



A Change of Plan?: Controversial Issues and Student-Led Civics

READER'S THEATER SCRIPT

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<https://justiceinschools.org>

In 2018, then-Governor Charlie Baker signed a new law that aimed to strengthen civic education in Massachusetts. A key part of the law was the opportunity for all public school students to complete non-partisan student-led civics projects, first in eighth grade and again in high school. Through these projects, students develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions by engaging in hands-on experience that helps them understand how their government works. The eighth-grade student-led civics project includes six stages, laid out in a Civics Project Guidebook published by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE):

- Stage 1 - Examining Self and Community: students reflect on issues that matter to them and their community
- Stage 2 - Identifying an Issue: students choose a focus issue for their projects, which can be done individually or in groups.
- Stage 3 - Research and Investigation: students complete research to learn more about their chosen issue and its root causes.
- Stage 4 - Developing an Action Plan: students create a plan that will address a root cause of their chosen issue in order to create change.
- Stage 5 - Taking Action: students carry out this plan, “mov[ing] beyond the classroom walls and exercis[ing] their voices.”¹
- Stage 6 - Reflecting and Showcasing: students reflect on and celebrate their learning from the project.

While individual teachers have flexibility in terms of timing and specific lesson plans, the broad outline of the project is the same across the state.

Setting	
Lawndale Middle School (ages 11-14) in Massachusetts, U.S.A	
Speaking Characters	
Narrator (large role) Jessica Sullivan (large role) : 8th grade social studies teacher Robert Kelley (medium role) : 8th grade teacher	Terry Gordon (medium role) : Veteran teacher; Jessica’s mentor Dawn Lee (medium role) : School counselor Naomi Davis (medium role) : 8th grade teacher

¹ Civics Project Guidebook:
<https://www.doe.mass.edu/rlo/instruction/civics-project-guidebook/index.html#/lessons/ucNI-fsOvwEfOOcAUODwfAu95xwsNjB>

Terry: “You’ve got a doozy here, Jess.”

Jessica (*groaning*): “That’s why I need you to tell me what to do!”

Narrator: Jessica and Terry had been colleagues at Lawndale Middle School for nearly twenty years, teaching social studies in neighboring classrooms. Terry had been Jessica’s mentor teacher when Jessica first arrived, but it had been many years since Jessica had felt such need for Terry’s advice.

They were gathered for the eighth-grade social studies team’s regular Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting. Normally, Jessica and Terry would be joined by only Naomi and Robert, their colleagues in the department. Jessica’s inclusion of Dawn, the school guidance counselor, was unusual. But she felt it was important today.

Dawn: “I’m honored to be joining the eighth grade social studies superstars! But I’m also a bit mystified. What’s going on?”

Jessica: “We recently started our student-led civics project with the eighth grade. Normally I love this unit—I’m so glad it’s part of the Massachusetts state standards. But I’ve run into a hard situation with Mari, Ben, and Alexis, and I could really use your collective wisdom.”

Robert (*sarcastically but sympathetically*): “Challenges with student-led civics projects—how could anything go wrong?”

Jessica: “Yeah. Right from the start of the project, Mari, Ben, and Alexis knew that they wanted to focus on a pro-life issue. And as you may know, reproductive rights have been a contentious issue in my class this year.”

Terry: “Reproductive rights are a contentious issue all over town.”

Narrator: Terry was right. In the wake of the *Dobbs* decision by the Supreme Court, ruling that access to abortion was not a right protected by the U.S. Constitution, a series of protests and counter-protests had taken place on the town green, right around the corner from the school. While Massachusetts was generally portrayed as a solidly blue state, the reality was more complicated. Lawndale was decidedly purple. Two churches in town had organized a prayer vigil celebrating *Dobbs*, while abortion-rights advocates protested on the town green on three subsequent Saturdays. When anti-abortion counter-protesters had shown up on the third Saturday, people on both sides had been arrested. Since then, the abortion-rights advocates had been holding regular protests on the first Friday of every month.

Robert: “I know about the protests on the town green—I drive by there on the way to school every day. But what’s been happening in your class, Jessica?”

Jessica: “I have a few girls in my class who are strong advocates for abortion rights. Nothing confrontational—things like wearing shirts that say ‘Reproductive Rights Are

Human Rights,’ or having ‘Pro Roe’ pins on their backpacks. But we had a bit of a face-off back in January. Ben and Alexis—they’re cousins—went to the March for Life in DC with Ben’s mom, and they came back on Monday wearing shirts that read “Equality Begins in the Womb.” Another girl in the class got upset and asked them why a fetus deserved equality when the pregnant woman didn’t. It escalated from there, with kids on both sides yelling.”

Dawn: “Quite a few kids ended up in my office over the course of that day. There were strong feelings all around.”

Jessica (*gratefully*): “You were a lifesaver that day, Dawn. And things did calm down after that. Ben and Alexis haven’t worn the shirts since, and actually, starting the student-led civics project a few weeks later was helpful. All those Stage 1 conversations about what it means to be part of a democratic classroom helped set the stage for some respectful class discussions about community issues.”

Naomi: “So what’s going on now?”

Jessica: “Well, as I said, right from the beginning of the project, Ben and Alexis were keen to do something related to anti-abortion legislation. They raised the issue as an important one to our community as soon as the class started brainstorming. None of the other students were especially interested in pursuing the topic—the student who was most upset by their March for Life shirts is doing a project on sustainability—but Ben and Alexis formed a small group with Mari, who goes to their church. And I thought that it might be OK until I saw their research.”

Naomi: “What materials were they finding?”

Jessica: “Really visceral stuff. They had lots of documents that framed abortion as a sin, with some really shaming language directed at women who choose abortion. And they found a lot of graphic imagery of aborted embryos and fetuses. Here, you can take a look at their action plan.” (*She distributes copies to the group.*)

Naomi: “Oh no.”

Jessica: “I mean, it’s powerful—I was certainly getting emotional looking at it. But I encouraged them to look for other sources as well. I even referred back to the T-shirts and pointed them to sources that dig into the meaning of equality, for both the fetus and the pregnant woman. I started them thinking about the root causes for why people seek abortions and what might be done about those causes. And I really thought they were taking a more balanced approach.”

Terry: “But based on this action plan, they didn’t change much.”

Jessica (*sighing*): “No, their action plan is built on the shaming, graphic sources they found—you can see some of the images there. They did find some medical sources to go alongside the religious ones, but they’ve got just some brief nods to the rights-based

arguments against abortion that I pointed them to. They plan to make a presentation to our state representative, calling on him to introduce restrictive abortion legislation here, modeled on laws that other states have passed post-*Dobbs*. I'm worried about what will happen in my classroom when they start creating their materials using these images, or when they practice their presentation in front of classmates, given what happened in January."

Dawn: "I'm worried about a particular student in the class."

Jessica: "I know who you mean. One of my students had a difficult time this fall—a close family member had an abortion. I can't say more, for privacy reasons, but it was incredibly tough on the whole family. I worry that seeing these images and hearing all this shame directed at pregnant women who choose abortion will be really traumatic for her."

Narrator: Only Dawn and Jessica knew that the student in question was Callie, a quiet, hardworking girl who happened to be the daughter of one of Jessica's closest friends. Callie's older sister Anna—a sophomore at Lawndale High—had become pregnant in the fall. While her staunchly-Catholic parents had long been opponents of abortion—it was a point on which Jessica and her friend agreed to disagree—they had ultimately decided with Anna that abortion was the best option for her. But believing it was the best choice didn't make it easy, and the whole family had wrestled with their grief over the whole situation. Callie and Anna had always been close; seeing her sister suffer while grieving the niece or nephew she'd never meet was horrible for Callie.

Dawn: "I worry about the impact it will have on her, too. She told me that focusing on her schoolwork has been an important way to cope, and school has felt like a safe place, even with that dustup in your class, Jessica. I think the arguments that this action plan puts forward will be extremely hurtful."

Terry: "Hurtful or not, everything in this plan is publicly available. These arguments and images are part of the public discourse. We can't protect this student from them forever."

Naomi: "But we don't need to expose her when the grief is so fresh. The classroom needs to be a safe space, and I don't think any student should be exposed to the images that I see here."²

Robert: "I'd be more concerned about the religious overtones of the argument. To me the biggest problem here is that the students haven't demonstrated the kind of critical thinking that they should during the research and investigation stage, even if they did

² In 2013, the Supreme Court declined a chance to weigh in on this issue, letting stand a lower court ruling which stated that protestors in Colorado couldn't use graphic imagery of aborted fetuses on signs that were likely to be seen by children under 12. Of course, the children in this case would be unlikely to be younger than 12; eighth graders are more likely to be 13 or 14.

include some new medical sources. I'd tell them to go back to the other sources you helped them find to create an action plan that draws on political arguments rather than religious ones."

Terry: "But religious arguments *are* political arguments, at least on this issue. We've seen protestors holding signs with these kinds of images and this kind of language for years. I'd feel very uncomfortable forbidding the students from using this action plan just because the religious arguments didn't convince me."

Robert: "What about leaning into the reproductive rights issue, rather than away from it? I have a unit that I put together and did with my class in the fall. We looked at pieces of the *Roe* and *Dobbs* decisions, along with arguments on both sides of the debate. I could share it with you, and you could bring in those sources you wanted this group to look at."

Jessica: "Honestly, that makes me anxious, knowing how high emotions run around the topic. Besides, I feel like I'm still processing my own anger around the *Dobbs* decision. I don't think I could teach a unit on reproductive rights in a neutral way right now."

Naomi: "I don't think it should be taught in a neutral way. Reproductive rights *are* human rights, and the *Dobbs* decision was a travesty. Students should think about the implications of an activist court stripping away a constitutional right."

Terry: "I couldn't disagree more! Political neutrality in the classroom is fundamental to our job. My students know nothing about my political views—"

Jessica (laughing): "I don't even know how you voted in the last election."

Terry: "And that's just how it should be! Honestly, I think these students should be allowed to proceed with their action plan without any interference. They have a persuasive message, and it's grounded in sources that are—for better or worse—politically mainstream."

Dawn: "If I might add, at this age it's important for students to be developing autonomy—it's part of the reason eighth grade is such a great time for the student-led civics project. Just because I worry about one student being hurt doesn't mean I necessarily believe that forcing Mari, Ben, and Alexis to change their plan is the right response."

Jessica: "There's one student that we *know* might be hurt. But the movement to destigmatize abortion has shown that it's affected more people than had been previously thought. There may be other students in the class who've had personal experiences with abortion."

Naomi: "Which is why it's so important to remove possibly triggering language and images! Honestly, given how contentious this issue is at the moment, I'd think about pushing Mari, Ben, and Alexis to consider a different topic altogether."

Robert: “I don’t think we need to take it that far. With new evidence and reasoning, they can approach the topic from a less emotional place, and it will be less triggering for their classmates.”

Terry: “Even *that’s* going too far! I don’t think we have the right to tell these students that they can’t use ideas and images that are part of the public discourse.”

Naomi: “But the classroom isn’t the town square. We have to think carefully about which issues are safe to bring into the classroom. DESE says that teachers are able to set boundaries on the topics that students can address in this project.³ It’s not too late to ask the group to change.”

Dawn: “Do they need to present their project to the class?”

Jessica: “Yes. It’s important for the groups to practice in front of their peers before they make their presentation out in the community. It wouldn’t be fair to ask them to miss that chance to practice.”

Terry: “There’s no reason they should. They chose this topic because it matters to them. The DESE guidebook tells us that ‘student choice defines the project experience.’”

Dawn (sympathetically): “Well, you’ve heard what we all have to say. What are you going to do?”

To cite this case study:

O’Brien, S. & Levinson, M. (2025). A Change of Plan: Reader's Theater Version. Adapted from: O’Brien, S., Billingham Bock, A., Blythe, T. & Guerin, J. (2025). A Change of Plan?: Controversial Issues and Student-Led Civics. *Justice in Schools*. <https://www.justiceinschools.org>

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³ The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in Massachusetts (DESE) created a *Civics Project Guidebook*, which states that “teachers may set boundaries on the topics that can be addressed.” See: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/hss/civics-guidance.docx>