

CHALK TALK: The Future of Civic Engagement

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This summer, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education plans to adopt a new History and Social Science Curriculum Framework. The revision of the current standards were in the works before the 2016 presidential election and its instances of foreign interference, fake news, and lapses in civil discourse, but DESE's new emphasis on civic engagement in the Framework couldn't have come at a better time.

The Framework was last revised in 2003; the History/Social Studies MCAS was piloted a few years later but was never instituted. As a result, time dedicated to teaching social studies in many districts was reduced to make room for remediation in the disciplines that did have an MCAS assessment: English, Mathematics and Science. Social Studies teachers found themselves in the uncomfortable position of wishing there was an MCAS for their discipline despite their qualms with standardized tests, because "what gets tested, gets taught."

A 2015 survey by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Working Group on Civic Learning and Engagement found that 60 percent of the state's superintendents considered the level of civic learning in their districts to be insufficient. And the problem isn't limited to Massachusetts; only 23 percent of eighth graders scored proficient or better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress civics assessment in 2014 (the test was also administered in early 2018, but results are not yet available).

Several bills have been filed in the Massachusetts legislature to shore up civics and social studies education in the public schools. The same is happening in about a quarter of the other states. Some of those states are looking at proposed legislation that aims to have students pass the same citizenship tests as those seeking naturalization.

Massachusetts is further renewing its commitment to civic engagement by revising its Definition of College and Career Readiness to include readiness for civic life and by convening a Civics Learning and Engagement Task Force. The Western Massachusetts Writing Project saw this renewed commitment and, when it received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation

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to promote teacher leadership, decided to support the state's civic engagement efforts by running a Civics Literacy Leadership Institute for teachers.

I had the pleasure of being one of the facilitators of the institute, along with Belchertown High School history teacher Lawrence O'Brien and Richard Cairn, director of the Emerging America program at the Collaborative for Educational Services.

The first iteration of the institute included social studies teachers and a librarian from a variety of schools and communities: public, private, charter and career technical; urban, rural and suburban. The teachers were daunted by two of the requirements: write a formal argument essay and participate in some form of civic engagement. We facilitators felt those requirements were critical because we believe as educators we should practice what we are asking our students to do: value evidence and sound reasoning when defending a claim, and be active participants in our democracy.

The course also included sessions on media literacy, constructive dialogue, research, teaching strategies, and designing and presenting workshops. But in the end-of-course evaluations, it was those two daunting requirements that the teachers praised specifically, expressing gratitude for being challenged to write and be civically engaged. Every single one vowed to personally continue their civic activities after the completion of the course. They also planned to emphasize in their classrooms (and library) the importance of reasoned debate and taking a critical stance when consuming information from any source.

We facilitators have no doubt their students will emerge from their classes as the kind of citizens the Framework revision panel had in mind when it stated the expectation that students "have the knowledge and skills to be thoughtful and active participants in a democratic society and a multinational world."

When the new Civics Framework is adopted it doesn't need to be accompanied by a standardized test; what is needed is for teachers to have the time and tools necessary to be able to meet DESE's vision that students be educated "to evaluate competing ideas, to understand the past, and to promote the ideals of equality, justice, liberty, and the common good for all peoples in the world."

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