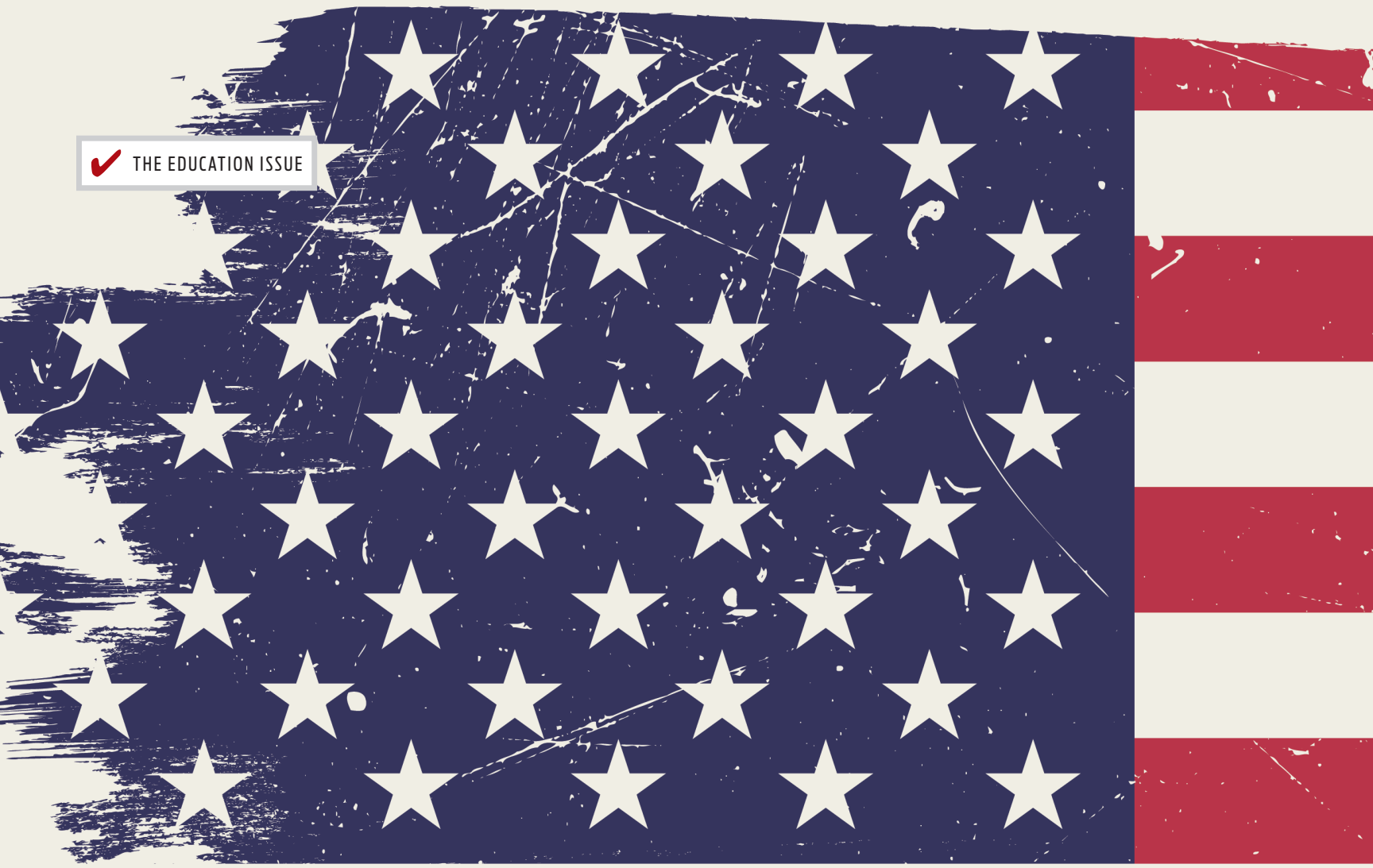

✔ THE EDUCATION ISSUE

# Do We Really Deserve Democracy If We Don't Know Anything About It?

BY LINDA K. WERTHEIMER

FLAG IMAGE FROM ADOBE STOCK

**PUBLIC SCHOOL CIVICS EDUCATION HAS BEEN ON THE WANE FOR DECADES. HERE'S HOW MASSACHUSETTS IS MAKING IT MATTER AGAIN.**

IT'S EARLY SEPTEMBER at Newton's Bigelow Middle School, and a class of eighth-graders watch as the teacher sticks a blue slip of paper on a bulletin board. On the paper is the word "democracy." The teacher, Andrew Swan, turns to them and asks, "What's the opposite of democracy? What does it look like?"

The students stare at him — their silence gets awkward. A girl finally raises her hand and says: "Republican."

Swan shakes his head, and the girl and some classmates break into giggles. Swan smiles gently. He asks "What are you thinking of? Political parties?" The girl nods.

"This is democracy with a lowercase d," Swan explains, in a classroom with posters on the back wall headlined "Periodic Table of the Constitution" and "Periodic Table of the Amendments." It's early in the semester, and there is a lot of ground to cover.

Welcome to civics class, courtesy of new Massachusetts social studies standards requiring all eighth-graders to take a year-long civics course. The 2018 standards, recommended by the state's education department, also say students in other grades should get at least some civics instruction. Shortly after those standards were set, the Massachusetts Legislature passed the 2018 civic engagement act requiring eighth-graders and high school students to do one community-focused civics project on a local, state, or federal policy issue. The first-in-the-nation project requirement makes Massachusetts the "national bellwether leader" in civics education, says Ted McConnell, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, a coalition of more than 70 organizations.

Civics is supposed to teach us civic discourse, civic duties, and other rights and responsibilities of being a citizen. But McConnell says it's been decades since civics was seen as an essential part of school curricula. Schools, once expected to teach the country's waves of immigrants what it meant to be an American, shifted priorities in the last half of the 20th century. One reason was the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of Sputnik, the first satellite, which launched the space race and an urgent push for math and science in schools. Many civics courses degenerated into patriotic cheerleading, which became increasingly unpalatable as the Vietnam War worsened.

There have been periodic pushes to boost civics education. In Massachusetts, the Legislature created a state commission on civic learning in 2008, but it didn't issue recommendations until 2012, and many of those weren't adopted. But things have been changing, here and nationally. Between 2015 and 2017, 17 states passed laws requiring students to pass a civics test based on questions from the US citizenship test.

After February 2018's mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, students quickly established themselves as articulate spokespeople for gun control. Civics education advocates credited Florida's education requirements—a middle school civics course and a test mandated in 2010—with helping the students understand how lawmaking and advocacy worked.

Hillary Clinton vs. Donald Trump also sparked cries for civics education. "After the 2016 election, civics became like the popular kid on the block," says Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, director of the Tisch College's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. A survey her center published in January 2017 reported that 35 percent of millennials were losing faith in American democracy, and only a quarter were confident in the democratic system. Anxiety over such perceptions saw lawmakers in 32 states propose 89 pieces of legislation on civics education in 2019. Measures passed in about a dozen states,


Above: Evan Doan (left) and Aaron Li are among the students in civics class at Newton's Bigelow Middle School. Left: Students work on ranking societal values, an exercise in civics. Facing page: Bigelow history teacher Andrew Swan is now teaching about civics, too.

including Massachusetts. How much does civics matter to young people now? In 2018, Rhode Island public schools were sued for failing to prepare students to function as citizens.

AT THE BIGELOW MIDDLE SCHOOL, Andrew Swan springs the "opposite of democracy" question on a different class he's teaching this day. "Monarchy," pipes up Clayton Lee, 14. "Kings and queens. Everyone else has no say."

Swan strolls around the classroom, dropping envelopes before small groups of students. Inside each envelope are slips of paper with societal virtues on them—democracy, equality, tolerance—10 in all. "These are values that are all important," Swan says. "But

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WEBB CHAPPELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**"CIVICS CLASS IS THE LENS THROUGH WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CITIZEN. IT'S ABOUT THE VOICE YOU DO AND DON'T HAVE."**

—ANDREW SWAN, EIGHTH GRADE TEACHER, NEWTON'S BIGELOW MIDDLE SCHOOL

**"IF WE CREATE A GENERATION OF KIDS WHO ONLY LISTEN TO THEMSELVES AND ARE CONVINCED OF SUPERIORITY ON WHATEVER ISSUE, ALL OF OUR CHALLENGES ARE GOING TO GET WORSE."**

— ADAM BLUMER, WELLESLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL'S SOCIAL STUDIES COORDINATOR

what are the top three, the middle three, the bottom three?"

The students get to work. Lee's partner is 13-year-old Sandy Skinner, a self-described politics aficionado. The two boys shuffle the values around on a white mat. Lee puts equality, justice, and happiness at the top and tells Skinner that democracy should be last "because we're not old enough to vote." Skinner pushes for democracy in the middle group because "democracy means we can actually decide who our leader is."

Skinner argues that even in contentious times like today, democracy should work in our favor. "Even if we're divided and some people really hate our leader now, we won't end up with someone god-awful who literally could be worse," he says, adding that in his opinion "it definitely could be worse" than President Trump.

Skinner's logic may be optimistic—democracy does not guarantee good candidates. But it sways his partner. The two rank tolerance last on their list.

The renewal of civics education is still relatively young, and most students will not have civics projects this school year. Of the 400 school districts in Massachusetts, at least a dozen already run civics projects in eighth grade or in high school. Some of those have had civics requirements, including civics projects, in place for at least a decade, among them schools in Boston and Lowell.

The main focus of social studies instruction in Massachusetts has been US or world history, though high schools have never stopped offering courses in government or politics at least as electives. Many districts have shoehorned civics into eighth-grade US history classes, which are not required (schools can offer either American or world history). The state expects schools to start implementing the new standards this academic year, and by the 2020-21 session all students in the state's middle and high schools should be undertaking civics projects.

Civics education has traditionally been an exercise in "memorizing facts and never doing anything with them," says Meira Levinson, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and author of the 2014 book *No Citizen Left Behind*.

Levinson is a former public school teacher, who taught a civics in action course at Boston's John W. McCormack Middle School more than a decade ago. That class included a project: a mock trial held with the help of students from Harvard Law School. Levinson thinks project-driven civics addresses a major flaw in how the subject is taught. "In every other field, we think you need to practice the discipline in order to learn how to do it," she says. "'Oh, I am a mathematician, I do math. I am a writer. I write.' But we don't have kids think 'I'm a citizen, I do citizenship.' "

It will take time to get teachers ready to teach civics. Many teachers, including Swan, who is 42 and has been teaching history for 12 years, had little or no civics in their own educational experience. Even if they did, they may know little about how local or state government works (or doesn't).


Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg in front of her office building at Tufts.

"If you don't have any experience working with levers of power, and someone's asking you, 'What's the difference between a city manager and mayor?,' that's not something they teach you in a school of education," says Robert DeLossa, Lowell High School's academic chair of social studies. At Lowell High, for the second year in a row, all juniors must take a semester-long civics class called American Civics Past and Present as part of a new graduation requirement. Civics projects are included.

Besides becoming experts on local governance, social studies teachers also are being asked to embrace teaching about controversial issues, a natural part of civics. "It's the best and worst thing that my course is relevant," says Swan, who treads carefully around national hot-button issues like immigration until he's sure students have learned how to disagree respectfully. "There's some ugliness that needs to be tackled."

Wellesley Middle School, which has taught aspects of civics and media literacy in seventh grade for years, considers this a planning year in which it will pilot civics lessons and a project in some eighth-grade classes. "This is actually our shot," says Adam Blumer, Wellesley Middle School's social studies coordinator. "Schools have to be doing this. If we create a generation of kids who only listen to themselves and are convinced of superiority on whatever issue, all of our challenges are going to get worse."

But there's no way at the moment to directly enforce the recent standards changes, the first overhaul of social studies in Massachusetts since 2003. For starters, schools aren't measured on social studies. The state piloted a social studies MCAS test in 2007, then dropped it the next year because of a lack of funds.

"There is flexibility for [school districts] to roll out the programs," says Casey Cullen, a Westborough High teacher who is a past president of the Massachusetts Council for the Social Studies and a founder of the state coalition that pushed for the civics law. Cullen says that for many districts,

though, "If there's not a test, then people feel, 'Well, then, I'm just not going to do it.' "

State education officials acknowledge the lack of a direct accountability measure, but say they're already seeing excitement across Massachusetts for the increased focus on civics, with teachers flocking to workshops. The law also provides an incentive with the creation of a $1.5 million Civics Project Trust Fund. School systems can apply for grants to help with training, field trips, and other related activities. "We believe the MCAS is going to come, and people will take it seriously, and districts will want to do it," says Louise Dubé, the executive director of Cambridge-based nonprofit iCivics and the co-chair of the Massachusetts Civic Learning Coalition, a group of civics organizations, educators, school districts, and other groups that helped promote and design the new state law.

ICivics has developed materials to help teachers run "active civics" projects, as has Generation Citizen, a New York-based nonprofit. Teachers, of course, also design their own. Harvard's Democratic Knowledge Project, meanwhile, has teamed up with the Cambridge public schools to create a new eighth-grade civics curriculum, which the district piloted last year and this year is being taught across its eighth-grades.

Swan taught civics as a stand-alone class for the first time last year, and for the projects requirement used materials from Generation Citizen. He has been glad to add dedicated civics classes. In his history classes, when civics came up, "Kids were like, 'Why do we have to learn this?' " he says. "I don't get that question any more. Civics class is the lens through what it means to be a citizen. It's about the voice you do and don't have."

I still remember yawning my way through high school lectures on how Congress was set up, and not all members of the younger generation thrill at the idea of civics. Janelly Orellana, a 13-year-old in one of Swan's classes, is blasé about the class and its civics project. She and her table partner agree that democracy is the least important social value. Orellana concedes that "we should at some point in our lives know about the government, so when we're older we can do stuff involving the government. I think personally maybe we're too young to learn about this."

At the start of last school year, Evangeline Born felt the same way.

"My original idea was, 'We are only a middle school class. How are we going to affect everybody else? What changes can we make?' " says Born, who took Swan's class and is now a freshman at Newton North High School. From March through May of eighth grade, her class worked on a project about the dangers of flavored vaping. Born was one of several students tasked with inviting community members to speak to her class. They followed Generation Citizen guidelines for making phone calls. First, "be polite," recite Born and her twin sister, Margot, who was in a different section of Swan's class and worked on a project to help Newton's poor gain access to food.

They also learned how to write professional-caliber e-mails. They got plenty of "nos" from experts and local officials, but eventually got some "yeses." A Boston TV station featured the vaping project in a news story. Margot's class wrote an op-ed on the difficulties Newton's poor face getting food, since some of its food pantries open only once a month. (They weren't able to get the op-ed published.) All students presented at a school civics day.

Evangeline Born now says that civics was worth it. "In history class, you learn about all of this stuff but you never really get to engage in it. Civics . . . got us to see actually what was happening in our community and to try to make a change," she says. Then she has another thought.

"Maybe I should be a legislator someday." ■

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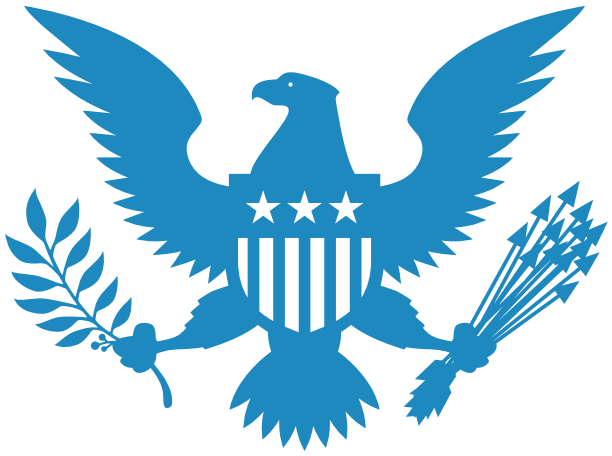

# Test Your Civics Smarts

BY LINDA K. WERTHEIMER

Here are five questions drawn from a past version of the National Assessment of Educational Progress for eighth graders and the US citizenship test (the citizenship test is oral; we added multiple choice answers).

**1. In the United States, taxes are NOT used for:**

**A.** Building churches
**B.** Funding public libraries
**C.** Building roads

**2. Franklin D. Roosevelt won four presidential elections between 1932 and 1944. Why could he not have won four elections today?**

**A.** The Constitution has been amended to prevent people over the age of 70 from serving as president.
**B.** The Constitution has been amended to prevent people from being elected to more than two terms as president.
**C.** The Electoral College system makes it difficult for candidates to serve more than two terms as president.

**3. Which of the following is an example of people using power without having the right to do so?**

**A.** A governor vetoes a bill passed by the state Legislature.
**B.** A group of people against nuclear power march outside a nuclear power plant.
**C.** A police officer arrests someone because the person looks suspicious.

**4. What is the supreme law of the land?**

**A.** US Supreme Court rulings
**B.** The Constitution
**C.** Federal Code of Conduct

**5. How many US senators are there?**

**A.** 50
**B.** 100
**C.** 102

**Answer key:** 1. A; 2. B; 3. C; 4. B; 5. B.