

Taking the Action Out of Civics?: Polarized Debates over Civic Education

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Narrator: Even after twenty years of teaching, the first day of school was still exciting for Emily Wilson, Social Studies Department Chair at Central High School. The school year wouldn't start for students until next week, but staff were back on campus for meetings. Emily opened her email. Scrolling through her messages, she read: Have You Seen This? The email linked to an opinion piece from the local newspaper, written by John Walsh, parent of a rising Central junior.

Mr. Walsh: *Kids once went to school to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. Not anymore. Central High School now requires "action civics," better described as protest civics. In their history classes, students learn to stage walkouts and protests, directed by left-wing educators who use teenagers' temper tantrums for their own political ends. It's indoctrination, and I refuse to stand for it.*

Narrator: Emily felt the attack keenly. She imagined defending the program to Mr. Walsh.

Emily: I introduced the action civics model to Central myself last year. It was a big success at my old school, and I'm excited that all Central juniors participate. In action civics, students examine their community and identify issues that need solving. They choose which issue to focus on. They do research about their chosen issue and look at the systems that contribute to the presenting problem. With school and community partners, they plan some action to create change. It could be a organizing a protest, but it could also be creating a Public Service

Announcement or making a presentation to the principal or the school board. And students constantly reflect on what they're learning: about the government, about the community, and about themselves.

Sure, the process doesn't always run smoothly. I know we got some pushback, as you note, Mr. Walsh. Disagreements happen, about the root causes of problems or which action to take. And of course, the students don't always create change. But these challenges make action civics valuable. Students see different viewpoints and see the issues in more complex ways. They gain public speaking skills and learn to navigate spaces of power. I remember one student told me: "This project taught me that I shouldn't be afraid to stand up for what I think is right. It taught me that anyone has the ability to effect change, no matter who they are."

(continuing to read) What else do you have to say, Mr. Walsh?

Mr. Walsh: *Parents must band together to fight this indoctrination. The next school board meeting is two weeks from tomorrow. Join me for a conference this Saturday at the New Hope Presbyterian Church, organized by local groups that share my concerns, as we plan to make our message heard. I am the tip of the sword. There are many others behind me.*

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Narrator: The subject came up quickly at the department meeting that morning.

Juan: We need to talk about this. Across the country, action civics is being lumped in with a host of "controversial theories" that parents are up in arms about. We can't just ignore this article and hope that protestors won't show up at the school board meeting. For all we know, there will be news cameras with them.

Jim: I actually think the article makes some decent points. You might remember that I expressed doubts about action civics this time last year. These projects take time away from learning real history.

Emily: I remember your doubts, Jim. But your students really enjoyed the project, right?

Jim (*chuckling*): Sure, all kids enjoy working with their friends and leaving school to visit City Council. But we're in a crisis of civic ignorance: only half of Americans can name all three branches of government. I've been teaching civics longer than anyone here, and, trust me, it's not the right time to be experimenting with civics education.

Darren: Those statistics show that the traditional curriculum doesn't work well, and we know it particularly doesn't work well for kids who look like me. Action civics is good for all kids, but especially for Black kids, for Latino kids, and for other marginalized kids. Action civics helps them see themselves in the curriculum. They get to focus on problems that feel relevant for them and their families.

Katie (*tearful*) 1: But not all those families support action civics. One of the stories in the article came from my class. One group was doing a project to raise awareness of income inequality, and we had a discussion about whether meritocracy is a myth. A Black mother called me the next day, furious, because she felt I had told her son that however hard he worked, he'd never succeed the way White people did. She said he felt like he'd always be a victim. I managed to reestablish a good relationship with the student—and the mother—but it was painful, for all of us. I mean, who am I to tell a Black family I know more about racism than they do? As a brand new teacher, too?

Darren: I remember that, Katie. But, you know, that mom doesn't speak for all Black families. Class discussions like that are valuable.

Jim: Look, action civics causes problems between parents and kids, too, not just parents and teachers. I had one student last year, an incredible athlete, looking at the controversy around transgender kids playing sports. Her parents are religious and don't support transgender rights. The girl was so worried she'd get in trouble at home that she switched groups to work on a pro-life project. But before she switched, she spent days in a panic. Kids shouldn't be tackling these issues, riling everyone up and stressing themselves out.

Darren: The problem isn't the issues. The problem is the pushback.

Jim: Well, more pushback is coming, assuming we keep the project. I'd certainly support dropping it.

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Narrator: Thoughts swirled in Emily's head as she walked back to her office. But the decision didn't ultimately rest with her; Rhonda Williams, curriculum coordinator for the district, would make the final call. So Emily forwarded Mr. Walsh's opinion piece to Rhonda, asking about the discussion at the district office. A knock at the door from Principal Dan Ricci interrupted her work.

Dan: I'm guessing that you saw John Walsh's opinion piece?

Emily: I did. I know we got some pushback last year, but I honestly wasn't expecting anything like this.

Dan: I've heard complaints from Mr. Walsh before. A few years ago, he objected to a book with a same-sex kiss. Of course, it was a different world back then; nowadays you see security escorting protestors from school board meetings. Or even arresting people. And Mr. Walsh didn't try to pull in other parents that time, not that I remember.

Emily: I was surprised by how many of the parent complaints we got last year were in his piece.

Dan: The whole city is more polarized than ever. My wife's on the City Council, and she says their meetings get pretty heated. I don't even want to imagine our school board meetings—or any city meetings—filled with protestors shouting and news cameras everywhere. It's a real safety threat.

Emily: I don't want to imagine it, either.

Dan: Maybe there's some way to make these projects less political, maybe some approved topics for students to choose from, topics that aren't so controversial.

Emily: That would undermine a key purpose of action civics. Students choose issues that matter to them, and many of those issues are political.

Dan: Maybe changing what students are allowed to do? They could write letters to the editor, or have a class debate.

Emily: That takes the "action" out of action civics. Action civics empowers students in a way that those traditional activities don't; they get to choose how they present their message.

Dan: I understand, but a lot of parents don't want their 'empowered' children learning to plan walkouts. Those parents deserve a say in their children's education. Besides, you know we've been dealing with budget cuts. The last thing the superintendent wants is a costly lawsuit from angry parents. Central is different from your old school, Emily; I just don't think we're ready for something as divisive as action civics here.

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Narrator: An hour later, Darren Johnson appeared in the doorway.

Darren: Was that Dan I saw in here a while ago?

Emily: Yes. I'm sure you can guess why he came. Yesterday, I thought the action civics project was a key part of the American History curriculum. Now I have parents, teachers, and administrators telling me otherwise.

Darren: You've also got parents and teachers telling you differently. Check out the Central Parents Facebook page.

Emily (*scrolling through her phone*): Mr. Walsh certainly has plenty of supporters. Listen to this: "Kids need to learn before they become activists, so they have informed opinions."

Darren (*scrolling through his phone*): You're focusing on the wrong parts. There are parents who support action civics, too. Like this: "My son hated history for years, but his project changed all that. Now he wants to intern at the State House. I just wish he'd done the project years ago."

Emily (*scrolling*): But listen to this: "Maybe the school board isn't the right place to fight. We should talk to our state representatives. Some places have already banned action civics." What if we become the school that inspires a new law here banning action civics for the whole state? There are well-funded groups behind parents like Mr. Walsh. They could make a lot of noise in the capitol.

Darren: It's a risk we have to take. I've seen this too often here: we do something that challenges the status quo, and people get nervous. And suddenly we don't teach that book or do that project anymore. We decide to wait until people feel ready. We've made a lot of statements about equity and justice recently, but I don't see those statements turning into action. We have a chance to take a stand for equity here.

Katie (*knocking hesitantly*): Can I come in?

Emily: Of course. We're just talking about the action civics project.

Katie (*nervous*): That's why I came. I want to drop the project this year. I'm not eligible for tenure until next year, and I'm worried my contract won't be renewed if anything goes wrong in my classes. But maybe you can still do it in your classes?

Emily: We'll talk more about it at our one-on-one meeting.

Narrator: Katie nodded and headed out the door.

Emily: I imagine Rhonda won't want just some classes doing action civics. Curricular alignment matters to the district.

Darren: Besides, Katie teaches three general ed sections. We don't want action civics to become something only AP kids do.

Emily: True. I have to see what they're thinking at the district office. There's a lot to consider.

Narrator: After Darren left, Emily woke up her computer to find a response from Rhonda.

Rhonda: I did see that article. I've been fielding a lot of questions at the office about action civics! The press attention definitely has some people nervous here, so we'll have to decide how far we push this issue. There may be some rebranding we can do to placate the dissenters. And of course, action civics isn't the only way to shake up the curriculum. The money we have budgeted for the project could fund a guest speaker, maybe, or a new field trip? It's something to think about. Come by the office this afternoon to let me know where you stand.

Emily: Where do I stand? Should I push to keep action civics unchanged in the curriculum and risk a firestorm of protests and press coverage? Should I just

accept that the timing isn't right at Central? Is there some middle ground, a way to keep some core of action civics while softening the more controversial pieces? What will I tell Rhonda this afternoon?