

Teaching Civics in Hyper-Partisan Times

January 25, 2020 ★ Minneapolis



Key Takeaways, Minnesota

Thank you for participating in Education Week's live event, "Teaching Civics in Hyperpartisan Times."

We wanted to send you this brief memo of takeaways to round out your experience—and more importantly, share the insights that each of you brought to the table as part of your discussion groups. We hope it will supplement the tools you took away with you and form a point of departure for the work you're doing in your own communities, nonprofit organizations, school districts, and classrooms. This data will be used to create issues guidance documents to share with your colleagues nationwide. We'll keep you posted on when those become available.

First, at the beginning of the workshop, Dr. Carcasson posed this question:

How would you complete this sentence: We want our civic education to ?

Looking at the responses provided another helpful way to think about the challenges of civics education. They tended to fall into three categories, each looking at the issue from a distinct lens: the what, the how, and the why. Selections from your responses follow.

Some attendees said they wanted civics education to hone specific content and skills (the "what"):

- Develop critical thinking
- Learn how to develop and sustain mechanisms for problem solving.
- Provide engagement opportunities
- Teach how governments work in the USA

- Teach principles
- Assess complex issues critically
- To know how history has led us to this current moment in time
- Engage students with current events
- Engage students to be problem solvers
- Teach students to think critically about and process opposing viewpoints.
- Teach students how our government functions
- Ensure the knowledge of how our governmental systems work
- Foster intellectual humility
- Broaden the conception of politics and civics beyond voting and volunteering
- Educate students on systems and processes.
- Educate our students about how governments work
- Respect for minority voice (minority opinion, not racial minority)
- Engage students in critical thinking.

Some focused on specific teaching methods, especially on providing relevant and authentic experiences for engaging through civic channels (the “how”):

- Be authentic
- Give students opportunities to practice civic participation
- Encourage students to vote
- Allow students to discuss and disagree respectfully
- To empower students to engage proactively in their government and the local affairs of their communities. All politics is local.
- Provide engagement opportunities
- Give students the experiences of and skills for participating as engaged citizens in a democracy.
- Engage people to understand and know how to engage and respond in community.
- Promote civic learning and civil responsibility thru meaningful public policy engagement
- Involve students now in civic life
- Teach hands on, in- person engagement rather than online anonymous rants or tweets
- Be simultaneously informative & engaging.
- Be neutral and come unbiased
- Be a priority in funding
- Help students get involved in processes that affect them
- Not be responsive to the newest crisis ... to focus on institutions rather than scandal

And some on the overarching goal of civics education, which is to build citizens (the “why”):

- Encourage participation in self-governance
- Prepare the next generation of citizens
- Create active participation in civic life
- Build a more perfect union—now and for future generations
- Create good citizens who know how to and do participate in a democracy.
- Understand the mechanics of how citizens are in charge of their political futures.
- Develop critical thinking skills, argumentation skills, and understanding of modes of engagement to change outcomes that require collective action
- Create active participants in our democracy
- Motivate students to vote and participate in democracy.
- Create thoughtful educated citizens motivated to participate in civic life
- Train for citizenship
- Create a lifelong habit of civic responsibility
- Inspire intellectual curiosity
- Create an active and engaged citizenry
- Build a solid foundation for democracy
- Produce educated citizens
- To prepare future citizens for the responsibility of our republic
- To understand both their rights and obligations to help promote and continue a healthy democracy that works for all.
- Produce citizens armed with the knowledge and skills to produce a more just society
- Prepare students for an engaged, reasoned, skeptical, civic life.
- Create engaged, compassionate, informed citizens who understand that democracy is messy, but worth it
- Prepare students to effectively engage in the civic affairs of their communities.

By the end of our workshop, Dr. Carcasson asked you to answer this question:

What is the most important idea you heard (or said yourself) today that you want to make sure we capture?

We have grouped the responses into five takeaways and highlighted a few phrases in red that speak to some of attendees' core insights.

1. The work is difficult but vital.

- We are creating the first multiracial, multi-culture, full-functioning democracy in the history of the world. **Civics teachers are in the cutting edge of that change.** It will not be an easy transition.
- That **civics education *cannot* be optional or extracurricular**
- **Why is easy. How is harder.**
- Civic education must not only lead to understanding of local, state, and national government but lead to **engagement and participation** in them.

2. We must acknowledge and respond to the complexity of the endeavor, especially given the political climate and the needs of diverse students (immigrants, undocumented students, students of color.)

- Educators are sensitive to students' **unique needs** re: teaching civics.
- Do we need to **teach civics in a different manner to those students who are new to country?** (Ineligible to vote)
- Teach civic learning and civil responsibility K-12 as a significant approach [is] **getting progressively more intense each year.**
- Wrestling with impartiality
- Conflict resolution, calm communication, needs to **start at a young age**, younger than kindergarten
- **Lead with what students need**
- Elementary and secondary **contexts are vastly different** when it comes to civics
- There is **a large difference between teaching facts and teaching applicable skills.** We need to find the balance.
- The complications involved in dealing with **conflicting values**
- Ensure a **transition** across all grades—PK-12

3. That democratic institutions inherently have conflict built into them, and the teaching of civics does, too.

- Democracy has **conflict inherent to it.** The object of civic education is to understand and value that and to learn to compromise.
- **Democracy and dissonance are okay.**
- There are **inherent tensions** in any large topic or concept
- Establish critical thinking skills and **don't avoid controversial topics.**

4. A general agreement that integrating the three approaches outlined in Carcasson's document is probably the most powerful way to teach civics.

- The **three approaches** suggested are silos of teaching. Incorporate the what should be done and the pros of all three over several classes over 9-12 grades.
- **Connect** approach 1 with approach 2 and with approach 3
- Empowering students to actively participate in democracy **requires civic education in all three approaches** –need to know foundations and skills of inquiry to engage effectively in community.
- **Starting** with information literacy and critical thinking, then **introducing** traditional civics with expedition components
- **Moving** civic education from 'lead to an understanding' (lower left box) to actual 'practice functioning in all levels of government.'

5. A concern about other challenges, including the treatment of teachers, and other questions that came up at individual tables and were not focal points of the event.

- Are there **"American values"** that should be shared with students?
- Teaching has been **deprofessionalized**
- **Listen** to teachers
- Offer **ways to engage adults**
- Differences between **governance**, issue advocacy/policy, and partisan/candidate campaigning
- If education is a civic right, why don't kids know that

We hope you enjoyed the event. Please send any additional feedback to mcibellis@educationweek.org.