

Teachers at the Center: Recent Efforts to Strengthen the Civic Mission of Schools in Illinois

Shawn P. Healy

Teachers in the trenches have led the charge to bring civics back in Illinois.

- They have worked within their buildings to deepen school-wide commitments to civic learning through recognition of their schools as Illinois Democracy Schools.
- Teachers played a leading role in the creation of a state civic education task force, were active participants on it, and ultimately worked with their students to advocate for action on its recommendations.
- Teachers were on the frontlines as we made an ultimately successful legislative push for a required high school civics course last year, and teachers from across the social studies and K-12 spectrum used the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework to write new standards for the State of Illinois.
- Even now, teachers are at the center of efforts in Illinois to implement the new course requirements and emerging standards, which will allow the graduates of Illinois schools the benefit of being prepared for college, career, and civic life. These efforts are informed by the C3LC model of collaborative professional development.

Building a Statewide Network of Democracy Schools

The Illinois Democracy Schools Initiative¹ was launched in 2005 by the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition to implement the recommendations of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, namely formal instruction in U.S. government, history, law, and democracy; discussion of current and controversial issues; service learning; simulations of democratic processes; civic-oriented extracurricular opportunities; and integrating student voice in school governance.² Schools employing these practices are recognized as Democracy Schools.

As of September 2016, the Illinois Democracy Schools Network was 54 members strong. It's fair to say that teachers both have driven the recognition process at their schools, and used this honor to deepen and sustain high-quality civic learning among their colleagues.

Policy Follows Proven Practices

The power of social studies teachers as advocates for civic education was demonstrated in 2015 through their support of legislation encouraging Illinois to join the ranks of 39 other states that require a civics or government course in order to graduate. This was proposed in House Bill 4025, introduced by State Representative Deb Conroy (D-Villa Park) in February 2015.

As chair of the Illinois Task Force on Civic Education, I strongly supported

the bill and was joined by teacher colleagues, including Larry Pahl, an Illinois Council for the Social Studies board member and teacher at Bartlett High School, a Democracy School. We faced an uphill struggle. The political environment was hostile to a new mandate imposed on public schools, particularly given the state's precarious fiscal situation and inability to provide funding for implementation. Thankfully, the state's philanthropic community committed the necessary dollars, and we were able to make the case that this was a "funded" mandate.

We enjoyed strong support from Democrats in the legislature from the outset, but knew that we desperately needed bi-partisan backing in order for the Republican governor to ultimately sign the bill. This meant outreach to individual legislators on both sides of the aisle in both the House and Senate, and our teacher leaders at Democracy Schools were up to the task.

The bill passed out of committee in the House with a handful of Republican votes, but we wanted to do better on the floor. One social studies department chair from the Northwest suburbs of Chicago contacted his local state representative, who had voted "no" in committee. She asked to speak with him at length by phone, and later rose when the bill was called on the floor to say she had changed her mind. The reason: "I was schooled by a social studies teacher."



The inaugural class of Illinois Civics Teacher Mentors during a weeklong training in Normal, Ill., in June 2016.

Not only did teachers serve as front line advocates for the bill, but they also encouraged their students to “take informed action.” This meant filing electronic witness slips as the bill made its way through committee in both chambers and helping with outreach to individual legislators by phone, email, or even the traditional letter.

It was the latter approach that impacted a wavering Republican senator as the bill surfaced on the floor before spring adjournment. As we called his office to conduct our own roll call tally in advance of the vote, he told us that he was leaning against it, but had a stack of letters from students sitting on his desk arguing the opposite. They were written by an AP Government class at a Democracy School in his district. When push came to shove, the senator “voted his district” and contributed to a strong bi-partisan majority sending the bill to the governor. The bill was signed in August 2015.

C3 Framework Customized to Illinois

Simultaneously, the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition was working with

the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to implement the second recommendation of the Task Force on Civic Education: revisions to state social studies standards via the C3 Framework.³ We convened a team of teacher leaders representative of the K-12 spectrum and various social studies disciplines on a monthly basis in the center of the state. The group first decided to cast aside the existing content standards that were “a mile wide and an inch deep,” and wholeheartedly embraced the C3 Framework. By design, the C3 Framework is adaptive to local context, and our teacher leaders customized it to the unique needs of Illinois schools and students.

For example, the elementary group specified standards by grade in an effort to reinvigorate the social studies, as the discipline had been largely displaced with our intense focus on literacy skills in order to meet the Common Core Standards.

Our teacher leaders debuted their work five months into the standards writing process at a statewide stakeholders meeting. They used feedback from this event to fine-tune the draft standards, and months later presented them to

ISBE at their summer board meeting (hosted by Oswego East High School, a 2015 Democracy School). State Superintendent Dr. Tony Smith praised the teacher task force for its work, and the board proceeded to adopt the new standards unanimously.⁴

Turning toward implementation of the standards and the civics/government course, teacher professional development for both pre- and in-service teachers lies at the heart of our efforts.⁵ Given the power of peer-to-peer learning and our aspirations to serve the entire State of Illinois, we have recruited a cadre of teacher mentors representing each of the state’s 38 regional offices of education (subunits of ISBE). This past summer, we convened our inaugural mentor class for a week of intense training, led by Mary Ellen Daneels, an NCSS board member, award-winning classroom teacher, lead author of our new high school civics standards, and a team leader in the NCSS C3 Literacy Collaborative.

The C3 Literacy Collaborative has served as the primary springboard for the statewide work in Illinois that Mary Ellen and I directed together as we later circulated the state, leading regional trainings in partnership with teacher mentors in their respective geographic areas. These workshops offered a mix of content and pedagogy in alignment with the law, standards, and best practices in professional development.

Mentor teachers are developing relationships with teachers, schools, and districts in their region, and leading local professional development efforts throughout the school year. They are presenting at conferences, convening teachers at their schools, helping us design and teach online courses, and contributing lesson plans and blog posts for IllinoisCivics.org, our online course and standards implementation hub.

Dubbed the #CivicsIsBack Campaign, this teacher-led effort of the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition will assume recurring annual cycles (responsive to local needs) for at least three years. These cycles will involve intensive men-

tor training early in the summer, a series of regional workshops to follow, mentor support of teachers, schools, and districts in their assigned regions throughout the school year, ongoing online professional development opportunities, and continuous evaluation of our efforts, adjusting our model to account for emerging and regional needs.

Our collective work to strengthen the civic mission of Illinois schools is ongoing, and teachers will forever lie at the heart of it. Not only can social studies teachers prepare students for college, career, and civic life in our classrooms, they can also assume leadership roles to ensure that these outcomes are universal for youth across our states and country. ●

Notes

1. For information on this initiative, see my article on

“Civic Learning in Illinois,” in *Social Education* 78, no. 6 (November-December 2014), 286-288.

2. “Six Proven Practices,” Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, www.civicmissionofschools.org/educators/six-proven-practices.
3. “Revamp Underway for Arts and Social Studies,” Illinois State Board of Education, www.isbe.net/news/2014/aug27.htm.
4. “IL Social Science Standards,” Illinois State Board of Education, www.isbe.net/ils/social_science/pdf/ss-stds-eff012716.pdf.
5. “Civic Education Implementation Plan,” Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, www.illinoiscivics.org/resources/civic-education-implementation-plan.

SHAWN P. HEALY, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation Democracy Program's civic learning scholar, serves as the Foundation's internal resource for knowledge on civic education and engagement. Healy plays a key role in the Democracy Program's work in the areas of advocacy and public policy, serving as a chair of the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, and leading the state's Democracy Schools Initiative. He can be reached at SHealy@McCormickFoundation.org or @IllinoisCivics on Twitter.

ORIGINS

current events in
historical
perspective



an ad-free online publication & podcast
featuring the insights of top scholars
on today's most pressing topics

origins.osu.edu



THE OHIO STATE
UNIVERSITY



The Long Road From Brown School Desegregation in Virginia



Dr. Yonghee Suh of Old Dominion University and Dr. Brian Daugherty of Virginia Commonwealth University invite school teachers (Grades 6 through 12) to participate in a one-week workshop on school desegregation in Virginia following the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Teachers will interact with leading scholars in the field, visit historic sites and archives, and will discuss curricular and teaching techniques related to this subject.

Location: Richmond, Virginia

Workshop Dates: July 9-July 14 OR

July 23-July 28, 2017

Application Deadline: March 1, 2017

Please visit our website to learn more about available NEH stipend, workshop information, and how to apply.

<http://thelongroadfrombrownneh.weebly.com>



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
Humanities



"Students Walking to Class. Life Magazine. Photograph. Little Rock, 1957.
http://www.anglonauts.com/history/hist_usa/hist_usa_20_civil_rights/hist_us_20_civil_rights_school_desegregation/hist_us_20_civil_rights_school_desegregation.htm.
(Accessed November 2014)"