institutions that ensure the well-being of our society.

The beauty of the United States is that it is a country not founded on ethnicity, religion or common culture. Rather, it is a nation built on a set of ideals: democracy, equality, natural rights and liberty. Every generation since our founding strives to contribute to reach these ideals. In reality, we’ll never fully experience these ideals, but we make an attempt to perfect the union with the passing of each generation.

Civic education is pivotal now more than ever. We’re at a crossroad in our democracy whereby many citizens have minimal understanding of its functions. For example, according to the Annenberg Public Policy Center, in 2017, 33% of Americans could not name a single one of the three branches of government and only 26 percent could name all three.

Furthermore, about one fourth of our fellow citizens can name one of the five First Amendment freedoms. The same study showed that more than half could name at least two of the five Simpsons (Bart, Lisa, Homer, Marge, and Maggie). Only one person in nine could name freedom of the press as a First Amendment right, but twice as many could name all five of the Simpsons.

In addition, native-born Americans know less about the Constitution and American history than do immigrants who become citizens. The Woodrow Wilson Foundation recently gave 40,000 Americans the civics portion of the U.S. citizenship test that immigrants have to pass for naturalization. A majority of adults in every state—except Vermont—failed.

This lack of understanding by a number of our fellow citizens have been accompanied by an erosion of the norms that make democracy possible. According to the Knight-Gallup poll of free expression on campus, 37 percent of college students think it is sometimes appropriate to shout down a speaker you disagree with. The media have abandoned the presumption of innocence so central to the due process rights of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment.

Civics was a staple of public education for most of the twentieth century. The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools notes that “until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools: *Civics* explored the role of citizens especially at the local and state levels, *Problems of Democracy* encouraged students to discuss current issues and events, and *U.S. Government* focused on structures and function of government at the national level.

The goal of civic education should be to empower students with the tools to become informed citizens, and to use their knowledge to contribute to making a difference in their community. I am reminded of this power when my students and I discovered the prevalence of teen pregnancy in the South Bronx. During our “Role of Government in the Economy” unit, my students were able to discover the impact of intergenerational poverty. They used their knowledge to contribute to reducing a crucial element that leads to the perpetual cycle of intergeneration poverty: teen pregnancy. We partnered with an organization in the community that focuses on women’s health and did a project on combating teen pregnancy. My students worked with the organization to conduct focus-groups, and interviews with parents, health officials and experts in this field. They produced 9 educational video series on healthy relationships and ways to avoid teen pregnancy. These materials have been used to educate at least 350 families over the past 18 months. Projects as such contribute not only to deepening the students’ knowledge of the issues, but to empower them to be problem solvers in their communities.

At the core of civic education is empowering students to become problem solvers and to hold those in power accountable. By doing so, we would preserve our democracy for the long run. This however, cannot be done without addressing the challenges of civic education. I see two major challenges for school districts and individual teachers in effectively implementing civic education.

First, the lack of a high-quality national or state standard for civic education makes it difficult for educators to fully engage with this vital topic. Fewer high schools are offering civic classes than in the past and their offerings might not be as rigorous as if there was a national standard.

Second, many textbooks may not fully convey the knowledge or provide opportunities for the development of the appropriate skills in order to fully prepare the citizenry for the duties and responsibilities that are to come. As demonstrated by the statistics mentioned above, the knowledge gap of the citizenry about the people in charge or functions of our democracy is quite wide.

While these challenges are real, the opportunities of civic education are far greater if the appropriate steps are taken. Among those crucial steps are:

- **Develop and distribute civic education materials and resources**

Having such a program would both enhance the quality of civic education nationwide as well as standardize the knowledge and skills outcomes necessary to become both an informed and active participant in our democratic process.

- **Create an institutional home for federal civic education initiatives**

By creating this institution, practitioners would have a place of reference as they tackle the challenges of our democracy and the tremendous benefits of this system. While we do have sites such as icivics that serve a similar purpose, the creation of this institution would be different as it would strive to meet the needs of every state.

- **Create a federal grant program to support civic education initiatives**

One of the biggest challenges that practitioners like myself face in teaching civic education is the limited resources that at times make it difficult for the students to fully experience the power of our democracy. For instance, I have always had a desire to take my students to Washington D.C. to have a first-hand look at the seed of our democracy. Due to lack of funds, this dream has not materialized yet. The other initiatives that my students and I were able to successfully complete such as combating teen pregnancy campaign and food stamp community forum initiatives were funded by private grants.

- **Institute national award and recognition programs to honor excellence in civic education**

By instituting such a program, we would have a great opportunity to highlight the best practitioners across the country and raise awareness of what excellence looks like in teaching civic education. But more importantly, this would lead to the creation of a network of outstanding teachers in this field, who would become ambassadors in each state as well as nationally.

As Americans, we come from different parts of the world with different beliefs and values. What unites us however, are the ideals upon which this country was built: democracy, equality, natural rights and freedom. It is paramount to therefore ensure that the citizenry is educated to understand the function of each of these ideals in our society. By doing so, we would ensure the betterment of the country. But, if we continue to falter on ensuring that Americans are effectively taught civic education, we would therefore be furthering a dangerous trajectory that could in essence weaken our democracy.