



A Change of Plan?:

Controversial Issues and Student-Led Civics

Sara O'Brien

with Adrienne Billingham Bock, Tina Blythe, and Jennifer Guerin

<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 in Lawndale, Massachusetts, USA	
Primary Characters	
Jessica Sullivan: 8th grade social studies teacher Terry Gordon: 8th grade social studies teacher Robert Kelley: 8th grade social studies teacher Naomi Davis: 8th grade social studies teacher Dawn Lee: school counselor	Alexis: 8th grader in Jessica’s class, part of the group whose project is under discussion Ben: Alexis’ cousin and project groupmate Mari: Ben and Alexis’s other groupmate Callie: 8th grader in Jessica’s class

¹ Civics Project Guidebook:
<https://www.doe.mass.edu/rlo/instruction/civics-project-guidebook/index.html#/lessons/ucNI-f-sOvwFfOOcAUODwfAu95xwsNjB>

“You’ve got a doozy here, Jess.”

Jessica Sullivan looked up to see her colleague Terry Gordon emerging through the fire door separating their two classrooms.

“You said it,” Jessica groaned with a wry smile, pulling one final desk into a small circle at the front of her room, its legs squealing in protest as she dragged it across the floor. “That’s why I need you to tell me what to do!”

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.

“I assume you’re hoping to spend most of the meeting talking about this action plan?” Terry asked, dropping a folder onto the nearest desk and taking a seat.

“As long as nobody else has anything pressing,” Jessica confirmed. “I also asked Dawn to join us, given the conflicts we’ve had over reproductive rights in my classroom before.”

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

The eighth grade had recently begun their student-led civics project, and normally it was Jessica’s favorite unit. Jessica was quite politically active herself—though her students didn’t know it—and she had actually done student-led civics projects with her students long before they became part of the Massachusetts state standards for eighth grade.

“Knock, knock,” Dawn smiled, peeking her head in.

“And there she is!” Jessica said. “I’m so glad you’re free this block.”

“Me, too,” Dawn said. She pulled out the chair at the desk next to Terry. “It’s so nice and cool in here! My office is like a furnace—I can’t believe how warm the weather has been for March.”

“It’s unusual,” Jessica agreed.

“Jess, is Ron coming to this meeting, too?” Terry asked, referring to their department chair Ronald Walsh.

“No, he’s so overwhelmed with the new sixth grade curriculum rollout, he told me that he trusted this group to find the right course of action,” Jessica explained.

“So are we waiting for anyone else?” Dawn asked.

“Yes,” Jessica affirmed, “just Robert and—”

“Here we are!” Naomi announced, hurrying in with Robert close behind. “Sorry we’re late. One of the copy machines is down, and there was a long line for the other one.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” Terry laughed with a shake of the head.

“Hi, Dawn!” Naomi said brightly, sliding into the chair next to the counselor. Naomi was one of the newer department members, having joined just a few years earlier. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“The students Jessica wanted to talk about are on my caseload,” Dawn explained.

“And I’m so grateful that you’re taking the time to check in today,” Jessica said. “Did you all get my email with the action plan that Mari, Ben, and Alexis put together for their project?”

"I got it, but I didn't have a chance to read it," Robert admitted. He had joined the department just that fall after completing his doctorate in history. Rather than pursuing a post-secondary teaching career, he had decided to return to K-12 classrooms.

"That's OK," Jessica said. "Let me give you some background. 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."

"Reproductive rights are a contentious issue all over town," Terry commented.

Terry was right. In the wake of the *Dobbs* decision by the Supreme Court, ruling that access to abortion was not a constitutional right, 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. And 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.

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

"I have a few girls in my class who are strong advocates for abortion rights," Jessica explained. "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 an altercation 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."

"Quite a few kids ended up in my office over the course of that day," Dawn added. "There were strong feelings all around."

"You were a lifesaver that day, Dawn," Jessica said gratefully. "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."

"So what's going on now?" Naomi asked.

"Well, as I said, right from the beginning of the project, Ben and Alexis were keen to do something related to anti-abortion legislation," Jessica said. "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."

"Oh boy," Naomi sighed. "What kind of stuff were they finding?"

"Really visceral stuff," Jessica explained. "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 fetuses."

"Oh no," Naomi grimaced.

“I mean, it’s persuasive—I was certainly getting emotional looking at it,” Jessica admitted. “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.”

“But based on this action plan, they didn’t change much,” Terry observed, opening up the folder and passing the action plan to Robert.

“No, their action plan is built on the shaming, graphic sources they found—you can see some of the images there, Robert. 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,” Jessica explained. “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.”

“I’m worried about a particular student in the class,” Dawn added.

“I know who you mean,” Jessica sighed. “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.”

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.

“I worry about the impact it will have on her, too,” Dawn agreed. “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.”

“Hurtful or not, everything in this plan is publicly available,” Terry pointed out. “These arguments and images are part of the public discourse. We can’t protect this student from them forever.”

“But we don’t need to expose her when the grief is so fresh,” Naomi argued, looking up from the action plan Robert had passed her. “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

“I’d be more concerned about the religious overtones of the argument,” Robert said. “To me the biggest problem here is that the students haven’t demonstrated the kind of critical thinking that they should

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.

during the research and investigation stage, even if they did 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."

"But religious arguments are political arguments, at least on this issue," Terry disagreed. "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."

"What about leaning into the reproductive rights issue, rather than away from it?" Robert suggested. "I actually 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."

"Honestly, that makes me anxious, knowing how high emotions run around the topic," Jessica said. "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."

"I don't think it should be taught in a neutral way," Naomi protested. "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."

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

"I don't even know how you voted in the last election," Jessica laughed.

"And that's just how it should be!" Terry declared. "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."

"If I might add," Dawn chimed in, "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."

"There's one student that we *know* might be hurt," Jessica reminded the group. "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."

"Which is why it's so important to remove possibly triggering language and images!" Naomi insisted. "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."

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

"Even *that's* going too far!" Terry exclaimed. "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."

“But the classroom isn’t the town square,” Naomi argued. “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.”

“Do they need to present their project to the class?” Dawn asked, attempting to lower the temperature.

“I think yes,” Jessica said. “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.”

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

“Well,” Dawn sighed sympathetically, looking at Jessica, “you’ve heard what we all have to say. What are you going to do?”

Jessica pondered the question. Could she justify asking Mari, Ben, and Alexis to change their action plan—or their topic—when student agency was a key goal of the project? At the same time, should she allow potentially harmful language and imagery into her classroom, even if it was part of the national discourse? What should she do about this action plan?

To cite this case study:

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/change-plan>

This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

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>