

## **When a “D” in Civics Is the Goal: Promoting Discourse in (and for) Civics Education**

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In this season of political lamentation, as Americans decry partisan polarization and a jarring absence of civility in political discourse, a large number of politicians, educators and thinkers of all stripes are increasingly revisiting what to many seems the related question of civic education and its role, if any, in fashioning the sort of deliberative democracy our Founders hoped to create. The cause for concern about our so-called civic illiteracy, though not new, is gaining traction as varied reports paint a bleak picture of both lack of civics knowledge and so-called “civic-mindedness,” understood as the foundation of political participation in a democratic republic. Recent studies, for example, find more than a third of Americans ignorant of the fact that the Bill of Rights guarantees them the right to a jury trial; 40% erroneously assume that the first ten amendments enumerate their right to vote.<sup>1</sup> And if most Americans cannot name the three branches of the government or any member of the Supreme Court<sup>2</sup>, studies by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni reveal that college students fare little better than the general population in responding to basic civics questions.<sup>3</sup> Add to stubbornly low voter turnout rates among Millennials the fact that, more broadly, “declining proportions [of Americans] say that free elections are important in a democratic society,”<sup>4</sup> and the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan R. Cole, “Ignorance Does Not Lead to Election Bliss,” *The Atlantic*, November 8, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford Janey, “Is Trump’s Victory the Jump-Start Civics Education Needed?” *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Cole, “Ignorance Does Not Lead to Election Bliss.”

<sup>4</sup> Kahlenberg and Janey, “Is Trump’s Victory the Jump-Start Civics Education Needed?”; for a more comprehensive discussion of lack of political participation among Americans, see Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer, “Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need To Do,” in *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems and Possibilities*, 3rd ed., E. Wayne Ross, ed. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 299.

hand-wringing and prolific ideas about how to correct course alike begin to seem both more understandable and worthy of our attention.

Though the contentious 2016 presidential election may have brought beliefs about civics (mis)education into even sharper relief, the question of whether (and how) civics ought to form an integral part of the school curriculum has been debated since the earliest public education theories were propounded in this country. Like his counterparts in forging a new republic, Thomas Jefferson believed that education was an instrument for preventing tyranny; the American experiment required a thoughtful, well-educated citizenry up to the task of preserving its liberties. But if American democratic republicanism had from its origins presumed a citizenry schooled in and dedicated to democratic ideals, it was Horace Mann who, in the mid-19th century, perhaps best articulated the connection between education and citizenship in a rapidly evolving democracy (one that, indeed, would have been increasingly unrecognizable to its founders): “As the ‘child is the father to the man,’” he wrote in the Twelfth Annual Report of his reform manifesto, “so may the training of the schoolroom expand into the institutions and fortunes of the State.”<sup>5</sup> Echoing Jefferson, Mann colorfully warned that a republican form of government without educated citizens would be akin to a “mad-house without superintendent or keepers.” Linking an intelligent populace and virtuous government, he asserted: “In a republican government, legislators are a mirror reflecting the moral countenance of their constituents. And hence it is, that the establishment of a republican government, without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people, is the most rash and fool hardy experiment ever tried by man.”<sup>6</sup> While the notion that education and citizenship go hand in hand

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<sup>5</sup> Horace Mann, “Twelfth Annual Report (1848),” in *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men*, Lawrence A. Cremin, ed. (New York: Teachers’ College Press, 1957), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Mann, “Twelfth Annual Report,” 91.

in a republic such as ours seems indisputable, however, it was--and is--by no means a foregone conclusion that schools have a unique and uncomplicated responsibility to instruct our youngest citizens in the requirements of republicanism, or, for that matter, in the ways and means of American governing bodies, political agencies, or policy debates, past or present. In 1932, as the nation was entering yet another phase of profound change in the relationship between government and the people, Bertrand Russell acknowledged that one of the primary purposes of education is to “train useful citizens.”<sup>7</sup> He did not, however, define what, specifically, “useful” meant, or how, in reality, training for this purpose was to be accomplished. We continue to debate these questions, with increasing ferocity, today.

Though civics education is assumed to have disappeared from the nation’s curricula in the 1960s --a casualty of the late-20th century culture wars and preoccupation with what are now known as STEM subjects--in fact, the current portrait of what Russell might call our citizenship training is a far more complex. All 50 states and the District of Columbia now require their schools to teach at least one course in civics--typically understood as the study of U.S. government. Not surprisingly, therefore, nearly 90% of American high school students are enrolled in such courses. According to Tufts Center for Information on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), however, state standards focus on factual knowledge rather than the “skills and dispositions” that latter day reformers believe will yield fuller comprehension of the U.S. political system.<sup>8</sup> More pointedly, argue critics, though 37 states require students to demonstrate proficiency in civics and/or social studies (which encompasses civics, U.S. history and economics), only nine require students to pass a standardized social studies test to graduate.

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<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, “The Negative Theory of Education,” in *The Teacher and the Taught: Education in Theory and Practice from Plato to James B. Conant*, Ronald Gross, ed. (New York: Dell, 1963), 213.

<sup>8</sup> <http://civicyouth.org/quick-facts/quick-facts-civic-education/>

The latest available National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores, meanwhile, show that only a quarter of American eighth graders are proficient in civics, with white students four to six times more likely than black or Hispanic students to exceed that level. Overall, then, social studies education has declined in curricular importance nationally, with only 21 states now requiring students to pass a state social studies/civics test (down from 34 at the turn of the 21st century).

In view of the increasing ideological polarization that has characterized the American political system since the 1980s, it cannot come as a surprise that into this “civics breach” have surged a large number of organizations eager to restore civic education to what they consider its former status in American society. That that status was never conclusively determined or clearly articulated seems not to concern activists who, regardless of whatever other political ideologies divide them, share a common belief in the potential, and indeed necessity, of civics education as a cure for our political and social ills. Among popular recent initiatives to support and engender civics education in the United States is the Dreyfuss Civics Initiative, founded by the actor Richard Dreyfuss in 2008, which describes itself as a “a non-profit, non-partisan organization that aims to revive the teaching of civics in American public education to empower future generations with the critical-thinking skills they need to fulfill the vast potential of American citizenship.”<sup>9</sup> iCivics, founded in 2009 by Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, offers a much more comprehensive menu of online lessons, games, and activities for K-12 teachers and students on the assumption that civic knowledge--accessible, fun, and available for free--will promote civic engagement among our youth. As the iCivics website explains, “our

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<sup>9</sup> <https://thedreyfussinitiative.org/mission/>

public schools were founded to teach young people to understand [our governmental] structures, and to cultivate informed citizens. Yet students are growing up in an uncivic-minded era.”<sup>10</sup> This assumption that public (and presumably private) schools have relinquished and/or failed in fulfilling their foundational mission has animated yet another popular effort, the Joe Foss Institute’s effort to require students to pass a version of the naturalization exam prior to graduation from high school. The Arizona-based non-profit, named after a decorated World War II pilot, has worked with an affiliate, the Civics Proficiency Institute, to successfully support state legislation in eight states, all of them Republican, requiring students to correctly answer 60 of 100 factual questions that it deems essential for American citizens to know. Unabashed in its commitment to instilling patriotism, the Institute, according to some observers, is merely putting into practice what Mann and others long ago envisioned: a “common” citizenship curriculum--however mechanical and based on rote knowledge--that would serve as the foundation of the common school, and of loyalty to the United States (no small feat in the mid-19th century, as immigrants streamed into the country) more broadly.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these discrete organizations, the civics momentum has also produced a network of charter schools, the Democracy Prep Public Schools, that explicitly aim to graduate “citizen-scholars” based on their assumption “that all public schools should place an explicit focus on preparing scholars to become active citizens and leaders in our democracy. Through civic initiatives, community engagement, speech and debate, and authentic student and family advocacy for more school choice, our scholars acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitude to change the world.”<sup>12</sup> Rounding out examples of civics initiatives is a schools-based initiative, Generation Citizen, whose

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.icivics.org/our-story>

<sup>11</sup> Vauhini Vara, “What’s the Right Way to Teach Civics?” *The New Yorker*, August 4, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> <http://democracyprep.org/about/>

response to the perceived problem of insufficient engagement by youth in civic life is to develop curricula and partner with local schools as they guide students in addressing socio-political issues of their choice: “We inspire civic participation through a proven state standards-aligned action civics class that gives students the opportunity to experience real-world democracy. Through student-driven projects, youth learn how to effect policy change by engaging with local government and leaders to solve community problems.”<sup>13</sup>

The aspirations of earlier philosophers and some of the contemporary activists aside, it seems reasonable to ask whether civics education is indeed the remedy for our current state of political polarization, or likely only to mirror, perhaps even exacerbate, our gaping divisions. Their deeply-felt intentions notwithstanding, the civics advocates who have emerged in the past two decades (no less than their diverse missions) often underscore how little public deliberation has gone into the deeper questions that arguably ought to undergird what can be termed the civics project: What exactly is civics? How do civic knowledge, engagement and virtue differ from one another? Which, if any, is the proper purview of secondary schools? Given the indisputably political nature of all education, who--the federal government, the individual states, school districts, families--has the right to decide what a civics curriculum should look like (and even more importantly, accomplish)?

As the 20th century came to a close amid profound changes in industrial capacity which irrevocably altered American society, John Dewey, arguably the most influential educational philosopher in American history, made the compelling argument that “[i]f our education is to have any meaning for life, it must pass through an equally complete transformation.”<sup>14</sup> Later in

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<sup>13</sup> <https://generationcitizen.org/about-us/the-solution-action-civics/>

<sup>14</sup> *John Dewey on Education, Selected Writings*, Reginald D. Archambault, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 309.

the century, Bertrand Russell likewise suggested that it does no good to design an educational system that is at odds with socio-political and economic realities. But, as Hofstadter reminds us, “Dewey was also trying to find the educational correlates of a democratic and progressive society,” rather than design an educational system that would only perpetuate society’s existing--often unjust and unequal--structures: “It was in this sense,” wrote Hofstadter, “that he saw education as a major force in social *reconstruction* [emphasis added].”<sup>15</sup> But while Dewey wanted to realign American education with what he hoped would become a revitalized society, according to Hofstadter, he offered only the barest general discussion of how his educational program--which still serves as the foundation for much of American schooling today--would help us realize the full potential of our distinctive democracy: “his view of the problem of education and democracy,” argued Hofstadter, “was not economic or sociological, or even political, except in the broadest sense of that term.”<sup>16</sup> If Dewey had only a vague notion of how his student-centric educational model would serve to advance socio-political democratic ideals, however, later philosophers offered a clearer sense of the preconditions of educating American citizens for the demands of republican citizenship. Arthur Bestor, a mid-20th century critic of the progressive education movement that Dewey’s writings had spawned, also viewed education as “almost the only force *within* society that is capable, in some measure, of *altering* society [emphasis in the original].”<sup>17</sup> While Dewey celebrated a child-centered, “psychologized” educational system, Bestor--a sharp critique of such a system and its slippery “life-adjustment”

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 363.

<sup>16</sup> Hofstadter, 379.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Bestor, “The Distinctive Function of the Schools,” in *The Teacher and the Taught: Education in Theory and Practice from Plato to James B. Conant*, Ronald Gross, ed. (New York: Dell, 1963), 196.

permutations--sought to restore to its rightful place what he thought ought to be the central focus of schools: intellectual training, or “the deliberate cultivation of the ability to think.”<sup>18</sup>

For future teachers of American governmental institutions and practices, Bestor’s paradigm of rigorous knowledge acquisition offers a unique opportunity, and challenge. “Freedom to think--which means nothing unless it means freedom to think differently--can be society’s most precious gift to itself. The first duty of a school is to defend and cherish it,” Bestor had enjoined. Warning against the “anonymous forces in the community that insist on like-mindedness,” Bestor implied that these were the true enemies of freedom, intellectual and otherwise, in America.<sup>19</sup> The problem, of course, for teachers, activists, and nearly everyone else who desires not only widespread civics knowledge for its own sake but also some collateral benefit in the form of a societal glue that binds us to the body politic, ensuring our investment in its perpetuation (much like Alexander Hamilton’s brilliant idea of a national debt that would ensure investors’ interest in the continued well being of the national economy), is that teaching and learning are never politically neutral acts. Mann tried to assuage nascent concerns that his common school would indoctrinate youth in ways their parents (and churches) would find anathema, by insisting that commonly accepted “articles in the creed of republicanism, which are accepted by all, believed in by all, and which form the common basis of our political faith” can and should be taught without incident. The teacher who encounters “a controverted text,” he advised, “should read it without comment or remark; or, at most...say that the passage is the subject of disputation, and that the schoolroom is neither the tribunal to adjudicate, nor the forum

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<sup>18</sup> Bestor, “The Distinctive Function of Schools,” 194-95.

<sup>19</sup> Bestor, “The Distinctive Function of Schools,” 207.

to discuss it.”<sup>20</sup> His assurances, however, ring hollow. Which republican articles are accepted by all? Certainly not those in the Bill of Rights, which has been subject to often contentious interpretation for hundreds of years. And what teacher “encounters” a text? Most of us select it, and select in what context (and with how much emphasis) to present it. Most of all, if the schoolroom is not the forum to interrogate and discuss political controversies--historical or current--what is a better forum, and what, indeed, is the point of civics education?

Terminology, it seems, is destiny. Much of the controversy that surrounds civics education is grounded in the different definitional ideas many hold about what civics *is*.<sup>21</sup> To some, the Joe Foss Institute among them, civics education is the internalization of factual *information* about the American government. Other initiatives, meanwhile, focus on civic *engagement*--the promotion of civic activism among the younger generation as part of the assumption that knowledge is but a handmaiden--and in fact better gained--by action in one’s community. The distinctions among the various definitions are not trivial; they imply widely divergent methodologies. The factual education model, for example, is arguably best served by direct instruction models and/or individual learning by a student adept at traditional linguistic pedagogies. Civic engagement à la the Generation Citizen approach, on the other hand, demands a much more varied pedagogical palette, one whose elements of traditional curricula are designed to facilitate the more important goal of hands-on communal engagement, on the assumption that citizenship demands vigorous action, not just knowledge (or, for that matter, the periodic casting of votes). Taken to its logical conclusion, some argue, the demand for restoring “an explicit civics curriculum” that places democratic principles at its center ought to be attended

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<sup>20</sup> Mann, “The Twelfth Annual Report,” 97.

<sup>21</sup> For a helpful definitional overview, see “Civic Education,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 27, 2007, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civic-education/>

by a reinforcing “implicit curriculum” which models (rather than merely teaches) democratic values: “In addition to teaching democratic values directly, what if educators and policymakers thought more carefully about addressing what is taught to students implicitly through how they choose to run schools?”<sup>22</sup> In other words, in such a practice-what-you-preach model, local school districts would solicit decision-making input from parents, teachers and community members, offering these participants agency that they don’t otherwise exercise. More radically, such approaches to civic education and engagement would begin to address the vexing underlying issue of our socioeconomically segregated schools, which, in addition to flying against cherished values of justice and equal opportunity, actually exacerbate the achievement gap.<sup>23</sup>

In deciding which of the proliferating civics definitions and models to adopt, or even interrogate, the American high school teacher might do well to consider that not all attempts to restore civic competence are focused on the high school level, and that none yet seem to conclusively resolve “the civics dilemma.” E. D. Hirsch, for example, has refined his advocacy of a core curriculum to include primarily K-8 teaching of the civics content on which he claims we can all agree--the nation’s foundational texts (*The Declaration of Independence* and the Constitution, for example) as well as what he calls “consensus changes toward greater inclusiveness and progress in social justice, which are part of our founding ideal.”<sup>24</sup> Consistent with his broader critique of progressive educational philosophies that he deems fundamentally “anti-intellectual”, Hirsch claims that, “[a]s a transethnic nation, we have a greater need for an *invented* common sphere that is determined not by blood and soil or hearth and home but by

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<sup>22</sup> Kahlenberg and Janey, “Is Trump’s Victory the Jump-Start Civics Education Needed?”

<sup>23</sup> Kahlenberg and Janey, “Is Trump’s Victory the Jump-Start Civics Education Needed?”

<sup>24</sup> E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 172.

transethnic traditions concerning our history, laws, and freedoms.”<sup>25</sup> At the elementary and middle school levels, national unity based on common language and literacy does seem to offer a path to the sort of “patriotism devoted to the good of the whole” that Hirsch claims James Madison and his cohort sought to foster. Unlike traditional jingoism, the “true American form of patriotism is commodious rather than tribal.”<sup>26</sup> On closer examination, however, as Hirsch himself concedes, “attempts to create guidelines for teaching American history in the schools have been occasions for fierce disputes between triumphal patriots on one side and critics of narrow nationalism on the other.”<sup>27</sup> If, as he hopes, a common core at the K-8 level requires us to “rediscover some basic agreements about the United States and its ideals that are shared by both the left and the right,”<sup>28</sup> we are arguably back to square one, and a contentious one at that. Hirsch is a learned guide to what he describes as the “fundamental debate about the American political religion as it pertains to the duties of the school curriculum,” namely, “whether America is primarily a formal structure that is sustained, as Lincoln implied, by core laws and a common language, yet open to constant changes of content, or whether America remains a system of Protestant, Anglo-Saxon values and traditions—a specific content pretending to be a merely formal structure.”<sup>29</sup> But his optimistic assumptions about resolving that debate for the sake of a mutually-agreed upon curriculum for our younger students should give us pause. Given that, by his own admission, “[t]he core curriculum...must be consistent with what both parties to the debate can agree on, and this is, at a minimum, the more formal, structural account of our polity that emphasizes the abstract principles of liberty, equality, and toleration, as well as the uneven

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<sup>25</sup> Hirsch, *The Making of Americans*, 186.

<sup>26</sup> Hirsch, *The Making of Americans*, 92.

<sup>27</sup> Hirsch, *The Making of Americans*, 65-66.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, *The Making of Americans*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Hirsch, *The Making of Americans*, 73.

history of our efforts to make them prevail,”<sup>30</sup> it seems fair to question which content in particular Hirsch believes would satisfy that requirement, and why he believes any but the broadest-brush curriculum would gain universal support. While that sort of curriculum would bind young Americans to their nation, it would not necessarily satisfy more the more substantive need that the quest for civics knowledge seems to imply.

Efforts to develop civic-mindedness at the college level, meanwhile, promise to bypass curricular choices in favor of the sort of hands-on political engagement that might make those choices either self-evident or obsolete. Tufts’ Tisch College of Civic Life and affiliated research center (CIRCLE) have been doing impressive work in this field but, by design, do not address the needs for civic knowledge and engagement at what may perhaps be the most appropriate age to begin addressing the complications of U.S. history and government: the high school level. In the best of circumstances, it is the high school student whose allegiance to her country can be deepened by debate about the political choices that have made it what it is today.

Debate, or better yet discourse, may be the answer we seek, not least because it poses more questions than it offers definitive conclusions--a fitting paradigm for a polity such as ours, whose complexities are at once integral to its very design and not sufficiently, or productively, appreciated by its citizens. In 1995, Neil Postman wrote a thought-provoking book, *The End of Education*, in which he not only returned to first principles, but offered a compelling path forward for constructing what he termed narratives that might answer our deepest questions about the purposes of education, the end, so to speak, of schooling. Evoking ideas about the transformative power of schools articulated long ago by Dewey and Bestor, Postman reminded

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<sup>30</sup> Hirsch, *The Making of Americans*, 75-76.

us that Americans tend to believe in two contradictory reasons for schooling: “One is that schools must teach the young to accept the world as it is, with all of their culture’s rules, requirements, constraints and even prejudices. The other is that the young should be taught to be critical thinkers, so that they become men and women of independent mind, distanced from the conventional wisdom of their own time and with strength and skill enough to change what is wrong.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than avoid the often treacherous shoals of patriotism, however, Postman suggested that teachers embrace it as a “profound and transcendent narrative...the story of America...as a center of continuous argument.”<sup>32</sup> Posing questions that seem to cut to the heart of what educational theorists as distinctive as Dewey and Hirsch had earlier contemplated, Postman prodded: “Is it too much to say that the arguments are the energy and the glory of the American experiment? Is it too much to hope that our young might learn to honor the tradition and to be inspired by it?”<sup>33</sup> And he offered perhaps a better template of sequential discourse than we have yet encountered by suggesting that “...as students progress from elementary school to high school to college, the study of the American experiment in freedom of expression must deepen, the arguments considered must increase in complexity, and the documents containing them must be more various....[I]t should at all times be made clear that the arguments are not finished; that today they are pursued with the passion they once were...”<sup>34</sup>

In effect, Postman’s schema prefigured a more recent, concrete explication of the “political classroom” by Hess and McAvoy, who have attempted to design a model of productive, authentic civics education that allows schools to be the political spaces they ought to

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<sup>31</sup> Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 60.

<sup>32</sup> Postman, *The End of Education*, 132.

<sup>33</sup> Postman, *The End of Education*, 135.

<sup>34</sup> Postman, *The End of Education*, 134.

be (inescapably are), without, however, degenerating into partisan ones. Cognizant of how our current political polarization complicates such a project, Hess and McAvoy nonetheless believe in schools as political sites: “we use the term ‘political’ as it applies to the role of citizens within a democracy...By extension, the *political classroom* is one that helps students develop their ability to deliberate political questions.”<sup>35</sup> Hess and McAvoy forthrightly reject the notion that schools can be--or even should be--politically neutral institutions: “In fact, the political classroom is undergirded by values that promote a particular view of democratic life and so cannot be considered neutral.”<sup>36</sup> In outlining a curriculum that is explicitly designed to promote the sort of deliberative democracy that the nation’s founders envisioned, the authors address the most critical developmental needs of high school students (and the requisite qualities of the adult voters they will soon become): “Mastering the ability to talk across political and ideological differences helps create an informed citizenry--an essential component of a democratic society--by teaching students to weigh evidence, consider competing views, form an opinion, articulate that opinion, and respond to those who disagree.”<sup>37</sup> Here, content as significant and controversial as the 2nd Amendment is discussed, while underlying questions--including the most foundational, “how should we live together?”--are deliberated. The fusion of content and skill seems seamless. Moreover, the oft-feared specter of nationalism is tamed in such a classroom, which may offer the most hospitable environment for Postman’s identification of a worthy narrative of the United States:

As it happens, there is such a story available to us. It has the virtues of being largely true, of explaining our past, including our mistakes, of inviting participation in the present, of offering hope for the future. It is a story that does not require the belief that America is

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<sup>35</sup> Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hess and McAvoy, *The Political Classroom*, 5.

superior to all other countries, only that it is unique, youthful, admirable, and opened wide to unfulfilled humane possibilities...I propose, then, the story of America as an experiment, a perpetual and fascinating question mark.<sup>38</sup>

Such level and degree of discourse in the political high school classroom, it should be added, promises to avoid the selection biases that other models fall prey to; where unity of purpose is attained through argumentation and discourse, teacher and students alike are freed of ideological and other constraints, save the most appropriate--relevance to the democratic project.

The potential for such a model of civics education to begin to breach what Meira Levinson calls the “civic empowerment gap”--the fact that minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth lack knowledge about and trust in political structures and institutions<sup>39</sup>--also cannot be overlooked. We know that, even beyond voter turnout, civic participation lags among disadvantaged populations. Recognizing that “civic identity is not a ‘neutral,’ shared space in which all can participate equally and in the same way,” Levinson proposes that we invite our secondary school students to “co-construct” American historical narratives. Since “the traditional, moderately triumphalist narrative about U.S. history taught in most schools reinforces many students’ alienation and disempowerment,”<sup>40</sup> Levinson not only suggests that students deliberate counternarratives, but that they move fluidly between school and community engagement, testing their theories and narratives as they do.

Critics may argue that any digression from triumphalism, even in a high school civics course, is partisan; others already dismiss as potentially dangerous any effort by schools to inculcate civic virtue (as distinct from civic knowledge).<sup>41</sup> But educators and activists alike, not

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<sup>38</sup> Postman, *The End of Education*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 55.

<sup>41</sup> James Bernard Murphy, “Against Civic Schooling,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 21 (1): 221-65.

to mention the American citizenry at large, would be hard pressed to deny that we are at a crossroads in our national history, and that efforts to reform our approach to civics education will demand more clarity of thought, honesty and collective courage than we have yet demonstrated the ability to muster. Interestingly, political scientist Robert Putnam, who at the turn of this century found Americans increasingly bereft of social and civic networks and more often “bowling alone”, recently asked readers to reenvision the connection between community and school that proponents of both civics education and civic engagement now regularly seek. It is not so much that improved education will promote social engagement, Putnam has proposed, but that social engagement is an important precondition for improving educational outcomes, in the civics classroom and beyond.<sup>42</sup>

For a high school teacher of American government and civics, then, perhaps the goal of discourse--the “D” grade--is better understood as but a means to the more important “C”--a celebration of the mind-boggling, productive complexity that is at the heart of our democracy. If we are truthful with ourselves and our children, not to mention faithful to the nation’s founding principles and institutions, we will acknowledge that appreciation of such complexity and promotion of intellectual flexibility in addressing it are preconditions of deep knowledge about American civics. It is an “A” citizen-student of any age, indeed, who realizes that the American experiment, as Postman so eloquently argued, is an invitation to forge--together and through messy compromise--an always evolving, ever more enlightened polity.

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<sup>42</sup> Robert D. Putnam, “Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance,” in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 87.