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Charter Schools as Nation Builders

Democracy Prep and Civic Education

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This policy brief is the first in a series of in-depth case studies exploring how top-performing charter schools have incorporated civic learning in their school curriculum and school culture. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit www.citizenship-aei.org.

On a sunny Tuesday in June, the streets of Harlem, New York City, are filled with the usual midday crowd hustling in and out of subway stations and eating hurried lunches. One thing they are most decidedly not doing is voting. And this is a disappointment for a small army of school-children dressed in bright yellow shirts.

The students in yellow attend one of the charter schools in the Democracy Prep Public Schools network and, with the help of their teachers and several parent volunteers, are waging a Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign. The occasion is the Democratic congressional primary for New York's 15th Congressional District, which encompasses upper Manhattan (including Columbia University, Washington Heights, and Harlem) and surrounding locales. Congressional primaries are typically low-turnout affairs in which incumbents have a massive advantage.

This year is different. Harlem's long-serving member Charles B. "Charlie" Rangel has been dogged by ethics violations and was formally censured by the US House of Representatives; he is now facing a tough challenger in New York State Senator Adriano Espaillat, who has the support of Harlem's ever-growing Dominican population. Rangel is not the first seasoned congressman from the area to be plagued by political scandal; Rangel's opponent in the 1970 Democratic primary, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., was weakened by charges of absenteeism and misuse of public money after a 26-year run in Congress. But whatever criticism Powell and Rangel weathered in Washington, they both remain beloved in Harlem. As the students flock the streets near their schools to pass out fliers and encourage the adults to vote, they traipse down Adam

Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. Rangel is similarly situated as a Harlem institution.

Harlem, with its tradition of producing highly visible and powerful political figures, provides a fitting backdrop for Democracy Prep, a network of seven public charter schools with a civic mission at its core. Democracy Prep's founder and superintendent is Seth Andrew, an energetic former teacher born and raised in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. Andrew has deep political roots. As a teenager, he served as a congressional page after being nominated by Rangel; while still a student at Brown University, he ran for election to the Rhode Island state house.

Andrew's passion for civic activism and academic rigor are at the center of Democracy Prep's model. The network's motto—"Work hard. Go to college. Change the world!"—couples the "no-excuses" charter school movement's emphasis on student achievement with a decidedly civic focus. This pairing is in the schools' DNA; students and parents are exposed to an explicit and unapologetic emphasis on civic education from day one. As Andrew quipped at a 2012 event at the Brookings Institution, "We are called Democracy Prep, not Generic Prep."¹

The fact that Democracy Prep is a charter school is crucial to its civic mission. Andrew views charter schooling as an ideal venue for experimenting with exactly *how* to teach citizenship. When it comes to civic education, Andrew argues, "The charter sector can start to model best practices . . . and really take risks"—such as sending a fleet of students to the streets of Harlem in a GOTV campaign. And if charters unearth new approaches, there is "no reason a traditional district school can't also do it."²

Of course, civic education has many dimensions. We might think of citizenship as a body of content knowledge that is critical to understanding the history and political structure of the United States: what amendments are in the Bill of Rights, why the Civil War occurred, and why the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was important. Others may cast civic education as an effort to impart a set of dispositions or values, such as attachment to one's country, being tolerant of others, following rules, and volunteering. Finally, we might think of civic education as the training needed to engage in the activities of citizenship—thinking critically about policy issues, voting, writing a letter to a congressman, or mobilizing others to take part in politics.

Citizens, parents, and teachers often have very different ideas of what schools *should* teach when it comes to civic education. One study of attitudes among social studies teachers and the general public found that the public was nearly twice as likely as teachers to say that schools should be teaching basic facts about American history and government. Meanwhile, teachers were more likely to say schools should prioritize civic behaviors, like voting and community service.³

As such, defining what it means to teach citizenship is difficult. Rather than a discrete body of content or skills, civic education is perhaps better understood as a combination of content knowledge, values orientation, and behaviors expected of US citizens. In this brief, we do not attempt to define civic education and then evaluate Democracy Prep relative to some ideal model. Instead, our objective is to describe Democracy Prep's unique approach to teaching citizenship and discuss the lessons that other schools might learn from one charter school network's experience. With civic education increasingly marginalized because of testing and accountability demands that focus on reading and math, insights from schools built around citizenship are much needed.

Though scholars have unpacked civic education in a number of ways, we distinguish between two basic strands.⁴ Students are taught *abstract citizenship*: how our system of government works, what rights and responsibilities US citizens share, and an understanding of significant issues, events, and turning points in American history. Abstract citizenship is most often taught in the classroom; it teaches students about being a citizen and why it is important.

Operational citizenship, on the other hand, teaches students how to be an active citizen. This side of civic education relates to the behaviors and attitudes expected of American citizens, such as following rules, respecting others, performing community service, and making one's voice heard via voting, rallying, or testifying. Operational

citizenship is often learned through experience, some of which can be gained in school but much of which takes place outside of the classroom.

Think of the distinction between learning a foreign language via classroom instruction and becoming a fluent, habitual speaker of that language by living abroad. The latter will likely be much more difficult (if not impossible) without the former, but the latter is also the step that is necessary for achieving mastery and a lifelong attachment to a language and culture. As is the case with languages, the two sides of civic education are interrelated, and schools ideally provide a mix of both.

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In any given school, the precise mixture of abstract and operational elements will vary depending on school context, mission, and leadership. Democracy Prep stands out for its emphasis on teaching operational citizenship. From an early age, students learn what it means to be a citizen by doing—mobilizing voters, lobbying state legislators, and teaching their own family members about the importance of voting rights. Meanwhile, classroom lessons about history, government, rights, and responsibilities provide students with the foundation and context necessary to understand why civic engagement is so important.

On the day of our visit in late June, Seth Andrew has an aggressive schedule, from classroom visits to each Democracy Prep campus to touring multiple polling stations to voting in the primary and using it as a teachable moment for a gymnasium full of students. At each stop along the way—from the blackboard to the voting box—we see civic education in action.

The Context

By 7:30 a.m., the grounds and halls of Democracy Prep Charter High School on 133rd Street are buzzing with activity. Students, most donning their yellow shirts for the day's GOTV campaign, mill about outside. The inside of the school is what you would imagine for a high-performing charter school: clean and bright, with

each classroom named after a different elite college or university. This is a strategy you see across no-excuses charter schools, intended to encourage students toward Democracy Prep's primary goal: college attendance.

For Democracy Prep, this challenge is particularly acute. Across New York City, the four-year high school graduation rate is 65 percent.⁵ In the section of Harlem where Democracy Prep operates, more than one-third of the population does not have a high school diploma, and a mere 12 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.⁶

The demographics of Democracy Prep's neighborhood are also shifting. Although the white population in Harlem has grown rapidly over the past 20 years—from less than 2 percent in 1990 to about 10 percent today—central Harlem, where Democracy Prep is located, remains about 63 percent black and 22 percent Hispanic, with a strong and growing foreign-born population drawing heavily from the Dominican Republic, West Africa, and Jamaica.⁷ Fifty-four percent of the population in Democracy Prep's zip code is under the poverty line.⁸

Not surprisingly, the setting in which Democracy Prep schools operate—a low-income, minority community with large numbers of immigrants—shapes their approach to civic education. For one, many of the schools' students come from backgrounds where the basic ingredients of engaged civic life—interest in politics, trust in government, and social capital—are often lacking. This stands in stark contrast to their peers in wealthier districts, where such civic attitudes and behaviors are more the norm.

In Andrew's eyes, this "civic gap" is analogous to the language gap researchers have documented between rich and poor students. Children from wealthier families enter elementary school with larger vocabularies as a consequence of having been read to more by their parents and having watched far less television than their peers in lower-income areas.⁹

Andrew argues that civic behaviors are similarly hereditary. Low-income adults tend to participate in politics at much lower rates than more affluent citizens, trust government less, and have a weaker sense of political efficacy.¹⁰ Because low-income parents often lack these prerequisites for engaged civic life, they are less likely to pass on expectations for active citizenship and political participation to their children. What is more, less active parents may even pass on a real mistrust of government and sense of powerlessness, both of which can depress any attachment to civic life in their children.

Because Democracy Prep challenges students to not only go to college but also change the world, bridging this civic gap is a crucial part of their mission. What

makes Democracy Prep schools unique is that they prioritize closing this civic gap with the same force as closing the traditional student achievement gaps in reading and math. In Andrew's words, "Some people argue that civic education is a luxury in the era of accountability. They're dead wrong. Our Regents and SAT scores prove that it's just the opposite: the more we focus on civic dispositions, skills, and knowledge, the better our scholars perform in English and math. It's not a zero-sum proposition. I think Democracy Prep can prove that preparing kids for citizenship is something close to 'best practice' in education."¹¹

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The politics of charter schooling also influence how Democracy Prep views civic education, providing teachers, parents, and students with opportunities for participation and activism. Charter schools are still controversial in many urban districts, and political fights between charter advocates and established interests like teachers unions are common. Charters are a particularly bright flashpoint in New York City, where Mayor Michael Bloomberg has supported charter expansion to the chagrin of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the city's major teachers union.

In 2011, for example, the UFT and the NAACP joined forces to file a lawsuit that would bar the city from closing underperforming traditional schools and expanding charter schooling. The lawsuit made headlines because it pitted minority parents whose children attend charter schools against other minority parents and the NAACP. In a show of political strength, charter school leaders rallied parents to protest the lawsuit, bringing out students in shirts that read "Future NAACP Member" and carrying signs imploring the civil rights group to drop the lawsuit.¹² The tactics worked: ultimately, a New York State Supreme Court judge ruled against the UFT and NAACP.¹³

In other words, because the expansion of charter schooling is inherently political, school leaders have been

eager to mobilize its beneficiaries—students and parents—to help fight these larger battles over school choice and charter autonomy. These battles provide Democracy Prep with regular opportunities for student participation and civic activism and an abundance of real-time “teachable moments” about urban politics, interest groups, and the potency of political voice.

Benjamin Feit, a Duke University law graduate and assistant director of strategy and development at Democracy Prep, reflected on the growth of high-quality charter schools in Harlem and their impact on the community. “Until high-performing charter operators started saturating Harlem,” he noted, “the community was littered with underperforming schools. . . . [Now] you see students and parents who understand not only the roots of the achievement gap but how to go about advocating for school quality and school choice.” As we will discuss later in this paper, this tactic of using their academic success and tententious political position to mobilize students and parents around school reform debates is an intentional strategy of Democracy Prep—and has the added benefit of making civic engagement feel real and meaningful.

What Is Citizenship at Democracy Prep?

Civic education takes center stage at Democracy Prep. Students are called “citizen-scholars.” The network’s mission statement proclaims: “Democracy Prep educates responsible citizen-scholars for success in the college of their choice and a life of active citizenship.” Its motto also serves as a shorthand reminder of this commitment—“Work hard. Go to college. Change the world”—while distinguishing it from peer charters like KIPP, famous for its “Work hard, be nice” slogan.

When we asked teachers and faculty how Democracy Prep defines citizenship, their answers tended to emphasize good character and civic behaviors. “We explicitly define being a citizen as someone who votes and obeys laws,” said Anne Christian, a first-grade teacher at Harlem Prep Elementary School and the school’s civics coordinator. “We highlight paying taxes, serving on a jury, and registering for the selective service as laws of which students should be aware and eventually understand.” Richard Irvan, a teacher at Democracy Prep Harlem Middle School, admitted that while citizenship is a “multifaceted concept” that can be “a bit fuzzy” to define, at Democracy Prep, it “starts with demonstration of strong character, specifically through our DREAM values: discipline, respect, enthusiasm, accountability, and maturity.” Irvan’s principal, Emmanuel George,

echoed this notion: “Being a citizen is more or less being of good character.”

The most comprehensive definition came from Feit, who, along with Seth Andrew, is responsible for creating the network’s civic education curriculum. Said Feit: “Citizenship is defined both in terms of measurable skills and knowledge and in terms of the dispositions we hope our students and faculty come to possess by the end of their time in the Democracy Prep family. Most significantly, the organizational imperative is to prepare students (and, by implication, their teachers) for lives of ‘active’ citizenship.”

Because it is easy for discussions of civic education to devolve into generalities and platitudes, Feit and Andrew have convened a group of the network’s teachers to explicitly define the dimensions of citizenship that Democracy Prep seeks to cultivate and to translate those into a curriculum and teacher professional development. Democracy Prep’s citizenship curriculum and assessment are still in the design phase, but the group has set out to define three areas of focus: civic knowledge domains, applied civic skills, and lifelong civic dispositions (the competencies for which are currently being drafted).

According to Andrew, the first two categories include the following competencies:

- **Civic knowledge domains:** Political Philosophy; Rights and Responsibilities; Civil Society; Constitutional Institutions; Federalism and the States; Constitutional Conflicts; Economic Literacy; Money and Influence; Media and Connectivity; Civic Geography; Domestic Dilemmas; International Issues; Choice and Elections
- **Applied civic skills:** Canvassing; Travel; Phonebanking; In-Person Lobbying; E-advocacy; Volunteer Work or Service Learning; Published Written Opinion; Public Oral Testimony; Political/Advocacy Campaign Work; Voter Registration Participation; Interscholastic Debate, Mock Trial, or Moot Court; Teaching and Mentoring; Cause-Related Funding

What does this initial framework tell us about the network’s approach to civic education? Two things stand out. First, this is an *intentional* attempt to define the knowledge, skills, and attributes Democracy Prep wants to impart to its students. This effort to carefully construct a homegrown, school-wide citizenship curriculum with input from many different parts of the faculty says a lot about the prominent place reserved for citizenship at Democracy Prep.

Second, the framework reveals that Democracy Prep intends action-oriented civic skills to share equal billing with civic knowledge. As Feit explained, “We want our students and faculty to be well-informed, engaged, and articulate on the issues that directly affect their lives, but we also want them to understand how to translate that knowledge into concrete action steps. Knowledge and awareness of pertinent issues and the institutions charged with enacting and implementing policies are necessary but insufficient conditions when we’re discussing ‘active’ citizenship. To truly fulfill our mission, we also want our students and teachers to be prepared to effectively advocate on their behalf in situation-specific ways.”

The development of the citizenship curriculum and professional development is still very much a work in progress. Indeed, Democracy Prep recently held a network-wide professional development session with the explicit purpose of discussing the civic mission of the school and soliciting faculty feedback on the last set of 13 civic dispositions. (We discuss this training session more in the “Professional Development for Civic Education” section.) What is apparent is that civic education is at the center of what Democracy Prep does. It is not simply a topic that social studies or history teachers focus on for a couple of units each year, but a cornerstone that undergirds the entire organization.

Educating Students—and Teachers

On primary day, we had a chance to observe a global literacy class address the importance of voting. A group of eighth graders are working on a daily “Do Now,” a warm-up exercise students complete at the start of each class. Today’s “Do Now” is explicitly geared toward GOTV prep, with questions including “What is a democracy?” and “Part of DPPS’ motto is ‘to change the world!’ How does voting allow us to change the world?”

The day’s lesson explores different types of democracies, the two major political parties in the United States, and the difference between a primary and general election. The teacher also presents a snapshot of data on political participation to illustrate low voter turnout among minority groups and its implications. Students then participate in a mock primary election. At the end of class, the teacher shifts gears to discuss the upcoming GOTV campaign, explaining who is running in the primary and instructing students on how to interact with the adults they meet.

The emphasis here is on the abstract side of civic education. Students learn concepts, facts, and dates—the

core content knowledge schools are designed to impart. The majority of content for any Democracy Prep course is designed internally, and teachers have a great deal of flexibility in choosing which materials to use and how to structure their classes. As such, the curriculum varies from school to school, or even teacher to teacher. For example, Richard Irvan uses a combination of curriculum materials from History Alive!, We the People, and Teaching Tolerance, explaining that at the sixth-grade level most instruction is “direct and highly structured.” Anne Christian’s school uses the Scott Foresman textbooks published by Pearson Education for their social studies classes, but since the text “does not adequately—by the standards set by Democracy Prep—incorporate civics discussion,” the school creates supplemental materials that she, as civics coordinator, writes and helps implement. Key concepts are integrated into history or global literacy classes rather than a specific civics class, and civics content is most directly taught on GOTV days in an attempt to marry abstract and operational citizenship.

Democracy Prep is now in the process of tying promotion for fifth and eighth graders and graduation for seniors to demonstrated mastery of its civic skills and knowledge domains. To graduate elementary, middle, and high school, students will have to pass a high-stakes civics exam on core content developed by the network.

But assessment does not stop with these grade-level examinations. Andrew recently announced that graduation from Democracy Prep High School will be contingent on students passing the naturalization test required by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services for hopeful immigrants—and passing at a higher bar than what the agency requires. Each Democracy Prep graduate will need to score an 83 percent on the 100-question test. (The necessary passing score for an immigrant seeking citizenship is 60 percent.) The exam includes questions like:

- What stops one branch of government from becoming too powerful?
- Under our Constitution, some powers belong to the states. What is one power of the states?
- There were 13 original states. Name three.
- Before he was President, Eisenhower was a general. What war was he in?¹⁴

Over the long-term, the network has a vision for quantifying civic engagement for its alumni. This includes

compiling statistics on voter participation, levels of philanthropic giving, participation in civic groups, and jury service. The first class of Democracy Prep students is slated to graduate in Spring 2013, so the groundwork for this data collection is currently underway.

Given the outsized role teachers and administrators play in designing curriculum and assessments, faculty recruitment and training is paramount for Democracy Prep. The school recruits teachers primarily on the basis of observable characteristics, both quantifiable (such as how well they improve student performance) and qualitative (distilled, in Feit's words, "into the pithy dating profile phrase 'hungry, humble, and smart'"). Civic dispositions are unlikely to factor much in a principal's decision to hire a particular teacher. "It will be far more incumbent on the network to provide thoughtful professional development on implementation of the civics program once they have arrived," Feit explains. Indeed, while most of the faculty we interviewed had degrees in their field and prior teaching experience, their backgrounds differed widely when it came to civic engagement.

Professional development, then, is vital if Democracy Prep is to fulfill its civic ambitions. For principals, the school has a yearlong fellowship called Leader U, aimed at training future principals in the culture and expectations of the network, including civic education. Teacher development is a little murkier, with Feit quick to admit that professional development sessions have to date "been more aspirational than actionable." Each campus has a civics coordinator who works "to translate [key civic] ideas into implementable strategies for teachers to use in their classrooms." He added, "Going forward, we know this needs to become more systematized."

Citizenship and Shoe Leather

Taking part in real-world politics builds on and reinforces what Democracy Prep students learn in the classroom. The primary election is a case in point of how Democracy Prep uses political events to impart civic skills to its students, promote the schools' brand, and advance the charter school agenda. In the midmorning, Andrew walks us over to Public School 175 on West 134th Street, where a slew of television cameras are setting up shop. He is furiously typing on his iPhone; word is that Rangel will be stopping by to cast his vote at the polling station inside the school, and Andrew wants to make sure a team of Democracy Prep citizen-scholars is there to greet him. This is part civics lesson, part media promotion, and if they get the timing right, a memorable

story for the students. (Rangel did show up to vote later that day, and the students were able to greet him briefly.)

The first GOTV campaign Democracy Prep held was in 2006, the same year the first school in the network opened its doors. At the time, Andrew recalled, the students distributed a black-and-white flier filled with text on both sides of the page. The results were unsurprising: the get-out-the-vote message failed to resonate, buried beneath a sea of words on an uninspiring handout. This caused Andrew to think seriously about his message, to distill the key concepts of democracy into an "elevator pitch" likely to hit home with busy passerby on the street. "What's the point of being Democracy Prep," he mused, "if we can't articulate what democracy is?"

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The distillation resulted in two key words—choice and voice—and a campaign that draws on the fact that while the students themselves cannot vote, they can encourage adults in Harlem to do so. Under the watchful eye of their teachers, students gathered at subway station entrances and on street corners in the vicinity of their schools. This time they had fliers that looked like large bookmarks. One side featured the school logo and mission statement, and read "I CAN'T VOTE." On the reverse, it continued: "But... YOU CAN! VOICE your CHOICE this TUESDAY."

Most passersby seemed amused by the students and took the fliers without hassle. Andrew estimates that, over the past seven years of these campaigns, over 100,000 adults have been "reached" on the streets around Democracy Prep's campuses, although it is tough to measure the impact the GOTV work has had on voter turnout. At times, the students' efforts were met with apathy or disinterest. Recalled Irvan, "My eighth graders noticed this when registering voters this year—some local residents told them they were wasting their time, that nothing was going to change anyways."

Witnessing voter apathy is an important civic lesson in and of itself: if the adults in the community are not using their political voice, whose voices are heard? Classroom instruction can teach students about historical debates over enfranchisement and low participation rates in urban communities. But the frustration of trying to

mobilize uninterested adults may provide the best argument for why active citizenship is important. Having a few doors shut in your face can make those classroom lessons more tangible and foster civic habits in students.

Students' real-time civic education goes beyond the grassroots. Democracy Prep students also participate in regular "lobby visits" to local legislative offices in Harlem and the Bronx, and frequently attend state Department of Education hearings on charter school facilities, school locations, and the expansion of the Democracy Prep network. At the New York state capitol in Albany, students interact with sitting lawmakers and their staffs. Andrew estimates that since the network's founding, Democracy Prep has made seven parent-and-student visits to Albany for lobby day, six student-and-staff trips to the statehouse, and seven student-and-staff visits to Washington, DC. These lobby visits are not your standard warm and fuzzy, photo-op trip to the state capitol. Democracy Prep students go to Albany to lobby, face-to-face, elected and appointed state officials on issues facing charter schools.

On one such lobby day in Albany in February 2012, we watched as students sporting the Democracy Prep trademark yellow shirts and hats peppered sitting legislators with questions outside the Senate and Assembly chambers. Ostensibly, the occasion was the annual Charter School Advocacy Day put on by charter advocates in the state of New York.

For most attendees, this is a relatively mild-mannered affair. Charter school parents are there to "share positive stories about charter schools all across the state," tour the capitol, and meet with their legislator.¹⁵ But unlike the other charter schools in attendance, Democracy Prep makes its own appointments directly with legislators and their staff. The network also makes a point to visit more than just the students' local representatives, hitting up other education policy power brokers. In the space of about four hours, the swarms of kids in yellow hats will meet with more than 10 officials, including Governor Andrew Cuomo's education secretary, the assembly speaker, staffers in the office of the Republican Senate majority leader, and the local legislators from Harlem and the Bronx, where most Democracy Prep families live.

Students' public-speaking skills and knowledge of legislative politics and process come in handy. The activists are articulate and polite but direct and unflinching. They typically start by describing the hard work that Democracy Prep demands—early mornings, extended school days, and long nights of homework—and make the case that charter schools deserve equal funding in return for these efforts. After the testimonials, they invariably ask the policymakers where they stand on charter schools.

Also on the February agenda was the New York DREAM Act, a law that would allow undocumented high school graduates to access state financial aid and pay in-state tuition at New York's public colleges. It is a controversial issue and, for schools like Democracy Prep where around 10 percent of the student body is undocumented, crucial to their success. If undocumented graduates cannot afford to attend college, the network's deep-seated goals of "Go to college" and "Change the world" will be much harder to achieve. Though other charter networks also have much to gain from the DREAM Act, their lack of explicit civic focus means it is unlikely any of them are discussing it on Charter School Advocacy Day.

If necessary, Democracy Prep students push the conversations with legislators back "on message." When the meeting with an aide to the Republican majority leader of the Senate devolves into a friendly conversation about what students want to be when they grow up, one student pipes up and asks where the senator stands on the DREAM Act. When an aide tells the group that the committee is still in the exploratory phase, the students immediately ask what kind of timetable the Senate is working on. Tough crowd.

While the politics of education reform can get nasty, the emphasis at Democracy Prep is on civil discourse and debate. When the group meets with Assemblyman Keith Wright, who represents the Harlem neighborhood where Democracy Prep resides, he applauds the students for their civility. Standing immediately outside the assembly chamber, he tells the group that though he may not always agree with them on charter school issues, "We always agree to be agreeable."

Lobby and election days serve as an important complement to the theory of democracy, making civic education come alive. In the words of George, the principal of Democracy Prep Harlem Middle School, this kind of participatory citizenship is "real education. . . . [It is] training students to be good citizens."

Building Civic Skills

The lobbying visits reveal how articulate and polished many of the Democracy Prep students are when it comes to talking to adults. Their poise in a setting that would be intimidating to most—standing face-to-face with a member of the state legislature—would rank them among the most precocious students in New York's toniest prep schools. Political scientists have found that these kinds of skills—how to speak publicly or give a presentation,

convene and run a meeting, and write a letter—prepare individuals to participate in civic life. Citizens who report that they have developed “civic skills,” whether at home, in school, in the workplace, or in churches, tend to participate in politics at higher rates.¹⁶

These civic skills come from practice, and part of the role of Democracy Prep is to provide opportunities for their students to “practice citizenship” and hone their civic skills. On primary day, we watch one such exercise: junior class college interview practice. Rising seniors must present to a panel of teachers and board members about their college plans and career aspirations. The presentation is intended to mimic a college interview. The panel asks the students a number of challenging questions and grades their presentations using a rubric.

College admission and success rates are of obvious importance to high-performing charter schools, which pride themselves in closing academic achievement gaps and preparing students for college. Given how young many of the best charter schools are, research on how their graduates perform at the postsecondary level is thin.¹⁷ For Democracy Prep, these high school juniors represent the first graduating class of Democracy Prep Charter High. The stakes are high.

The idea is to make civic behaviors a habit, an expectation.

As we watch, students come in one-by-one, announce which college they are applying to, and give five minutes of remarks on their backgrounds, attributes, and why their chosen school should accept them. One student arrives early and is heavily scripted, but when she forgets her lines, she has a difficult time speaking off the cuff. Another student exudes charisma, easily rattling off his accomplishments, but the panel is quick to call him out for relying too much on his innate charm and coming unprepared for their questions. One fails to show, and a teacher is sent to track her down.

This process—giving a speech in front of a critical audience—would likely not be considered citizenship narrowly defined. But for Democracy Prep, obvious parallels exist to the kinds of civic behaviors the school intends to inculcate in its students. One is an emphasis on decorum. Students are expected to arrive on time, dress professionally, and come prepared—all traits necessary to succeed in college and the workplace. As AEI education scholar Frederick M. Hess explains, “When citizenship is spoken of today, it is more and more in a ‘transactional’ sense—with

citizenship understood as the basket of skills and attitudes (how to shake hands, speak properly, and be punctual) that will help students attend prestigious colleges and obtain desirable jobs.”¹⁸ Hess argues that this facet of civic education has become more prominent in recent years, especially as the primary objective of schools has become, in the words of President Barack Obama, to make students “college and career ready.”¹⁹ The mock interviews help impart this transactional citizenship.

A second parallel between mock interviews and civic education is that the practice of public speaking—much like the practice of lobbying in Albany—builds civic skills. Indeed, Democracy Prep lists “public oral testimony” as one of the 13 civic skills that the network wants its students to master. Students practice public speaking in front of their teachers, and, as a graduation requirement, must give a public speech to a charter school board, public assembly, rally, or similar meeting. These experiences both teach students *how* to participate and give them a chance to actually do so.

Leading by Example

Seth Andrew is not only Democracy Prep’s founder and superintendent, but also the school’s civic-educator-in-chief. On primary day, Andrew convenes the entire school for a brief, somewhat impromptu lesson on voting. The school’s gymnasium is a polling place on primary day, and Andrew uses his own primary vote as an opportunity to teach active citizenship by example.

Andrew’s 10-minute talk drives three themes home: voting is important, it is easy, and not enough people do it. The superintendent returns to his roots as a teacher and peppers the students with a litany of questions—“Name one person who is running in this election,” “What does it mean that Charles B. Rangel is the ‘incumbent?’”—before proclaiming, “It only takes 10 minutes to vote, and today I’m going to prove it to you.” Principal George chimes in to say that voting “is one of the most important things that adults do.”

As the school files into the gym, Andrew continues his lesson—thanking the volunteers who man the poll, holding up his blank ballot to show the students, filling it in (he does not reveal who he voted for), and submitting it. All the while, he is talking and circling around the same themes: it is easy to vote; tell your parents to do it; here is why it matters; this is a big deal; it is really easy.

The repetition is key. As Andrew later explains, it is about making civic concepts “sticky” for a student body unfamiliar with active citizenship. The idea is to make

civic behaviors a habit, an expectation. This is the same strategy the school uses to encourage college-going by naming classrooms after the teacher’s alma mater, organizing frequent field trips to universities, and identifying each grade level by the year the students will graduate from college. (For example, the current senior class is called “the class of 2017.”) This system constantly reminds students why they are there—it instills a belief that college is a natural and expected progression.

At Democracy Prep, civic education works the same way. By constantly preaching the importance of voting, showing how it is done, and urging students to encourage their parents to do so, Democracy Prep seeks to make active citizenship the norm.

Building Social Capital: Town Halls

Fall—and a presidential election—was very much in the air when we returned to Democracy Prep for a follow-up visit in October. Charles Rangel had won the Democratic primary, although it was close: he beat out Espaillat by just over 1,000 votes. The victory all but ensured he would be reelected to a 22nd term in November. In the interim, Democracy Prep had started a new school year and continued their GOTV efforts; one voter registration drive in September yielded 300 new registrants from the Harlem community.

Inside the schools, civic education continues in a variety of forms. We visit on a Friday to observe the weekly town hall day. Each grade has a town hall meeting every Friday that is one part grade-wide assembly, one part pep rally, and one part current-events lesson. The actual substance runs the gamut and is not always directly connected to abstract citizenship. But the town halls do offer lessons on several important facets of operational citizenship.

The day’s first town hall is already underway when we arrive in the school gymnasium. The eighth-grade class at Democracy Prep middle school is finishing a short video on the importance of hard work. Afterward, a teacher who is serving as the facilitator repeatedly asks the class, “How bad do you want it?” and encourages the students to spend their weekends studying and setting goals for long-term success.

A handful of students who are applying to New York City high schools that specialize in fine arts proceed to audition in front of their peers, one performing a dance routine while another belts out “Good Morning Baltimore” from the musical *Hairspray*. This particular town hall is concentrated more on work ethic and the students’

academic trajectory. At most, it can be said to focus on the transactional side of citizenship, the traits necessary to succeed in college and career. The students remain in their seats throughout, and it feels more like a low-key assembly than a public forum.

This is not so down the street at Democracy Prep Endurance Middle School, which opened its doors in 2012 to its first class of sixth graders. On this particular Friday, Endurance’s town hall is more what you would expect to see from 100-some 12-year-olds. Energy in the cavernous auditorium is palpable, driven primarily by the school’s dynamic principal, Margaret Marrer. As the students file in amidst the thumping noise of three students (and one teacher) up front pounding on bongo drums, a faculty member tells us almost apologetically, “We make the kids show good behavior all week, so we have to give them a reward at the end of it.”

That reward lies in both a controlled outlet for a great deal of pent-up energy and a series of awards for a variety of behaviors. The town hall starts with students reciting both the Pledge of Allegiance and a pledge to Democracy Prep. Principal Marrer then leads them in a series of chants (Marrer: “Work . . .” Students: “. . . hard!” Marrer: “Go to . . .” Students: “. . . college!”) before launching into the award ceremony. For each award, a different teacher bounces up to the front and gives a description without revealing the student’s name (“This student always works hard and comes to class on time. Every time I see her in the hallway, she smiles at me. . . .”) before announcing the winner. Awards are given out in a number of categories, such as “The Academic Risk Taker” for a student who takes on academic challenges, and “The Founder Award” for all-around exemplary character. (Some weeks, Marrer says, they give out a “Change the World” award for civic engagement; one previous winner was a student who registered 12 voters on one GOTV day.)

After the ceremony, Marrer moves into the results of the recent election for the school student council, prefaced by some tough love (“We don’t win everything all the time”). The town hall closes with each homeroom singing its own fight song, their teachers leading the charge.

It can be difficult to gauge the direct impact of the town halls on citizenship education from visiting just two of them. While the eighth-grade town hall focused more on academics and life skills (setting goals, working hard), the sixth-grade one had more immediate civic takeaways: students recited the Pledge of Allegiance, awards focused on civic behaviors, and the school announced the results of a student council election. At her town halls, Anne Christian conducts five-minute current events lessons for

elementary students. But for the moment, the town halls function more as a school assembly than as an explicit attempt to teach citizenship, and the network is still wrestling with exactly how to make the town halls more civic-oriented.

Nonetheless, the forums do impart to Democracy Prep students an important lesson for civic life: they are individuals who are part of a larger community within which they have certain rights and responsibilities. In this sense, the town halls, by gathering an entire grade into a single location on a regular basis, are akin to meetings of civic organizations like the Rotary Club, Lions Club, or any number of local neighborhood groups. Members convene, elections are held, and values are shared.

In this way, simply being part of a school mirrors civic life. Harvard political scientist Robert D. Putnam argues that associational life is a critical source of social capital, which in turn drives broader participation in civic life. However, Putnam notes that participation in such groups is dwindling—we are, in his phrase, “bowling alone,” with real consequences for civic life.²⁰ Democracy Prep’s town halls, by teaching students the importance of associational life, can start to reverse this trend.

Professional Development for Civic Education

The same afternoon the students gathered together in their grade-level town halls, so did the Democracy Prep faculty and staff. The purpose: the school’s first network-wide professional development event geared specifically toward civic education. Andrew runs the meeting, which parallels a typical Democracy Prep classroom: the staff complete a “Do Now” exercise before the presentation, faculty snap their fingers in lieu of clapping for correct answers, and the session concludes with a 40-question version of the naturalization test.

The professional development session is a concerted effort to ensure that all of the network’s teachers, not just those in social studies, share the school’s vision for civic education. Andrew’s talk centers on a single theme: “How do we create demand for active civics?” He and the teachers cover a handful of topics that illustrate the challenges and opportunities the school faces.

- **Stickiness.** One theme Andrew discusses is the importance of overcommunication and repetition on the part of teachers and staff—the idea of making civic learning “sticky” so that it is retained by the students. “Our scholars learn what we teach

them,” Andrew declares during the training. “But the really scary part is the corollary: they don’t learn what we don’t teach them.” In this aspect, Democracy Prep faces an uphill battle. Many of the school’s students come from backgrounds and homes where even the most basic civic knowledge, habits, and skills are often lacking. Just as no-excuses charter schools fight to close gaps in English and math for their students, so too should they work to close gaps in civic knowledge and behaviors, Andrew argues. Constant repetition and the infusing of civic concepts in every facet of students’ school experience should gradually start to embed these behaviors and norms into their day-to-day lives.

- **Generating excitement.** This starts, in part, by making civics exciting. To that end, Andrew encourages his staff to think of creative ways to teach citizenship in their classrooms. To demonstrate, he brings out a crew of fourth-grade students from Harlem Prep Elementary. Under the guidance of music teacher Brian Duran, the students burst into a catchy rendition of the pop song “Call Me Maybe,” with the words changed to encourage voting in the upcoming election. (“Vote for Obama, or vote for Romney. It’s your civic duty, vote for somebody,” the students sing.)²¹ Duran explains that rewriting songs enables him to “explore character development themes [while] at the same time teaching rhythm, rhyme schemes, articulation, public speaking, body language,” and so on—in other words, marrying a music lesson with a civics lesson. Andrew is keen to ensure other non-social studies teachers take note.

Similarly, activities like the GOTV campaign, class elections, town halls, and calling students “citizen-scholars” all help to generate excitement on the part of students for civic learning. The school is still working on how to infuse this excitement about citizenship into classroom content. But for the moment, Andrew is more concerned about imparting a mindset to his faculty: that every aspect of school life should have some connection to civic education.

- **The ripple effect.** Part of creating demand for civic learning, in Andrew’s mind, extends beyond students to impacting the students’ families and other Harlem residents. Andrew repeatedly returns to this theme during the session, posing rhetorical questions to his staff and sharing his long-term vision of Democracy Prep students ultimately graduating

from college and returning to Harlem, creating a ripple effect for the entire neighborhood. This idea is also present in the GOTV campaigns and Andrew's exhortations to his students to go home and urge their parents to vote.

- **Three groups of 13.** As mentioned earlier, Democracy Prep has identified three areas of focus: civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions, with 13 competencies in each. This framework is meant to guide the schools' approach to civic education writ large. Andrew is quick to emphasize that the framework remains very much a work in progress. The network is still grappling with how to teach citizenship in a systematic way—recall that it allows each teacher a great deal of latitude in what content to use. As the network grows, so will the need to make teaching and assessment more organized. The three groups of 13 are a step in that direction.

Perhaps most important, the meeting was the first time the school had attempted a specific civic-focused, network-wide professional development session. Civic education permeates Democracy Prep, and the network stands out as a national leader in the field. But even here, leaders and teachers are still building and adapting their approach to civic learning.

Conclusion: Schooling as Nation Building

Much of Seth Andrew's inspiration for Democracy Prep comes from a surprising place: the Republic of South Korea. Andrew taught English there for a time early in his career, and the experience influenced his views on what schools in the United States *should* be doing. As is well-known in education circles, South Korea is a success story; over the course of a generation, the nation has built a world-class education system. Part of that success, Andrew and others suggest, is due to the prominence given to education in South Korea. The country reserves one of its most important honorifics for its teachers; in English, the title translates to "nation-builder."

Andrew believes that American schools and teachers should also be in the business of "nation building," and that charter schools are an important test bed for a more active take on citizenship. He is frustrated that so many high-performing charter schools have chosen to focus so intently on math and reading, missing the chance to raise the bar on civic education. In the disadvantaged urban

communities where "no-excuses" schools operate, active citizenship is often as scarce as the college degrees to which their students aspire.

Its status as a charter school is key to Democracy Prep's approach to civic education. So much of what Democracy Prep does on citizenship is action-oriented and overtly political, such as the lobbying days when the school takes a firm stance on an issue and encourages students to lobby for it. The fact that parents opt in to a charter school gives Democracy Prep more latitude to experiment with different modes of teaching. It is unlikely that a traditional public school could operate with the same freedom as Democracy Prep.

Democracy Prep believes that American schools and teachers should be in the business of "nation building."

But some elements of the Democracy Prep approach are transferable to district schools. Ensuring that all students take a citizenship exam before graduation seems like something a civic-minded principal could implement relatively easily. The naturalization test and the National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam are both available to the public. Likewise, asking all students to speak publicly in a forum outside of school could better prepare students for civic life. Rather than vague "community service" or "service learning" requirements, schools could make citizenship a live issue by asking students to participate in the political processes in their community.

Still, it is unlikely these activities would be implemented with the same vigor at most district schools as they are at Democracy Prep. The network does not simply compartmentalize civic education as just another subject to teach; instead, the schools are built around it—thanks largely to Seth Andrew's vision. But the network itself is entering a time of transition: Andrew recently announced that he would be stepping down as superintendent of Democracy Prep—in his words, "graduating" with the first class of seniors—in summer 2013. Given how instrumental he has been in setting the civic vision of the school and guiding its development, it is fair to ask what the impact of his departure will be.

The good news is that the network seems well-poised to continue to grow. Democracy Prep was recently awarded a \$9.1 million grant from the US Department

of Education to expand to new locales throughout Harlem and across state lines, including in Camden, New Jersey. Whether the intense emphasis on civic education can scale across multiple states is an open question. But if we were city councilmen or school board members in Camden, we would be prepared to see a swarm of yellow hats outside our offices in the years to come.

Author Biography

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Notes

We would like to thank the faculty and staff at Democracy Prep, especially Seth Andrew and Miriam Joelson, for hosting us and answering our questions.

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