

Q&A: Seth Andrew

Democracy Prep founder on building active citizens

A REPORT IN THIS ISSUE OF EDUCATION NEXT confirms that K–12 schools can make a difference in students’ civic attitudes and behavior (see “A Life Lesson in Civics,” *research*, Summer 2019). The study finds that attending a charter school operated by Democracy Prep Public Schools nearly doubles students’ rates of civic participation as young adults. *Education Next* editor Martin West spoke with Seth Andrew, founder of Democracy Prep and senior adviser in the Obama White House, about the schools’ approach to civic education.

Martin West: Democracy Prep students are known as “citizen-scholars,” and the schools follow the motto, “Work hard. Go to college. Change the world!” How do you work to make this identity in students a reality?

Seth Andrew: We break out the schema of citizenship and civic engagement into three elements: civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions. The first priority is teaching civic knowledge. If you don’t understand how the system works, if you don’t understand that there are three branches of government in the American system or the costs and benefits of a democratic republic compared to other forms of democracy, then you can’t really be an engaged citizen, and the skills and disposition elements have less value down the road.

We start as early as kindergarten getting kids to think about civic knowledge. That means you make word problems in math that include civic content. It means that you valorize civics from the beginning. With kindergartners we talk about community and our responsibilities to one another and the difference between freedom *from* something and freedom *to do* something. In high school, there’s a much greater focus on skills. In fact, Democracy Prep high-school students have to demonstrate 10 civic skills in the real world to graduate—speaking in front of a public body, having an opinion published, recruiting 100 followers to a cause of the student’s choice, and more. The skills are not at all theoretical; they’re 100 percent authentic.

MW: There’s a debate in the civic-education world between those who place greater emphasis on knowledge of American history and government—how the political system works—and those who seek to cultivate a disposition in their students to be activists, so-called action civics. Where does Democracy Prep stand in this debate? Is it “both and” rather than “either or”?

SA: It’s unquestionably “both and,” but it involves a sequence. Teaching a kindergartner “action civics” is foolhardy, as is only teaching a 12th grader about the U.S. citizenship exam. We’re

trying to develop an arc of knowledge, skills, and dispositions in our scholars from ages 5 to 18. So the answer is “both and,” but not “both simultaneously.” It’s about building a thoughtful pedagogical arc from the beginning of the student’s education to the end.

MW: In their recent study, researchers from Mathematica Policy Research found that attending the Democracy Prep school in Harlem boosted voter registration by 16 percentage points and turnout by 12 percentage points. What was your reaction to the results?

SA: I had a mixed reaction. I was thrilled with the rigor of the study and with the statistical significance in the outcome—that we do have a causal effect on participation in our democracy. But I was also deeply disappointed, because I felt the results weren’t large enough. Our students voted at much higher rates than their peers, but not at the rates that I would have liked to see from our citizen-scholars.



MW: What do you see as the most promising strategies for bringing civics education to scale in the United States?

SA: Starting in 2012, I worked on a policy effort to get states to adopt the U.S. citizenship exam as a high-school graduation requirement. That’s now been implemented in eight states and represents one way to increase civic knowledge, but there’s much more we need to do.

We need more civics taught in middle and high schools, but that doesn’t mean having a boring one-semester course requirement. It means creating outcome expectations around civic skills and knowledge. Lots of states now mandate x amount of civics in high school. I think that’s the wrong way to think about it, because it focuses on input as opposed to outcomes. In the Democracy Prep civic-outcomes model, we actually don’t teach “civics.” There is no standalone “civics” course. However, there is a course on the “sociology of change,” a course on economics, and a senior seminar on American democracy. We require a “change the world” project for seniors, and we hold Election Day get-out-the-vote campaigns at least once every year.

Together, these methods lead to civic *outcomes*, as the Mathematica study showed. But what we’re trying to do is remind the world that “civic education” is not about a specific course; it’s about the public purpose of education and putting citizenship first.

This is an edited excerpt from an Education Next podcast, which can be heard on educationnext.org.