



The Power of Active Citizenship

A RENEWED FOCUS ON TEACHING CIVICS EDUCATION

BY BOB GRAHAM AND RANDI WEINGARTEN

At the end of the day, the students at my school felt one shared experience—our politicians abandoned us by failing to keep guns out of schools. But this time, my classmates and I are going to hold them to account. This time we are going to pressure them to take action.

—Cameron Kasky, a junior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School

Earlier this year, a horrific tragedy unfolded at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Broward County, Florida. On February 14, a former student walked into the school with an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle and mur-

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dered 17 students and staff in the deadliest high school shooting in American history. Only the 2012 mass killing at Sandy Hook Elementary School, with a toll of 26 young children and adult staff, resulted in a greater loss of life in a K-12 school. Since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, 187,000 students have experienced gun violence at their schools, and active shooter drills are now commonplace.

We were devastated by the needless loss of life and anguished that yet another mass school shooting had taken place while commonsense gun safety legislation to protect America's students and educators lingered in Congress and many state legislatures. Yet we were heartened by what came next. Because, rather than allowing themselves to be further victimized, the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas began to take matters into their own hands, meeting and networking on social media, speaking to the media, participating in vigils, organizing walkouts and demonstrations, establishing coalitions with others who share their outrage and goals, and traveling to Tallahassee and Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of meaningful gun safety laws.

In other words, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students have been acting as informed and activated citizens, utilizing their constitutional rights to assemble and speak freely, and they have

learned competencies to petition the government for the redress of their grievances.

It is notable that Florida, like most states, stopped teaching civics—the study of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy—in the 1960s, only to restore it by legislative action in 2010, with citizenship instruction making its way back into schools around 2011. (For more on each state’s civics education requirements, see the article on page 10.) Thus, these Marjory Stoneman Douglas students were among the first wave of students in Florida public schools to be taught civics in nearly four decades. For many of them, their civics education started in middle school and continued through a 12th-grade Advanced Placement government course where the teacher, Jeff Foster, espoused a simple mantra: “If you don’t participate, you can’t complain about things. I tell them in order to make a difference in the country, you need to participate. Unfortunately, we had this event happen [at Marjory Stoneman Douglas], and now it’s in live action.” Evidently, the education provided at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School served these courageous students well: they credit their teachers with introducing them to the civic knowledge and skills they have been using so effectively. Indeed, before the shooting, some students had just had this debate on guns in Foster’s class.

The fact that these students feel empowered to take a stand on their own behalf is a testament to the value of educating young people on their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy, as well as teaching them how to exercise the power of active citizenship.

An Antidote to Authoritarianism

The events in Florida are taking place at a time when democracy itself is confronting serious threats,* both in the United States and internationally. In October 2017, the Albert Shanker Institute brought together leading scholars and democracy activists from across the globe to discuss these challenges.¹ They are many: growing economic inequality, intense political polarization, government dysfunctionality and paralysis, the decline of civil society institutions such as organized religion and organized labor, attacks on science and factual knowledge, and the emergence of movements of racial, religious, and nativist intolerance. The conference’s participants, who included Han Dongfang, a leader of the independent unions in the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy protests, and Mac Maharaj, a leader of the antiapartheid struggle who had been a prison mate of Nelson Mandela, agreed that the future of democracy cannot be taken for granted but must be actively promoted and secured by confronting these challenges. That is our work as citizens.

Education for citizenship is the first, essential part of securing the future of American democracy. (For more on the importance of civics education in preserving our republic, see the article on page 14.) This is not because—as some have incorrectly suggested—popular support for democracy is flagging or because today’s youth are less committed to democratic governance than previous generations. In fact, the best evidence indicates that support for democracy has increased modestly and American youth



Students at Edison Preparatory School protest a lack of funding for teachers in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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are more stalwart in their support for democracy than those who are older.² Rather, it is because openness to authoritarian rule is greatest among those who are disaffected and disengaged from politics, and who are under the sway of prejudice toward fellow citizens of different backgrounds. When a person lacks a sense of his or her own power as a citizen, experiences a problem that dysfunctional democratic institutions have been unable to solve, and has little experience in working constructively with other citizens on common goals, he or she is more likely to give up on democracy and turn to a “strongman” to solve his or her problems. Education is a powerful antidote to this authoritarian temptation, because it can impart that needed sense of civic efficacy and common cause. We know from national and international studies that increases in educational attainment are highly correlated with increases in civic participation and support for democracy.³ So the more education we provide to Americans—and the better we make that education—the healthier our democracy will be.

To be most effective, civics education must be resonant and relevant. Any serious effort to ensure that young people are fully educated about the values, processes, and institutions of democracy depends on accomplished and experienced teachers who both know their subjects well and actively engage students in their learning. Research both here and abroad confirms that those students who understand democracy best—and who participate most actively in civic life as adults—are those whose teachers know their material and dare to run classes that involve students in civic work and in discussions of controversial subjects.

*For more on these threats, see “Hope in Dark Times” and “History and Tyranny” in the Summer 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2017.



Chicago students march to the U.S. Department of Education to deliver report cards to Secretary DeVos.

for them to know that there are 435 members of the House of Representatives. This concept of bottom-up civic engagement is what the book *America, the Owner's Manual: You Can Fight City Hall—and Win* is all about (see the sidebar below).

Teaching civics should be more than just understanding the structures and functions of government. In an era of “fake news”^{*} and Internet conspiracy theories, it is crucial that students learn how to gather and evaluate sources of information, and then use evidence from that information to develop and support their ideas and advocacy positions.[†] No polity can make wise decisions if its citizens do not know how to separate fact from opinion, and how to gather and weigh relevant evidence. Education for democracy shapes attitudes, values, and actions—it creates the foundations for a culture of democracy, not just an understanding of what it is. It takes time and long-term funding. It requires new forms of professional training.

Citizenship education at its best is a unification of foundational knowledge with civic values and key competencies. Together, these elements represent action civics. One of the biggest roadblocks to participatory democracy is the perception that everyday Americans can't influence government policy, and that only the privileged and special interests can command the levers of power or change bureaucracies. But if students can actually identify a problem in their school or community that is important to them, consider the options to solve that problem, marshal evidence in support of their selected solution, identify which public decision-maker can make a difference and how he or she might be persuaded to take action, determine the best time

^{*}For more on the proliferation of fake news and the importance of civic reasoning in a social media environment, see “The Challenge That’s Bigger Than Fake News” in the Fall 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg.

[†]For more on developing arguments and teaching evidence-based writing, see “For the Sake of Argument” in the Spring 2018 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2018/friedrich_bear_fox.

It shouldn't take a shooting for students to become civically engaged.

Civics instruction should be “bottom up.” We need to teach students to interact directly with their government and make government respond to their concerns. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas students have done this, but it shouldn't take a shooting for students to become civically engaged. Civic engagement should begin close to home. It is more important to teach students how to seek effective action from their school board or persuade their city commission to place a stop sign on the corner than it is

Teaching Civic Engagement

BY BOB GRAHAM

I am a former U.S. senator, Florida governor, and member of both houses of the Florida Legislature. In my campaigns for governor and the U.S. Senate, and while serving in those offices, I was known for working full days in a variety of occupations, including as a factory worker, busboy, fisherman, and ironworker—in total, 408 workdays over a 30-year span. One job—my very first job—certainly stands out, however, and shaped much of my later work. It was 44 years ago, when I spent a semester teaching civics at Miami Carol City Senior High School.

Before working in the classroom, I was the head of the Florida state Senate's Education Committee, and I was surprised

by how little students understood about their local government institutions and how to influence change. I observed the decline in the teaching of civics, and how the curriculum placed too much emphasis on teaching about government, with too little attention to civic engagement. If students are not engaged, I found, they too often become cynical and divorced from community life, as well as the activities of a democratic society.

While bringing these concerns to a gathering of civics teachers, I was challenged to stop preaching, come into the classroom, and learn the reality teachers faced—indifferent students, parents who would not attend parent-teacher nights, an overly bureaucratic school administration,

and all those laws politicians placed on teachers. I accepted this challenge for what became a semester-long transformational experience.

With the help of my students and Donnell Morris, a young social science teacher at Carol City High School, I developed a citizen-centric civics curriculum constructed around the essential skills of effective citizenship and hands-on projects applying those skills. Our goals were to tackle real issues that students were concerned with in their school and community. Students would learn ways to advocate for real change—this was not a simulation, but an exercise in advocacy. We wanted to teach students how to make government work for them.

and conditions to pursue a decision, attract allies to an expanding coalition of support, devise a plan to engage both traditional and new media, and propose credible fiscal solutions for challenges requiring public funding—then students can both move the needle toward success for the problem at hand and gain the confidence and experience necessary for a lifetime of action civics.

The active-citizenship approach we encourage focuses on five key principles for teaching action civics:

- Help students recognize challenges or opportunities in their school, community, state, or nation that can be addressed through effective citizenship;
- Instruct students on the competencies required for civic success (i.e., the skills of effective citizenship);
- Provide students with foundational knowledge of democratic institutions and processes while teaching citizenship skills (e.g., exploring federalism to identify which level of government can resolve the challenge a student has selected);
- Instill in students the dispositions of democratic citizenship, such as respect for fellow citizens of different races, religions, classes, and sexualities, and tolerance for different political



viewpoints; and

- Encourage students to utilize their newly learned skills, knowledge, and values to address the challenge or opportunity they have identified.⁴

We must provide students with the opportunity to acquire the above-described citizenship skills. Civics is not an accumulation of dry facts and abstract ideas. As with any endeavor that we wish to perform well, it must be practiced. You don't learn to play the piano by reading a textbook about the piano or even memorizing famous scores. You don't learn to make persuasive oral arguments by studying the science of speech or even watching great speeches. You learn to play the piano by playing the piano. You learn to make persuasive oral arguments by practicing such arguments. And you learn the skills of civics—the habits and attitudes of democracy—by engaging in civic activities.

America needs a “crash course” in civics. More important, we need to instill an understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizens into our collective experience. Perhaps the need has grown so acute because civics education, like other areas of social studies, has been pushed to the back burner in American schools, a victim of the single-minded focus on English language arts and mathematics wrought by our recent national obsession with standardized testing. But, in a very real sense, the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have proven the vibrancy and strength of American democracy. Despite the horror of their circumstances, they fell back on an education that provided them with the knowledge and skills to demand change from local, state, and national elected leaders. It is up to us to see that their citizenship education experience is provided to all American students. □

(Endnotes on page 43)

High school students in Boston get out the vote as part of a civics class.

Three decades later, after three terms in the U.S. Senate, I—as a senior fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University—led a class of Harvard undergraduates in an updated version of the Carol City High School curriculum. I then used these ideas last year as the basis for a new book (coauthored with my former Senate speechwriter Chris Hand), *America, the Owner's Manual: You Can Fight City Hall—and Win*, which encourages strong civics education and participation.*

I'm honored that the United Teachers of Dade (UTD) Teaching Excellence Foundation has converted my book into a curriculum guide, combining it with professional development taught in part by me. More than 100 Miami-Dade teachers were trained in a series of union-sponsored professional development sessions this past school year, and my ideas on civic engagement are now being piloted in middle and high school civics classrooms across the county. This would not have been possible without the strong support of UTD President Karla Hernandez-Mats and her team at the union. It's my hope that next school year, we will be able to expand the program piloted by UTD's foundation to other school districts across the nation.



Senator Graham holds up his book, *America, the Owner's Manual*, during an April 2018 professional development session based on his work, as Karla Hernandez-Mats, the president of the UTD Teaching Excellence Foundation, looks on. The foundation has funded a curriculum guide and professional development sessions based on the book. This workshop was held in Miami.

*To learn more about my ideas and review case studies of everyday Americans who have developed the skills to make changes in government policies, read *America, the Owner's Manual: You Can Fight City Hall—and Win*, published by CQ Press.

Activating Student Engagement

BY RANDI WEINGARTEN

My passion for politics has been lifelong, but the art and science of turning that passion into student engagement was kindled in the classrooms of Clara Barton High School, where I learned how to teach civics education. While serving as legal counsel for New York City's United Federation of Teachers in the late 1980s, I had worked closely with Clara Barton, helping it through a health and safety crisis caused by construction work that had been improperly conducted on asbestos-containing insulation, ceilings, walls, and floor tiles. The relationships that were formed in that work led to an invitation to teach in the school, and I joined its faculty as a social studies teacher in September 1991.

More than a quarter of a century later, I can still vividly recall my excitement and anticipation—and my nervousness—the day I first stood in front of a political science class at Clara Barton. My students were intellectually curious, thoughtful, and hard working. As students of color, mostly of African descent, and with many first-generation immigrants from the Caribbean among their number, they brought a rich set of real-world experiences to the study of politics and government. The challenge for me as a new teacher was how to actively engage them in their learning so that their great potential could be fully realized.

Clara Barton had a solid cohort of experienced and accomplished educators, and I drew upon their professional expertise and advice as I developed my own pedagogical approach. They helped me more than I can ever properly thank them, in particular Leo Casey, with whom I taught several Advanced Placement (AP) United States Government and Politics classes. I had practiced law and litigated cases—in courts and in arbitration forums. I knew that the practice of law was more important than the study of law. Likewise, I had studied John Dewey's educational philosophy and believed in his focus on learning by doing, but I did not appreciate the full power of this approach until I saw how Barton teachers used it, and I began applying it in my own teaching.

For instance, one of my classes took part in the We the People civics competition on the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Students participated in mock congressional hearings and debates to demonstrate their

ability to apply their knowledge and understanding of American government to contemporary issues. Since this was shortly after the first Gulf War, students debated the war-making powers of Congress and the president. And, at a time when the Supreme Court had upheld laws criminalizing gay sexuality, they analyzed the rights of all Americans to privacy and intimacy. They spoke eloquently on the First Amendment protections of their speech in the schoolhouse, on how the principles of the Fourteenth Amendment should be applied to affirmative action programs, on what the Fourth Amendment had to say about police stopping and searching them on the street, and on whether the United States still needed a strong Voting Rights Act. And they related these questions to the very principles underlying American government—natural rights philosophy, republicanism, and the Lockean social contract.

In sum, my students learned how to be democratic citizens by actively using civic knowledge and practicing the skills of citizenship. Empowered by this method of education and its relevancy to their lives, they were motivated to give this work their all and went on to defeat schools from much more advantaged settings, winning the New York state championship and placing fourth in the nation in the We the People competition.

During my years at Clara Barton, I went on to teach courses in law, American history, and ethical issues in medicine, and I applied the insights I had acquired on how to actively engage students in their

learning. My law class was centered on a mock trial, in which students acted out the different roles of judge, jury, prosecution, and defense. In my ethical issues in medicine class, our practical nursing students debated real-life challenges and dilemmas in healthcare, and, weighing values such as respect for life and respect for patient autonomy, discussed how they should be handled. In my history class, students engaged in a project of researching candidates for elected office and volunteering on the campaign of the candidate of their choice.

What I learned from my teaching is that engagement is essential. Student engagement and knowledge lead to critical thinking, confidence, judgment, and empowerment. While I am a teacher of social studies and civics, and my approach is rooted in my experience, the same practices of active student engagement—project-based instruction, student inquiry, and experiential learning—are no less applicable in other subjects. But I believe these practices hold a special value and importance for civics education today: the future of our republic and democratic governance hangs in the balance at this critical moment, and active democratic citizenship is essential for its survival. Civics education, in which students learn democratic citizenship by practicing it, is essential not just for good education, but for democracy itself.

Weingarten, bottom right, with her students at Clara Barton High School in 1994.



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Active Citizenship

(Continued from page 7)

Endnotes

1. Proceedings of the conference are available at www.shankerinstitute.org/event/crisis-democracy-conference.
2. Lee Drutman, Larry Diamond, and Joe Goldman, *Follow the Leader: Exploring American Support for Democracy and Authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, 2018).
3. Zhaogang Qiao, Ying Zhang, and Guodong Liang, "Does More Education Promote Civic Engagement?," *Journal of Postdoctoral Research* 5, no. 9 (2017); and Thomas S. Dee, "Are There Civic Returns to Education?," *Journal of Public Economics* 88 (2004): 1697–1720.
4. See Bob Graham and Chris Hand, *America, the Owner's Manual: You Can Fight City Hall—and Win* (Los Angeles: Sage/CQ Press, 2017).

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