

The Need for Civics Education

Robert Austin

Humanities Coordinator, Utah State Board of Education

Excellence in Ethics Award Luncheon, Utah Valley University, September 28, 2022

I've coordinated the Utah Teacher of the Year program for a number of years, and I have done the same with the Utah History Teacher of the Year program for the last fifteen years and now I have a little taste of my own medicine, realizing what I put those people through when I present an award and then ask them to speak. None of those teachers ever really consider themselves worthy, and of course none of them went into teaching to get an award, and I share those traits as well.

And yet here I am, deeply honored and very aware of the fact that I would not be here, with you today, without some amazing people and educators in my own life, and some awesome students who challenged me and inspired me as well.

The good news for all of you is that with my current gig in social studies education I need to be a student of history, and while I have much on my mind about the current state of civics education, I am also aware that Edward Everett is not a household name. Am I right? Everett was the speaker before Lincoln at Gettysburg. He spoke for two hours, and Lincoln for a few minutes. So I will try to learn my lesson and keep my remarks somewhere between that.

I do want to say that the very existence of a Center for the Study of Ethics gives me hope, and I thank all of the board members who are committed to this work. I also want to acknowledge all of the great work and collaboration over the years by UVU in both the teacher preparation program and in the groundbreaking work of the Center for Constitutional Studies.

I've loved social studies ever since I was a little kid. I remember practicing my presentation on Pompeii in a full-length mirror in my childhood home in Iowa when I was in third grade, trying to anticipate the questions I might get about pumice. I have always been fascinated by this world, by the past, by geography, how systems work, how people wield power, how people have overcome hardships and injustices.

Learning – and by extension, schooling – was engaging and fun for me. That's not necessarily a surprise, since school was pretty much designed with my demographic in mind. I was the poster child for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which was the gold standard of standardized tests for a long time.

School was fun for me, and it ought to be fun for every kid. It ought to be a place of wild creativity and problem-solving, full of laughter and excitement and challenge. And often it is. I had the great opportunity just a few weeks ago of interviewing a third-grade teacher in Provo district who worked with her students on an intensive unit of study all centered around what should be done about Utah lake. For those of you who are not aware, there are plenty of proposals regarding Utah lake, including dredging the lake and creating islands for future development. Students were introduced to the proposals, read about the history of the lake to gain context, considered the ideas put forth, debated the consequences of the differing plans, and most importantly, they changed their minds based on new evidence or new arguments. And they made some of the arguments based on concepts not even mentioned by their teacher, such as considering what our legacy should be for future generations.

Remember, these are eight-year-olds, from a solidly performing public elementary school, guided by an outstanding and thoughtful teacher.

One of my favorite sayings is “Teaching is easy if you don’t know how,” and this educator’s depth of planning, her scaffolded instruction, choices of leveled texts and primary sources -- including news clippings and television news stories-- shows that once you know how to teach, it gets really, really hard.

I love talking about this teacher and her classroom because the reading, writing, speaking and listening that she had her students doing was a master class in civics education. In fact, civics is central to the mission of public education. Utah has a solid definition of civics education, and it provides enough latitude and real-world practice to keep civics education relevant and engaging.

"Civic education" means the cultivation of informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of representative democracy in Utah and the United States. This cultivation can be found in the classroom of a great eighth-grade teacher, where I have had the pleasure of serving as a judge as part of his use of the We the People program. We the People provides students the opportunity to engage in a mock public hearing on an aspect of the U.S. Constitution. As part of these hearings, and in the questioning posed by judges, students call on their own understanding of historic and current issues and how these issues help amplify and explain Constitutional concepts.

In a few weeks I will have the great opportunity to spend time with students who are participating in the United States Senate Youth competition. It is sort of an American Idol for civics. As a part of the day these Senate youth participants will get an opportunity to give an extemporaneous speech – their favorite – and participate in a round table discussion of current issues. When I speak with these students, invariably they tell me they loved the opportunity to have those discussions, listening to one another and thinking about the issues of the day, and that it is a rare occurrence in their own school experience.

So I am Inspired by these students and these teachers, but I am worried. I love the blues, and there’s a great line by Seth Walker in his song of the same name: “The Future Ain’t What it Used to Be No More”. The future is not what I envisioned as a kid growing up in Iowa in the 70’s when we were all about to go metric.

I used to joke that we lived through a historical simulation of the great depression when the great recession hit. Then when covid hit it was a great time to teach a simulation of the Spanish flu. Now we have seemingly entered into a simulation of McCarthyism. The nebulous and ill-defined scourge of communism has been replaced by a desire to root out a discussion of “sensitive topics” and in the process that can make schools even less likely to be places of joy, creativity, and problem solving, and less likely to include the sorts of study devoted to current and sometimes contentious issues.

There was a recent NEA study assessing classroom climate found that potential teachers were being scared away in part because of the relentless unpredictable political environment. Well, recent in relative, historic terms. That study was from 1949. But the same environment has returned. These concerns were borne out in our recent Utah Civic Learning Collaborative listening tour. The findings reaffirm the challenges teachers are facing.

Imagine teaching the US civil war and being encouraged to not teach about enslavement. Imagine being a civics teacher launching a new class and deciding that solely reading the Constitution and Declaration of Independence in civics class and leaving it at that will be a lot “safer” than engaging in the pedagogy that the teacher knows would be more engaging and relevant .

The number of library book challenges are through the roof. Of course, there needs to be a process in place to assess instructional materials, making sure they are age appropriate and have educational value, but those processes must be followed. On top of that is the self-censorship that is occurring. I have been asked for the “list of topics” that are “off the table.” There is no list. There is guidance about how and when to engage in meaningful discussions, and there are academic standards to hew to, but there is no list. Even long-provided content like presentations about the internment of Japanese Americans at Topaz have found hesitant reception by schools worried about controversy.

The discussion of current events is at the center of our work in social studies, not at the margins. As authoritarianism has swept across the planet, as more and more people lose faith in institutions, and as we confront significant issues like mass migrations, civil unrest, climate change, and a media landscape unrecognizable from my youth of Walter Cronkite telling me “and that’s the way it is,” we must continue to help students engage in civil discourse and problem solving. The republic depends on this.

Maybe some of this pressure is a desire for a return to a simpler time, a nostalgia. The late and great public historian David McCullough scoffed at the notion of a simpler time. George Washington wasn’t walking around in his wig and breeches thinking he looked quaint. He had no idea, in his time, how the revolution would turn.

And now this is our time. We have to seize it. It’s important to remember that robust civics education, preparing students to be informed participants, is reaffirmed time and again in multiple ways with multiple documents and data points.

At the Utah legislative level with [HCR 15](#). This concurrent resolution emphasizing the importance of civics education included this language:

WHEREAS, Utah's students should be taught skills in constructive civil debate, critical thinking, media literacy, evaluating the credibility of sources, and recognizing the dangers of the dissemination of misinformation and sowing distrust in fundamental civic institutions.

With the passage of a [new ethnic studies bill](#) that offers opportunities to expand and make more inclusive the standards in our schools.

At the state board level with [R277-328](#), a board rule that lays out parameters and guard rails for teaching and professional learning around equity issues, and also includes this statement:

R277-328-5. Rule Interpretation.

- (1) No part of this rule shall be construed by an LEA or educator to: (a) prohibit or ban discussions of events, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, or concepts, including those described in this rule, from the general sharing and participation in the marketplace of ideas fostered in a learning environment; and (b) promote one ideology over another regarding a topic, including those described in this rule.

With the state board's [Portrait of a Graduate](#), which emphasizes civics, service, collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, honesty, integrity and responsibility, creativity and innovation, among other things.

Within our own academic standards, and our emphasis on [foundational practices for civic preparation](#).

And within the community. A solid majority of Utahns' surveyed in a [2021 Civics Education study](#) by the Sutherland institute found that "the top priorities for civics education include teaching students to sift through information and decide for themselves what to believe.

America is built on an idea: We the People.

Lincoln spoke of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And I have often thought about and focused my energy on the power in the people.

But lately I have been thinking about the importance of the concept of "We". We the people. I am not too Pollyannaish to think that we can all come together in perfect harmony.

But enough of us have to come together to find common ground, to celebrate common decency, and to further the common good.

I had the great good fortune to hear an amazing artist the other day, the singer and force of nature named Danielle Ponder. You will hear much more about her in the future, and I encourage you to check her out on Spotify. If you get nothing else from my talk today but a music recommendation, it's time well spent. Ms. Ponder sang about and spoke about the fundamental need to belong. We need to belong to our families, our communities, and to one another. Schools and classrooms can play their part in nurturing that sense of belonging, and partner with parents and families in doing so.

Public schools are the last best hope for this country. They are the places that are the training grounds for citizenship, for creating a sense of community, and one of the few places where people don't self-select into our own little bubbles of confirmation bias, gated communities, and algorithms that feed us a steady diet of whatever we want to believe.

So I leave you with a challenge. If "the future ain't what it used to be no more", history and civics education teaches us the contingency of history, and that we can make our own futures. We all have to step up at this time in history. Our students deserve it. Our teachers need it.

So, register to vote. Volunteer at your local school. Attend board meetings, or at least pay attention to board meetings. Give your two minutes of public comment. Enter the maelstrom of social media from time to time to provide a counterpoint to those who try to stoke these fires of fear and maybe even engage in conversation. Attend and testify at legislative hearings.

And stand up for teachers. As one teacher noted from our civics listening tour, "I've totally seen the crisis in faith in American institutions, but that is my whole purpose in being a teacher: to say you cannot give up on yourselves, you cannot give up on this world. You're old enough to see the problems and there are many, but there's still good in the world and we want you to be a part of that."

So thank you to all of you for all you do to bring joy and creativity and a commitment to the ethical application of your work for the good of our community, and thank you for your time and attention.