



FEATURE

Lack of civics curriculum priority has longterm impact on students, admins

Students who don't receive a proper civics education foundation in grade school may be ill-equipped to become well-informed collegians

By **Shalina Chatlani** • July 12, 2017

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election of Donald Trump, students across the nation became embroiled in an upswing of political activity — whether it came in the form of a heated debate among 9th graders before the start of class or a full-fledged university-wide protest that would make national headlines. For some in the education space, such activity reflected a sign of greater youth interest in the political process. But for many others, the nature of the election also highlighted a critical need for both educators and policymakers to turn a reflective eye toward the quality of civics curriculum at the K-12 level and beyond.

With greater focus on the role of free speech and civil rights in education, the importance of civics curriculum in creating an informed citizenry has received greater attention. In fact, it was the focus of a discussion hosted by the National Archives last week, where experts in a panel entitled, "Enlightened and Engaged: Education for Democracy," tackled the question of whether the current education system is effectively teaching democratic values and civic engagement to youth. Experts explain that civics education is currently not enough of a priority at all levels of education, and if the status quo continues, there will be implications not only for democracy and students, but also for administrators.

Students are generally interested in politics, but lack an effective K-12 civics curriculum

Less than a quarter of 8th graders in the nation are proficient in civics, according to The National Association for Educational Progress's latest report card from 2014. And in the NAEP's assessment from 2010, which looked at civics education at the 4th, 8th, and 12th grade levels, the study found that while 4th graders made progress in civics from 1998, 8th and 12th graders made no progress at all. In this assessment just 27% of 4th graders, 22% of 8th graders, and 24% of 12th graders performed at proficient level, meaning that the majority of students don't have a basic understanding of civics.

Daniel J. McGrath, Chief of the Reporting Branch for the National Center for Education Statistics, opened up the panel discussion with a look at these statistics and commentary on the current state of civics curriculum in the nation. He explains that the majority of students have an incomplete knowledge of how the government works, breaking down some of the key areas where this a gap in knowledge.

"In the case of grade 12 civics, [at the proficient level] they should understand what civil society, politics, and government are. They should understand some of the foundations of the American political system, [...] how the government works, how various entities contribute to the electoral process, they should be able to identify the roles of citizens," said McGrath.

"So at grade 12, 64% of students in 2010 reached a basic level, which means that 36% didn't reach a basic level. That doesn't mean they don't have any knowledge of civics at all, but they have an incomplete knowledge," he said.

But McGrath also noted later that students are generally excited about social studies and interested in talking about politics.

"The thing that we find, relative to other subjects, is that kids tend to be really engaged in social studies. Now I'm not saying they're doing engaging things. In 2014, 69% of 8th graders said social studies was a favorite subject...so when you talk about infrastructure, one of the resources we seem to have is interested students," he said.

Scott Warren, CEO of Generation Citizen, a non-profit organization that is dedicated toward enhance civics education

through strategies like experiential learning, responded to this point and explained that part of the reason why students are not getting what they need from the classroom, is because schools are lacking the resources and the proper teaching.

"I think one thing that needs to be done more is that teachers, even colleges need to prioritize actually teaching educators — it's a tricky subject to teach, so we need to teach educators how to teach it. And, there needs to be time in the classroom to actually do this, said Warren.

"And one thing we've heard a lot of too, is that as teachers consider teaching civics and politics especially in this day and age right now they often treat it as the third rail. They know that students are talking about it, but they don't want to say something out of line and have a parent say something about it," he said. "And so, we aren't providing them the resources to teach them how to teach effectively."

And data show that most educators are truly not prepared to teach civics education. For instance, the National Center for Educational Statistics' 2011-12 School and Staffing survey found that of 2,014,000 high school students, 92.9% were taught by government teachers who didn't major in the area they were teaching. And among those educators, 78.3% didn't even receive a certification to teach a civics course.

Warren says that this is an issue, not only because civics isn't already prioritized in K12, but also because civics generally a tricky subject. The little focus on the curriculum, therefore, may not be entirely effective.

"To teach young people you have to do A, B, and C and D might not happen... that's a hard thing to do, and that's different from every subject. Part of that is recognition of how do you teach young people that political engagement is really important, and also that you are not going to get what you want all of the time. There's a complexity there."

Ineffective K-12 civics education means students don't fully understand their democratic rights in college and beyond

Peter Bonilla, vice president of the Foundation of Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), has been working through this organization with faculty and students for several years on defending their constitutional rights, and especially freedom of speech and expression. He explained at the panel that lack of proper K12 civics education can have consequences as students enter college and prepare to engage in a more political environment.

"When the circumstances warrant it, we go to that student or faculty member's defense for the organization, writing their university letters explaining where they went wrong in their censorship or in the enforcement of a particular policy against a student or faculty member, and much more often than not winning a favorable outcome..." Bonilla explained.

"[But] at some point we realized that that was only going to get us so far if we were going to improve the overall culture for free speech in higher education," he said. "Many of the issues that we are focusing on in higher education become urgent much sooner than that. It was important to us to go from educating the college community to doing what we could to help give high school students a stronger foundation in first amendment values, give them an understanding in the philosophy of freedom of expression and give them a lesson in tolerance and humility, the virtues of civil discourse."

But at the same time that students entering university may not be receiving proper civics education, they already believe that they are going to protest at least some point while they are enrolled. A recent report entitled, "Navigating the New Wave of Student Activism," shows that 10% of incoming first-year college students in 2015 said that they would most likely participate in a form of protest while in school, with another 69% of respondents saying they would support policies that limit offensive speech on campus.

And in fact, administrators have been seeing a great deal of political activism among their students on a number of race, gender, and socioeconomic concerns – high-profile protests at the University of Missouri, Evergreen State College, and the University of Cincinnati, for instance – but are still navigating what the most appropriate response to this trend is. For the most

part, students' demands are focusing on their free speech rights, their civil liberties, and the role of administrators in creating an inclusive campus.

But still, administrators often face difficulty navigating the extent to which free speech can go on college campuses, particularly when they feel First Amendment rights are being morphed into something else--like hate speech and threats against faculty members. George S. Bridges wrote in an article for The Seattle Times that he felt that protests at his institution, Evergreen State College, showed how administrators increasingly are dealing with a difficult situation of defending free speech, while still ensuring safety on campus.

"We are focused on our future as a college community, as a catalyst for businesses, jobs and prosperity in the region, and as an integral part of the state's higher education system. How do we change and adapt to thrive in this era of national polarization?" he wrote. "Some steps we must take are clear. To preserve freedom from discrimination and of expression for all at Evergreen, we must have greater accountability and consequences for those who would deny those rights to others."

"Freedom of speech belongs to all. Freedom to threaten does not. I am talking with Evergreen faculty and students, alumni, legislators and others about how we can strengthen and clarify the rules for conduct. Since the disruptions, which took place on campus in late May, students are being investigated for violations of the student-conduct code, and their cases are currently under review. If they are found to have violated the code, sanctions range from a written reprimand to expulsion," he explained.

It is evident that as students enter college campuses and go on to become productive citizens of civil society, a foundation in civics curriculum better prepares them to understand the extent and limitations of their constitutional rights. Lack of such knowledge can have an effect on how administrators do their jobs, as they must figure out how to offer students the rights they are demanding, while also explaining that some types actions are actually prohibited by law.

But as Bonilla notes, such an understanding cannot come through merely supporting knowledge of free and speech and promoting a culture of democracy on campus. For this to happen, such learning has to begin at the K12 level, proper teaching of how to teach civics curriculum must occur at the college level, and adequate resources must be provided – a point that the panelists all agreed on.

Prioritization of civics education must involve opportunities for an interdisciplinary, experiential learning approach

When it came to whether public schools were ideal for teaching of democratic values, Bonilla responded that public schools were the perfect laboratory for this.

"I think our public schools are naturally the best place to do a lot of these, whether it comes to the efforts to increasingly dedicated teaching professionals or from a number of other sources. I think it's a unique laboratory for the democratic process..." he said.

"Social studies and civics classes [compared to other subjects] open it up a little bit more to the students, give them for the first time in their educational career, some sort of authorship over how the discussion goes...and the right and ability to argue an issue from any number of perspectives, and I don't think there are many other places where you can replicate that kind of laboratory setting."

And the first way to make this laboratory effective is to personalize the civics lessons to high schools students, according to another panelist Peggy Jackson, the board president of the National Council for the Social Studies.

"I think the most important thing that I do initially to teach them about the Bill of Rights is that the constitution itself is a framework....after that framework is created, the Bill of Rights is added to say what the government cannot do for us," she said. "And of course...if you know any 18 year old, is probable cause they want to know for sure that nobody can go in their car, nobody can go in their house without probable cause to search and seize anything they find."

But in addition to this, she emphasized the importance of experiential learning techniques, such as games, to get students invested in the democratic process. She mentioned a game she played called "Deciding to decide," where students gave their input on how the Supreme Court may rule on current cases, forcing students to learn things like the delineation between state and federal roles.

Warren added to this point, explaining that civics in practice is actually incredibly interdisciplinary. When citizens are acting in the real world, he said, they are actually pulling from a number of different core subjects, and teachers often don't realize this when they tend to prioritize other topics, sometimes for the sake of meeting Common Core curriculum requirements.

"Public schools were created literally so that we could ensure we had an informed and engaged citizenry, which is something I think has been lost to some extent...[but] it really can be interdisciplinary, because to have an engaged citizenry you have to hold all of those expertise at once. For instance, we got students that are trying to take action on water safety in their schools, they have to look at PH levels and understand science..." he said.

He offers an example of where educators are instilling civic values in students effectively, such as in a New York school. There, he worked with 11th graders that were were looking at gentrification and affordable housing the state, and they actually worked on a bill that would incentivize landlords to offer up affordable housing by providing tax incentives for landlords to do so. When they realized it wouldn't pass, they found out it got stuck in a committee, and proceeded to learn about that process.

But beyond just experiential opportunities, he says it really comes down to recognizing the need for prioritization.

"What we hear from educators on a daily basis is the extent to which they don't have time to teach this. Assessments don't reflect that we prioritize it, and there's not resources to do so," he said. "I think you're seeing educators that are hungry to teach this and students especially in this moment that want to talk

about politics. We need to reflect that we actually prioritize this on every level, we just haven't yet."