

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

Sara O'Brien and Meira Levinson

<http://justiceinschools.org>

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 staff email. Scrolling through her messages, she read: Have You Seen This?

The email linked to an opinion piece from the local newspaper, titled "Take 'Action Civics' Out of Our School." It was written by John Warner, parent of a rising Central junior.

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.¹ 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.² It's indoctrination, and I refuse to stand for it.

Emily felt the attack keenly; she had introduced the action civics model from her old school to the district the year before. Students began by examining their community and identifying issues that needed solving, and then chose a single issue to focus on, working as individuals or in groups. Having chosen their issue, they did research and completed a root cause analysis, looking at the structures and systems that contributed to the presenting problem. They then worked to find community partners and plan some action to create change. Throughout the process, students reflected on what they were learning: about the government, about the community, and about themselves.³

¹ Rebranding action civics as "protest civics" seems to have been coined by Stanley Kurtz of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. See Kurtz, S. (2021, June 1). How Dems will push protest civics and CRT on schools. *National Review*. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/how-dems-will-push-protest-civics-and-crt-on-schools/>

² "Temper tantrums" comes from David Randall of the National Association of Scholars. Randall, D. (2019, December 26). Oklahoma education agency promotes progressive activism masquerading as civics. Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. <https://www.ocpathink.org/post/oklahoma-education-agency-promotes-progressive-activism-masquerading-as-civics>

³ The National Action Civics Collaborative provides an overview of the action civics process, along with links to more detailed materials. <https://actioncivicscollaborative.org/why-action-civics/overview/>

The process didn't always run smoothly. Classroom discussions sometimes got heated, as students disagreed about the root causes or about what action to take. And of course, the students did not always create the desired change. But, in Emily's experience, these challenges made action civics uniquely valuable. The heated classroom discussions exposed students to different viewpoints and led to more complex understanding of the topics.⁴ In strategizing and taking action, students honed their public speaking skills and learned to navigate spaces of power (like school board meetings or legislative hearings).⁵ Emily found that after completing their projects, her students gained a stronger sense of agency, along with increased civic knowledge and skills.⁶ Emily proudly recalled one student's words: "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."⁷

Emily had been excited to bring action civics to her new school. The project became part of the American History curriculum for all juniors; keeping equity in mind, Emily insisted that students at all academic levels have a chance to participate. Of course, there had been challenges. In fact, Mr. Warner seemed well informed about some parent pushback they had gotten.

Parents must band together to fight this indoctrination, Mr. Warner continued. 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.⁸ I am the tip of the sword.⁹ There are many others behind me.

* * *

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

⁴ Lee, N-J., Shah, D.V., & McLeod, J.M. (2012). Processes of political socialization: A communication mediation approach to youth civic engagement. *Communication Research*, 40(5), 669-697.

⁵ Kirshner, B., & Geil, K. (2010). "I'm about to bring it!" Access points between youth activists and adult community leaders. *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 20(2), 1-24.

⁶ See data from Generation Citizen about the impact that their action civics curriculum has on students: <https://generationcitizen.org/our-impact/by-the-numbers/>

⁷ This student comment is paraphrased from public testimony given by Kaira Watts-Bay, a Generation Citizen student who spoke before the New York City Council's Education Committee in 2017. Her full testimony is here: <https://generationcitizen.org/kaira-watts-bey-generation-citizen-student-shares-public-testimony-on-the-importance-of-action-civics-and-diversity-in-schools/>

⁸ In Alabama in June 2021, more than 40 people took part in a similar conference to "abolish Common Core education standards and ban instruction of Critical Race Theory" in the state's public schools. Moseley, B. (2021, 28 June). Conservatives hold conference on banning Critical Race Theory, Common Core. *Alabama Political Reporter*. <https://www.alreporter.com/2021/06/28/conservatives-hold-conference-on-banning-critical-race-theory-common-core/>

⁹ Maine parent Shawn McBreairty called himself "the tip of the sword" in an interview on Fox News on June 1, 2021, discussing his opposition to an "equity letter" sent by his daughters' school district. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/maine-father-critical-race-theory-we-need-education-not-indoctrination>

“We don’t need to devote any time to that drivel,” Rose Benson, a veteran ninth grade teacher, stated. “The writer obviously misunderstands action civics and is trying to manufacture a problem where none exists. It’s White fragility, plain and simple.”

“I sent the article to everyone because I think it’s worth discussing,” Juan Ramos said. Dedicated to teaching the “general ed” students, who were least likely to go to college and most likely to feel unseen, Juan valued curriculum that elevated student choice and voice. “Across the country, action civics is being lumped in with a host of ‘controversial theories’ that parents are up in arms about.¹⁰ We can’t just ignore this article and hope that protestors won’t materialize at the school board meeting. For all we know, there will be news cameras with them. We should talk about how to defend the project.”

“I actually think the article makes some decent points,” Jim Hennesey, the longest serving department member, chimed in. “You might remember that I expressed doubts about action civics this time last year. These projects take time away from learning real history.”

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

“Sure, all kids enjoy working with their friends and leaving school to visit City Council,” Jim chuckled. “But we’re in a crisis of civic ignorance: only half of Americans can name all three branches of government.¹¹ It’s not the right time to be experimenting with civics education.”

“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,”¹² interjected Darren Johnson. “For Black kids, for Latino kids, for other marginalized kids¹³, action civics helps them see themselves in the curriculum. They get to focus on problems that feel relevant to them and their families.”

“But not all those families support action civics,” Katie Fiske pointed out. “One of the stories in the article came from my class.¹⁴ One group focused on the racial wealth gap, which led to a class discussion about whether meritocracy is a myth. A Black mother called me the next day, furious, because she felt I had

¹⁰ For example, action civics was attacked as a “divisive theory” in New Brunswick, N.C., in June 2021. Simmons, K. (2021, June 8.) New Brunswick County leaders tackle critical race theory, other “divisive” theories. WECT News 6. <https://www.wect.com/2021/06/08/brunswick-county-leaders-tackle-critical-race-theory-other-divisive-theories/>

¹¹ In 2020, the Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey found that 51% of Americans could identify all three branches of government, the highest percentage since the yearly survey began in 2006. <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/political-communication/civics-knowledge-survey/>

¹² Littenberg-Tobias, J., and Cohen, A.K. (2016). Diverging Paths: Understanding Racial Differences in Civic Engagement among White, African American, and Latino/a Adolescents Using Structural Equation Modeling. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 57, 102-117.

¹³ For example, civic engagement can help urban youth exposed to violence (who are disproportionately low-income youth) build resilience. See Jain, S., and Cohen, A.K. (2013). Fostering Resilience Among Urban Youth Exposed to Violence: A Promising Area for Interdisciplinary Research and Practice. *Health Education & Behavior* 40(6), 651-662.

¹⁴ This story and the following story about affirmative action are based on parental pushback received by teachers, related by nonprofit organizations that work with educators using action civics in the classroom.

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." Blinking back tears, Katie continued, "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?"

"I remember that," Darren said. "But, you know, that mom doesn't speak for all Black families. Class discussions like that can do a lot of good."

"That wasn't the only story in the article, though," Jim added. "There was another family angry about affirmative action."

"That was in my class," Juan volunteered. "I had a group examining the barriers to college admissions for minority and low-income students. So the class got into a discussion about whether affirmative action is racist. One parent believed that students were being taught that people of color need a leg up, that they're not as smart as White people. But it led to good conversations."

"I just want to point out," Rose said, "we've got two teachers of color in this department, and they both say that action civics helps kids of color. I trust their expertise."

"With all due respect, Rose," Jim said, "you're not leading these projects. Action civics causes problems between parents and kids, 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."

"The problem isn't the issues," Darren said. "The problem is the pushback."

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

* * *

Thoughts swirled in Emily's head as she walked back to her office. Possibly those teachers who felt comfortable could keep the project—if the district supported that decision. However, this solution contravened the department's commitment to equity. Action civics taught students that their voices had power, and all students deserved that experience. And of course, the decision ultimately wasn't hers; it belonged to the curriculum coordinator for the district, Rhonda Williams. Sitting down at her computer, Emily forwarded Mr. Warner's opinion piece to Rhonda, asking what the discussion was at the district office.

A knock at the door from Principal Dan Ricci interrupted her work.

“I’m guessing that you saw John Warner’s opinion piece?” Dan asked.

“I did,” Emily said. “I know we got some pushback last year, but I honestly wasn’t expecting anything like this.”

“I’ve heard complaints from Mr. Warner before,” Dan told her. “A few years ago, he complained about 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.¹⁵ And Mr. Warner didn’t try to pull in other parents that time, not that I remember.”

“He seems to have other parents on his side now,” Emily admitted. “I was surprised by how many of the parent complaints we got last year were in his piece.”

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

“I don’t want to imagine it, either,” Emily said.

“I’m no expert in civic education,” Dan said. “But 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.”

“That would undermine a key purpose of action civics,” Emily objected. “Students choose issues that matter to them, and many of those issues are political. Besides, having discussions about controversial issues helps students engage with the curriculum and become critical thinkers.¹⁶ That’s important.”

“Maybe changing what students are allowed to do?” Dan suggested. “They could write letters to the editor, or have a class debate.”¹⁷

¹⁵ On June 22, 2021, protestors interrupted a school board meeting in Loudoun County, Virginia, resulting in the arrest of one person.

(<https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/pronoun-policy-debate-leads-chaos-virginia-school-board-meeting-n1272134>) That same evening, security officers escorted a dozen protestors out of a school board meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, after protestors disrupted proceedings there.

(<https://www.wave3.com/2021/06/23/opponents-critical-race-theory-escorted-out-jcps-school-board-meeting-after-disruption/>)

¹⁶ Diana Hess at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has spent many years studying the benefits of discussing controversial issues in the classroom. For a good example of her work, see Hess, D.E. (2002). Discussing controversial public issues in secondary social studies classrooms: Learning from skilled teachers. *Theory & Research in Social Education* 30(1), 10-41.

¹⁷ For a detailed argument that class debates are preferable to action civics, see Kurtz, S. (2021). “Action civics” replaces citizenship with partisanship. *The American Mind*.

<https://americanmind.org/memo/action-civics-replaces-citizenship-with-partisanship/>

“That takes the ‘action’ out of action civics,” Emily explained. “Debates and letters to the editor have a place in the social studies classroom, but action civics empowers students in a way that those traditional methods don’t.”¹⁸

“I understand, but a lot of parents don’t want their ‘empowered’ children learning to plan walkouts,” Dan countered. “Those parents deserve a say in their children’s education.¹⁹ Besides, you know we’ve been dealing with budget cuts. The last thing the superintendent wants is a costly lawsuit from angry parents. I know that this project worked great at your old school, Emily. But Central is a very different place; I just don’t think we’re ready for something as divisive as action civics here.”

* * *

“Was that Dan I saw in here a while ago?” Darren Johnson asked, appearing in the doorway.

Emily nodded. “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.”

“You’ve also got parents and teachers telling you differently,” Darren countered, handing Emily his phone. “Check out the Central Parents Facebook page.”

“Mr. Warner certainly has plenty of supporters,” Emily said, scrolling through the comments. Various parents echoed ideas from the opinion piece. One line jumped out at her: “Kids need to learn before they become activists, so they have informed opinions.”²⁰

“You’re focusing on the wrong parts,” Darren objected. “There are parents who support action civics, too.”

Darren was right. Emily read, “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.” Other parents shared

¹⁸ Levinson, M. (2014). Action civics in the classroom. *Social Education* 78(2), 68-70.

<https://c3teachers.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Levinson.pdf>

¹⁹ Writing for The Heartland Institute, Robert G. Holland argued, “Let families decide whether they want their children to learn about the principles of self-government that make this country exceptional or if they would prefer that the kids gather petitions to submit to the local waterworks department.” Holland, R.G. (2017, November 19). Would revived civics end up being progressive ed redux? *The Heartland Institute*.

<https://www.heartland.org/news-opinion/news/would-revived-civics-end-up-being-progressive-ed-redux>

²⁰ Delaware state representative Richard Collins said this at a Delaware House Education Committee Hearing in May 2021.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/05/19/after-capitol-riot-some-states-turn-to-civics-education>

similar stories of student engagement, not just in their classwork but also in following political news and participating in political discussions at home.²¹

Emily read the next comment aloud: “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.”²²

“What if we become the school that inspires a new law here banning action civics for the whole state?” Emily asked Darren. “There are well-funded groups behind parents like Mr. Warner.²³ They could make a lot of noise in the capitol.”

“It’s a risk worth taking,” Darren replied, “to do what’s right.”

“And what’s that?” Emily sighed.

“It’s clear to me what’s right,” Darren said. “I’ve seen this too often here: we do something that challenges the status quo, that lifts up the voices of marginalized students, 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.²⁴ We’ve made a lot of statements about equity and justice recently, but I don’t see those statements turning into action. For example, all our new hires last year in the department were White. Now we’re looking at eliminating a project that we know helps kids of color because it’s making some White people uncomfortable. We have a chance to take a stand for equity here.”

A hesitant knock sounded at the door. It was Katie Fiske.

“Come in,” Emily told her. “We’re just talking about the action civics project.”

“That’s why I came,” Katie said, hovering by the door. “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?”

“We’ll talk more about it at our one-on-one meeting,” Emily reassured her.

²¹ Research has shown that action civics can lead to this behavior. Barton, K. and McCully A. (2007). Teaching controversial issues... where controversial issues really matters. *Teaching History*, 127, 13-19.

²² In Texas, for example, HB3979 states that “a school district, open-enrollment charter school, or teacher may not require, make part of a course, or award a grade or course credit, including extra credit, for a student’s political activism, lobbying, or efforts to persuade members of the legislative or executive branch at the federal, state, or local level to take specific actions by direct communication. <https://legiscan.com/TX/text/HB3979/id/2339637>

²³ In June 2021, NBC News found “at least 165 local and national groups that aim to disrupt lessons on race and gender,” controversial issues that are often connected with attacks on action civics. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/critical-race-theory-invades-school-boards-help-conservative-groups-n1270794>

²⁴ Paul Gorksi has termed this kind of situation a “Pacing-for-Privilege Detour.” He explains: “In too many schools, the pace of equity progress prioritizes the comfort and interests of the people who have the least interest in that progress” (p. 57). Gorksi, P. (2019, April). Avoiding racial equity detours. *Educational Leadership*. 56-61.

“OK,” Katie said, heading back to her classroom.

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

“Besides, Katie teaches three general ed sections. We don't want action civics to become something only AP and Honors kids do,” Darren pointed out.

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

After Darren left, Emily woke up her computer to find a response from 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 sat back in her chair. Where did she stand? Should she push to keep action civics unchanged in the curriculum, risking a firestorm of protests and press coverage? Should she accept that the timing wasn't right at Central, putting aside Darren's argument that now was precisely the right time to push for equity? Was there a middle ground, a way to keep some core of action civics while softening the more objectionable pieces? What would Emily tell Rhonda that afternoon?