

EDUCATION WEEK

Can the Parkland Survivors Inspire a New Focus on Civics Education?

Powerful examples are being set by shooting survivors

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The Marjory Stoneman Douglas students-turned-activists are fast becoming a powerful model of civic engagement for educators across the country.

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Survivors of the **deadly school shooting in Parkland, Fla.**, have taken to social media and TV, arguing eloquently for gun-control policies—and citing skills garnered from their Advanced Placement U.S. Government courses. They have successfully pressured major companies to drop their affiliations with the National Rifle Association and spurred thousands of students nationwide to draft petitions, plan walkouts, and start grassroots groups of their own.

Now the example of their activism, coupled with an increasingly divisive period of policymaking following—and preceding—the 2016 presidential election, has advocates for civics education asking: Is it finally time for civics to get a bit more attention?

"I think there is a resurgence and a significant amount of interest from many people who are concerned about the declining strength of our democracy," said Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at the University of California, Riverside. "But by no means is civics education a central priority for reformers at this point, and I think that's part of the case we have to make."

Whether the Parkland tragedy will galvanize more widespread attention to a topic in

America's schools that some say has long been neglected remains to be seen.

"I do think it is a unique moment. Actually, the Trump presidency makes it a unique moment, and a lot of people think there needs to be a hell of a lot more understanding about the democratic system and norms," said Charles N. Quigley, the longtime executive director of the Center for Civics Education, which trains networks of teachers and has developed civics education standards. "To what degree it's translated into action, and effective action, is another thing."

A Starting Place

From almost every angle, from the invasion of fake news to the Second Amendment of the Constitution, the aftereffects of the Parkland tragedy resonate with talking points for civics education.

Civics Education: What Do States Require?

The vast majority of states require students to take a civics course before graduating from high school, according to a report published last month by the Center for American Progress think tank. Seventeen states require students to pass a citizenship test and, in three of them, the citizenship test is the only graduation requirement for civics.

In eight other states, neither a course nor an exam in civics is required for graduation.

Census Bureau: In the November 2016 election, just 40 percent of youths aged 18 to 24 voted, compared to 56 percent of the population as a whole.

Recent gauges of American adults' civic knowledge, likewise, exhibit troubling patterns. A nationally representative survey from the Annenberg Public Policy Center, released last fall, found that **only half of Americans could identify a right** enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Plus, Americans are warming up to the idea of government censorship, it noted.

Is there a simple explanation for what Quigley has termed the "civics recession"? That's less clear. Some educators fault the pressure, over the last two decades of the standards-and-accountability movement, to emphasize reading and math over other subjects. Others point back further to the late 1960s and 1970s, as the civil rights, counterculture, and women's movements made civics a far more touchy topic.

States' current civics education requirements, meanwhile, are not encouraging.

In a report released late last month, the Center for American Progress noted that **10 states do not require a civics course in high school**; in those states that do, a majority require just a half semester. Seventeen states require students to take the U.S. citizenship test to graduate.

In earlier grades, civics is typically subsumed into social studies standards, making it hard to tell how faithfully it's being covered.

New Models

For some civics education advocates, the problem isn't merely the dose of civics students get, but also what's in it. Schools have tended to focus on book learning—how a bill becomes a law—while neglecting how civic knowledge is enacted through attitudes and practices.

"It's not so much that there's a decline in civics classes, but a decline in effective civics education," said Andrew Wilkes, the director of policy and advocacy at Generation Citizen, a group that supports action civics, a newer approach that helps classes of students apply civics skills and channel them into civic problem-solving.

From a certain perspective, the Parkland student activism feels like action civics writ large. Yet the experts warn about comparing it with the action civics that students receive through programs like those offered by Generation Citizen or the Center for Civics Education. Most such projects center on local problems and contexts—think school bullying, cafeteria food, and bus routes—not taking on the state legislature or the NRA.

"A lot of action civics is more about the immediate context of the kids and much less controversial," said Peter Levine, the associate dean for research at the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. "I don't want it to be stereotyped as left-of-center, government-oriented activism. I think there is a little risk of Parkland polarizing the

issues of civics, when the point is students being activated to participate in debates that deeply affect them."

Educators who study civics, meanwhile, say that classroom discussions on current events and controversies should be both balanced and academically challenging, which requires considerable flexibility and nimbleness from teachers—as well as a willingness to forgo carefully planned lessons when events like the Parkland shooting take place and provide fresh opportunities for students to engage with tough questions.

"You need to have a plan that assumes those are going to happen, and that is in a thoughtful way and in an ongoing way preparing all students for such moments," said Kahne of UC-Riverside.

Lessons in Practice

Successful examples might look a lot like the lesson that Kevin M. Fox, a history teacher at Cardozo High School in the District of Columbia, is planning in the lead up to the March 24 March For Our Lives Rally, which will be taking place in downtown Washington, practically Cardozo's backyard.

Fox plans to connect the Douglas students' activism to the history of youth movements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, from the Lowell Mill girls' strike in 1836 up to the 1963 Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Ala., an event often glossed over in history textbooks' depictions of the civil rights struggle.

"The way we're framing this movements unit, we're asking whether the ideals of America have been achieved by the youth movements of the past century," Fox said. "Here we have it again: life, liberty, property. That's what's in jeopardy here."

In the wake of Parkland, other teachers—many of them not even formally civics or history teachers—are also stepping up in ways civics advocates have long argued: that civics can and should be taught throughout the curriculum, not just in government class.

In high school English teacher David Preston's class, students watched Douglas activist Emma González's Feb. 17 speech at a gun-control rally and analyzed it using the classical modes of persuasion—ethos, logos, and pathos, which roughly correspond to one's credibility, the logic of his or her argument, and the emotions it evokes.

"I wanted the students to think critically about this student, who had a powerful need to be understood and a powerful need to move other people to understanding, and to evaluate that in a way that helps them grasp why these rhetorical practices are important," said Preston, who teaches in the Santa Maria-Bonita district in California.

In South Fulton, Ga., English teacher Matthew Patterson's seniors are now registered to vote, part of a wave of civics-related activities he's begun in his classes. His juniors, meanwhile, have been studying news articles and debating some of the policy proposals to come out of Parkland, such as President Donald Trump's idea to arm teachers.

Parkland's civics implications, the teachers note, can present unique challenges to make relevant for low-income students or students of color, given the wealthy community surrounding Douglas and the mostly white faces leading the activism on TV. But that should be part of the discussion too, they said.

"Why didn't Black Lives Matter get this same kind of traction? What would it take to get you to protest? What's worth protesting? What makes them effective protests? What do you think students should be able to protest?" Patterson said, ticking off some of the questions he'll ask of his students in upcoming units. "I really want them to start thinking: 'We have a lot of power as students. How can we best leverage this to speak truth to power?' "

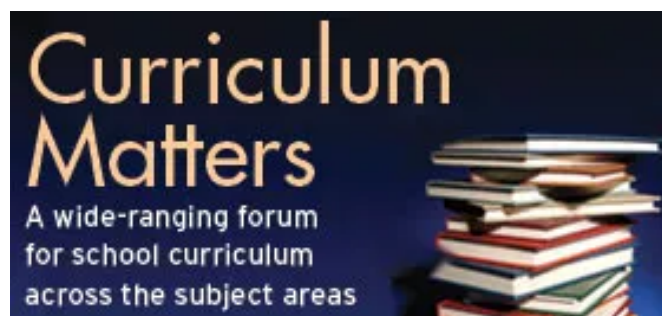
He reserves some strong words for social studies teachers, meanwhile, who haven't yet started thinking about how their practices need to change post-Parkland.

"If you're teaching a civics class now and not teaching this, it's shameful," he said. "What are you waiting for?"

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