

Solving the Civic Achievement Gap in De Facto Segregated Schools

Meira Levinson

"So why did the Articles of Confederation make it so hard for the states to work together and get anything done? Adam, what do you think?"

"Ummm — oh, Dr. Levinson, there's someone knocking at the door. Can I let them in?"

"No, I'll get it!" "No, me, no, me!" "I'm the closest!"

Josephine triumphantly makes it to the door first, and opens it to reveal my colleague Ms. Donis, who is visibly shaken. "Dr. Levinson, have you heard?"

"No, heard what?"

"The World Trade Center has been hit by two planes. There are rumors that the Pentagon has also been bombed, and maybe the Capitol Building. Do you have a TV in your classroom? No? Why don't you bring your students into my room; you all can watch the news with us."

Stunned, I line up my homeroom, nineteen eighth-grade students whom I first met only a week ago, and file them down the hall to Ms. Donis' room. We enter silently, filling in the extra desks and perching on the radiators in the back of her classroom. A 13-in ch TV is propped on a chair in the front showing a wavy, often static-obscured image of Tom Brokaw and the World Trade Center towers pouring smoke and flames from gashes in their sides.

We watch for about forty-five minutes, long enough to see the first tower collapse, to learn that the Pentagon was indeed hit, and to hear more rumors about other missing, possibly hijacked planes. Although I am loathe to leave, my students are starting to get restless and the news is admittedly repetitive. Also, we're due in the library in half an hour to check out textbooks for the year, and I want to have an opportunity first to discuss with them what we have seen. Quietly, I motion to my homeroom students to follow me back to our classroom.

After my students slip into their seats, I ask them if they have any questions or thoughts. I'm surprised to find myself hit with a barrage.

"I don't understand what's happening. Can you explain it, Dr. Levinson?"

"Are the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan or Washington?"

"Where's the Pentagon?"

"I couldn't see anything. Why were those buildings collapsing?"

I realize that I'm going to have to explain everything that we just saw on television. Whether it's because of the fuzzy picture or the

difficulty my thirteen- and fourteen-year-old charges have interpreting the raw, undigested nature of breaking news, many of my students are totally confused about what's going on. I pull a student desk to the front of the classroom and sit on its top, resting my feet on the seat of the attached chair. "Well," I begin, "I don't know more than you do, but it seems that some planes were hijacked and flown into buildings. Two were flown into the two towers of the World Trade Center, which is in Manhattan, and one was flown into the Pentagon, which is in Washington. We don't know yet if there are other places that have been attacked, and it seems that there are still some planes missing, which may also have been hijacked."

"Why would somebody attack the Pentagon?" DaQuin interrupts.

"Because it's the center of the American military. It's the symbol of America's military power," I answer.

"Oh." I discover that many of my students have never heard of the Pentagon, and most are confused about why it's named after a shape they learn about in math class. I go to the board and draw the building for them and explain its purpose; understanding starts to dawn.

"I saw the World Trade Center when I was in Manhattan last year," Anna volunteers.

"Yes, you can see it from many places in New York City," I answer.

"Wait," Yasmine asks. "Are Manhattan and New York City the same?"

I realize that I have to back up some more. As I will learn over the next few months, less than half of my students are native-born citizens. Although most have lived in the United States for many years, some since birth, few have traveled outside of Massachusetts within the continental United States; if they travel in the summer or over school holidays, it's to go "home" to Cape Verde, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, or Vietnam. Except for the few students who have visited relatives in New York, no one has heard of the World Trade Center before today, so I draw a crude map of southern Manhattan on the board, filling in the twin towers, the Stock Exchange, Wall Street, showing why the area symbolizes America's economic power.

Once my students assimilate the basic information, talk quickly turns to whether there will be more attacks, and if so, where they will be. I work hard to assuage their fears that our school or down-

town Boston might be a target. After further conversation, we're called to the library, and with some relief I then send the class off to science and then lunch.

When they return to me for the last period of the day, our conversation turns to who would have done this and why. "I bet George Bush is behind this," Laquita declares. "I bet he did this so he could have an excuse to go to war with Iraq."

"What?!?!" I respond. "We don't know who's done this, but I can promise you it's not George Bush."

"No, Dr. Levinson, I think you're wrong," says Travis. "Bush doesn't care about anybody except rich people, and he wants to go to war with Iraq to take revenge for what Saddam Hussein did to his dad. President Bush probably got somebody to do this for him, like Laquita said."

More voices chime in to back Laquita up. Bush has the power to do something like this because he's the president. You know that he

doesn't care about the law because he stole the whole election. All he wants to do is go to war with Iraq, and this is the perfect excuse. People in power can do anything and get away with it; look how his brother managed to keep black people from voting in Florida, and you don't see anything happening to him, do you? Bush is a horrible man—why wouldn't he do something like this?

I'm completely taken aback. Until now, I've taken my students' questions in stride: their ignorance about the Pentagon, their confusion about the relationship between Manhattan and New York, their fears that our school would be the next target of attack. But this vitriol against President Bush, and their almost sanguine assumption that the president of the United States might choose to and be capable of killing 5,000, maybe 10,000, American citizens simply on a whim—I find it breathtaking in its combination of utter ignorance and absolute cynicism.

My friends and family generally agreed with my assessment of my students' reactions—that they betrayed stunning cynicism and ignorance—when I began telling stories about my class soon after the September 11th attacks. How could they believe an American president could do this? my friends would ask. And how could they never have heard of the Pentagon? A number of people asked me if my students had confused the current President Bush with his father, and I answered no; they clearly distinguished between the two, and they knew that Hussein had been attacked by, and had tried to assassinate, Bush 41 rather than Bush 43. But nonetheless, I too felt that my students must have gotten confused somewhere along the way—and that their mistrust of "the system" was almost pathetic in its casualness.

By contrast, nowadays when I tell this story, people comment on my students' prescience. Instead of questioning their understanding of the distinction between the two President Bushes, listeners to my story question whether my students really could have made the

Why did so many of my students immediately assume that President Bush could have planned and executed the (September 11, 2001) attacks?

claims I ascribe to them. Could they really have seen so far into the future, when none of the pundits in late 2001 and early 2002 did not? How could they have known, on September 11th, that President Bush would use these attacks to justify going to war against Iraq and deposing Saddam Hussein? My students were brilliant! Also, people point out, although it is too bad that my students had not heard of the Pentagon, and did not know that Manhattan was a borough of New York City, there is little reason to think that the average

white, middle-class, native-born eighth grader would have known this information either. Maybe the teachers in Arlington or Medford (two white, working- and middle-class suburbs of Boston) also had to explain these things to their students.

The latter point is well taken, but I am not yet convinced that my students were so brilliant. Despite such profoundly troubling elements as President Bush's use of the September 11th attacks to justify what I believe to be a profoundly misguided war in Iraq, as well as his own deeply cynical and manipulative disinformation campaign to convince the American people that Saddam Hussein was a terrorist connected with the events of September 11th; despite the Patriot Act's continuing threat to free speech, the White House's assault on due process for detainees at Guantanamo Bay and cavalier dismissal of the Geneva Convention; and despite the mounting evidence of the White House's complicity in torturing and killing Iraqi, Afghani, and other prisoners—despite all of these considerations, I still do not believe that President George W. Bush planned and executed the September 11th attacks on New York City and Washington, DC.

Why do I refuse to believe that President Bush could do something like this? So far as I am concerned, the facts do not bear out an alternative interpretation. But it is certainly plausible that I read the facts as I do in part because of my personal experience growing up and living as a white, middle-class, native-born American citizen. I generally have been well served by the United States: by its institutions, opportunities, freedoms, civil and public servants, class structure, and racial hierarchies. By contrast, why did so many of my students immediately assume that President Bush could have planned and executed the attacks? Again, so far as they were concerned, it is because facts such as the stolen 2000 election and the history of white, wealthy politicians holding ruthlessly onto power easily bore out

their interpretation. But it is also certainly plausible that my students understood the facts as they did because of their experiences growing up as non-white, poor, first- and second-generation immigrants in *de facto* segregated neighborhoods and schools. Growing up in poverty, vulnerable to violence and drugs, used to mutually mistrustful interactions with government representatives, labeled as “failures” by many people in power, and surrounded at home and in school entirely by others living in the same situation, my students have not always been well served by the United States. While in school, too, they learn about the depredations of American history and American presidents: President Andrew Jackson’s contributions to the genocide of Native Americans, or President Abraham Lincoln’s professed willingness to preserve the Union at the cost of maintaining slavery. Small wonder they interpret breaking news in such a way that implicates President Bush for complicity in the tragedy.

Whether my students are sadly ignorant or presciently brilliant, whether their life experiences blind or expose them to the true character of our political leaders, there is ample evidence that they are unlikely to become active participants in American civic and political life—and hence, that they are unlikely to influence civic and political deliberation or decision making. There is a profound *civic achievement gap*—as large and as disturbing as the reading and math achievement gaps that have received significant national attention in recent years—between poor, ethnic/racial minority, and immigrant citizens, on the one hand, and middle-class, white, and native born citizens, on the other. Although statistics are not destiny, it is extremely likely that my students at McCormack will vote, contribute time and money to political campaigns, contact government officials, and even attend protests at much lower rates than their white, middle-class counterparts attending schools just a few miles away.

What can schools like McCormack do to help the overwhelmingly poor and minority students who attend them to become civically engaged and politically empowered? To what extent does an effective civic education in these schools need to take into account

these students’ life experiences, readings of history, and interpretation of current events? If these do turn out to be significant, what does this imply about the construction of American citizenship more generally? These are the questions that motivate this essay.

The Civic Achievement Gap and De Facto Segregated Schools

Good citizens possess and exhibit a wide range of civic *knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors*. Good citizens need to be knowledgeable about politics, history, government, and current events. They need to be skilled communicators, thinkers, and deliberators.

They need to be concerned about the common good in addition to their own self-interest, and to believe it is possible and worth trying to make a difference through public action.

Citizens also need to become involved in public or community affairs through some combination of voting, protesting, contacting public officials, and by mobilizing others, contributing time or money to causes or campaigns, participating in community groups, and taking other appropriate action.

On all of these measures, there is evidence of a profound *civic achievement gap* between poor, minority, and immigrant youth and

adults, on the one hand, and middle-class or wealthy, white, and native-born youth and adults, on the other. For example:

Knowledge and Skills. As early as the fourth grade, African-American, Hispanic, and poor students perform worse on the civics test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than white, Asian, and middle-class students. American ninth graders’ scores showed similar race- and income-dependent disparities on a recent IEA international test of civic knowledge and skills. Among adults, similarly, “men are more informed than women; whites are more informed than blacks; those with higher incomes are more informed than those with lower incomes; and older citizens are more informed than younger ones.”

Behavior/Participation. In the presidential election of 2000, Hispanic and Asian voting-age citizens voted



Copyright-free graphics from *Trades and Occupations*, selected and arranged by Carol Belanger Grafton (NY: Dover Pub., 1990) and *Medicine and the Artist*, selected by Carl Zigrosser (NY: Dover Pub., 1970)

Price, Principle, and the Environment Mark Sagoff

Mark Sagoff has written an engaging and provocative book about the contribution economics can make to environmental policy. Sagoff argues that economics can be helpful in designing institutions and processes through which people can settle environmental disputes. However, he contends that economic analysis fails completely when it attempts to attach value to environmental goods. It fails because preference-satisfaction has no relation to any good. Economic valuation lacks data because preferences cannot be observed. Willingness to pay is benchmarked on market price and thus may reflect producer cost not consumer benefit. Moreover, economists cannot second-guess market outcomes because they have no better information than market participants. Mark Sagoff's conclusion is that environmental policy turns on principles that are best identified and applied through political processes. Written with verve and fluency, this book will be eagerly sought out by students and professionals in environmental policy as well as informed general readers.

"If it is the job of philosophers to keep everyone else intellectually honest, Mark Sagoff is doing his job for environmental economists with persuasive logic and graceful writing. There are very few members of our profession who will be able to read this without feelings of embarrassment over how easily they have fallen into the traps and fallacies revealed in Sagoff's analysis. But even as

they are chastened they will be entertained rather than lectured to. This is, in fact, a book that ought to be required reading in graduate school, before the socialization process has become nearly irreversible."

Clifford Russell,
Vanderbilt
University



284 pages
Cloth, \$70.00
Paper, \$24.99

The book may be ordered from the publisher:

Cambridge University Press
40 West 20th Street
New York, New York 10011
<http://www.cambridge.org>

at a rate only two-thirds that of eligible whites, while poor people voted at barely half the rate of middle class and wealthy people. First- and second-generation immigrant citizens also voted at significantly lower rates than native born citizens. Gaps in participation rates go well beyond voting. People who earn over

*To what extent does an effective civic education
... need to take into account these students'
life experiences, readings of history, and
interpretation of current events?*

\$75,000 annually are politically active at up to *six times* the rate of people who earn under \$15,000, whether measured by working for a campaign, serving on the board of an organization, or even such relatively low-cost actions as participating in protests or contacting

officials. Similarly, Hispanics are less politically involved than whites and blacks according to a wide variety of measures. Hispanic young adults (ages 18–24) in particular have much lower rates of community involvement than their white and black peers.

Attitudes. For both youth and adults, race and class correlate with huge gaps—"chasms," in the words of scholars Robert Smith and Richard Seltzer—in their trust in government, trust in each other, and their sense of political efficacy. The poorest individuals, for instance, express political interest and political efficacy at levels almost a full standard deviation lower than the wealthiest. These differences can be profound across racial groups: in a study of individuals' response to the 2000 presidential election voting irregularities in Florida, for example, nearly one-fifth of African American survey respondents interpreted the "problems with the ballots or voting machines" as being "a deliberate attempt to reduce the political power of minorities," whereas barely one to three per-

cent of white, Asian, and Hispanic survey respondents felt the same way.

These ethnoracial-, class-, and immigration-based disparities in political knowledge, skills, attitudes, and involvement are neither morally acceptable nor politically tenable to maintain a legitimate democratic system. One can draw this conclusion even if one is not an egalitarian. In fact, anyone who believes in the value of democratic governance should recognize how crucial it is to narrow the civic achievement gap. Civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes profoundly influence civic and political behavior. Civic and political engagement, concomitantly, are central to the strength, stability and legitimacy of democracy. Studies confirm that civic knowledge is clearly and directly correlated with higher levels of political participation, expressions of democratic values such as tolerance, stable political attitudes, and the adoption of "enlightened self-interest." Mastery of civic skills is also tied to both the likelihood and effectiveness of civic participation. Participation, of course, matters because democratic governance relies on participatory citizens. The legitimacy, stability, and quality of democratic regimes are all directly dependent on the robust participation of a representative and large cross-section of citizens. Attitudes matter, finally, because they constitute the motivational preconditions

One important battleground for attacking the civic achievement gap is the network of mostly urban schools that serve a de facto segregated, poor, minority, and immigrant student population.

for civic engagement. Empirical research has shown that political efficacy, civic duty, and civic identity are all crucial for motivating civic and political engagement. In sum, the civic achievement gap is a significant and documentable threat to democratic ideals and practice. It is important for both the civic and political empowerment of poor, minority, and immigrant individuals, and for the health of the polity as a whole, that we develop a means of closing the gap.

One important battleground for attacking the civic achievement gap is the network of mostly urban schools that serve a *de facto* segregated, poor, minority, and immigrant student population. Fully one-third of black and Latino students in the United States, and over half of the black students in the Northeast, attend schools that have a 90–100 percent minority student population. The overwhelming majority of these schools are in urban areas, often in central cities. Over half of all schools in the hundred largest school districts are 81 to 100 percent minority; among these 100 districts, public schools in Los Angeles, Houston,

Detroit, Dallas, Santa Ana, Atlanta, San Antonio, Oakland, and Washington, DC, all had a minority student population above 90 percent in 2000–2001, which means in practice that most schools had a virtually 100 percent minority population. The students in these schools and districts are also generally poor. Over half the students in the hundred largest school districts are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and in sixteen of these districts, including the three largest in the country (New York City, Los Angeles, and Puerto Rico, which together account for over two million students), more than seven out of every ten students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Finally, it is worth noting that schools are continuing to resegregate, and the public and political will to press for integrated schools is diminishing in the United States. Hence, not only do a large number of poor, ethnically, or racially segregated public schools currently exist and educate a substantial percentage of ethnic and racial minority students in the United States, but if anything, their numbers are likely to increase rather than decrease over the coming years, especially as the minority population in the United States also grows. Consequently, if we care about political stability, democratic legitimacy, and civic equality then we must care about what gets taught and learned in these schools—not just for the students' sakes but for our own, as well.

Reformulating Civic Education within the Social Studies: Students' Construction of Civic Narrative

How can *de facto* segregated, poor and minority schools help reduce the civic achievement gap, and hence promote true civic and political equality for all Americans? First, civic education must be restored to the curriculum. There has been a precipitous decline in the number, range, and frequency of civics courses offered in US elementary and high schools, and this decline needs to be reversed. Second, social studies education needs to be constructivist rather than delivery-oriented. Since students are constructing their own historical understanding anyway, the school should be an empowering partner in this process rather than a passive bystander or worse, a mistrusted hindrance. Third, civic education must become experiential. Students—especially poor, minority, and immigrant students growing up and attending schools in predominantly poor, minority, or immigrant communities—need to *experience*, not just read about, meaningful and successful civic and political participation. Finally, schools need to be explicit about both the impediments faced by and the opportunities available to poor, minority, and immigrant youth in the United States, and they need to teach students specific techniques for overcoming these impediments. Taken together, these

reforms will reduce the civic achievement gap by enabling all students to construct civic narratives that simultaneously “keep it real” and incorporate positive, forward-looking attitudes that promote high levels of civic knowledge, skills, and actual engagement.

1. Restore civic education to the curriculum. First, the civic achievement gap will never be reduced unless we actually start teaching civics again in our public schools. One finds ample evidence that civic education improves civic outcomes, but instructional time, financial resources, and professional development for civic education have dropped markedly over the past thirty or forty years—especially in schools serving minority students. In the 1960s, students regularly took as many as three civics courses in high school, including civics, democracy, and government; now students tend to take only one—government—and that only in the twelfth grade, by which point many poor and minority students have, sadly, already dropped out. The national emphasis on reading, mathematics, and eventually science motivated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is also threatening further to reduce the attention paid to social studies. A recent survey by the Council for Basic Education showed that almost half of the principals in high-minority elementary schools reported reducing the amount of social studies instructional time since 2000 in deference to the need to increase student achievement in reading, writing, math, and science. In my own school this year, students take social studies for only a semester instead of the entire school year because of increased time spent on English and math. Happily, this trend has not yet afflicted most high schools. If we want to narrow the civic achievement gap, though, especially by increasing civic knowledge and skills of poor, minority, and immigrant students, then civic education must begin in elementary schools and be a regular part of education K-12 (and beyond).

2. Teach a constructivist curriculum. In addition to increasing the *quantity* of civic education in the formal curriculum, we also need to increase its *quality*, specifically by teaching social studies in such a way that students are enabled to construct empowering civic narratives that simultaneously cohere with their lived experiences and impel them to civic and political action. This requires an enormous shift in the social studies curriculum delivery model that one finds in most American schools (especially urban schools) today. As their responses on September 11th demonstrated, students do not enter the classroom as blank slates, willing to accept whatever story about American politics, government, and opportunity that schools try to teach. Rather, they come in with views of their own, gleaned from family, neighbors, community leaders, the media, and probably most importantly, their own direct experience. Although I failed

to be sufficiently impressed with this at the time (shocked as I was by their ready assumption that President Bush had ordered the mass murder of American citizens), my students readily incorporated both their own experiences of disenfranchisement and their understanding of history, including the Florida election controversy, Saddam Hussein’s attempt on the first President Bush’s life, and the Persian Gulf War (which ended before most of them had turned four), into their interpretation of current events—all without any adult guidance or encouragement.

Hence, social studies teachers need to be responsive to students’ construction of historical and civic knowledge, and to provide students opportunities to acquire knowledge, develop skills, and practice behaviors that will enable students both to construct and to enact a more empowering story about their role within the polity. One means of accomplishing this is to teach history as a dialogue between the past and the present, explicitly acknowledging but also modeling for students how our understanding of the past shapes our views of the present and vice versa. Only by explicitly engaging students’ use of the past and present (“White people would still have us in slavery if they could.” “Nobody could’ve kept me in slavery! I would have just stolen a gun and shot my owner, ‘blam, blam!’, and been out of there!”) can teachers and schools hope to help students construct more sophisticated, nuanced, and potentially empowering conceptions of their potential roles within the United States. Furthermore, this historical dialogue needs to be open to multiple contemporary interpretations. It must incorporate not only many “voices of the past,” a view that is well accepted by now, but also permit many “present voices” to construct a *variety* of American stories, rather than “the American story,” as is favored by some contemporary educators, historians, and politicians.

3. Incorporate experiential education. In order further to change their minds about the opportunities provided by civic and political engagement, and not just focus on the impediments or even dangers, we need to give students positive, real-world civic and political experiences. Experiential civic education can take a multiplicity of forms, including activities within classrooms and schools as well as those beyond school walls. Students may serve on the school council, governing board, or diversity committee. They may invite local community leaders to visit the school and then interview them about their accomplishments, the challenges they face, and what motivates them to keep on working for what they believe in. After conducting a “constituent survey” of their peers, students may develop and implement a strategy to improve the quality of food in the school cafeteria. Students may debate current events and then write letters expressing their opinions to an elected representative or government official. They can

Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions

**Robert K. Fullinwider and
Judith Lichtenberg**

Leveling the Playing Field examines the admissions policies of contemporary American colleges and universities in light of the assumption that enhancing the educational opportunities of lower-income and minority students would make American society more just. It asks how current admissions policies affect the prospects of such students, and it evaluates alternative approaches. The book treats a variety of topics relevant to answering these questions. What does it mean to reward people according to merit? Is the American system of higher education a meritocracy, and should it be? How do the missions of contemporary institutions of higher education bear on admissions? What are the implications of the Supreme Court's landmark affirmative action decisions of 2003? What is the proper role and significance of standardized tests like the SAT? How does "lower" education prepare students, or fail to, for higher education? In answering these questions, the book examines legacy preference, early admissions policies, financial aid, the test-prep industry, college counseling, and athletics, evaluating their effects on the distribution of higher education in the United States, not only for lower-income and minority students but for college-bound students in general.

Robert K. Fullinwider is a senior research scholar at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Maryland, College Park.

Judith Lichtenberg is an associate professor of philosophy and a senior research scholar at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Maryland, College Park.

280 pages

Paper, \$24.95, ISBN 0-7425-1410-0
Cloth, \$75.00, ISBN 0-7425-1410-2

For orders and information, please write or telephone the publisher:

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706
1-800-462-6420

participate in a mock trial, conduct a voter registration drive in the school parking lot or before PTA meetings, or create a Web site about a policy issue that matters to them. An ambitious teacher may encourage students to volunteer with a non-profit social services agency or an advocacy organization and prepare a PowerPoint presentation about what makes it an effective (or ineffective) organization. Similarly ambitiously, students may research a public policy issue and then make a presentation to local officials, or attend a city council meeting as advocates for their position. Or, closer to home, they can elect class officers who will collaborate with the teacher on planning field trips and other special activities; or, they may as a class deliberate about and vote on such issues as the due dates for major projects, the order in which to read class novels, or the consequences for minor disciplinary infractions.

Research uniformly supports the efficacy of these kinds of active civic learning approaches. Done well, experiential civic education helps students learn and apply a significant amount of civic knowledge, develop a number of civic skills, embrace positive civic attitudes, and practice important civic behaviors. It promotes an active, explicitly political conception of citizenship. It can help students make contacts with adults and role models in the community, as well as help the participating organizations and institutions themselves. Experiential civic education can motivate students to become civically engaged in the future by contributing to their sense of empowerment and agency, connecting them to adults and peers who model civically engaged behavior, and enabling them to use their knowledge and skills to achieve concrete results. Experiential civic education may also reinforce (or generate) adults' sense of connection to, and responsibility and respect for, the younger generation, including toward children and young adults who live and are being educated in communities very different from those of the adults. These are all extremely important civic outcomes.

Experiential education also does not require elaborate field trips or mammoth projects to be effective. Although such projects are certainly possible, it is also relatively easy to give students the opportunity to exercise and reflect on their democratic rights and responsibilities, and to experience making a positive difference, entirely within the school walls and the school day. More than half of the examples I gave above, for instance, require nothing more than access to current news sources and a teacher and school culture that supports student experimentation in democratic participation. Furthermore, many projects require no increase in instructional time, and many can be implemented in classes other than social studies with little or no loss of content.

It is important to note, however, that all of the examples I gave intentionally built on collective and policy-

oriented action. There were no piecemeal approaches, such as donating cans to a homeless shelter or spending a morning visiting elderly people in a nursing home. Although such activities are noble and worthwhile, they do not foster attention to systemic issues and they do not help students recognize the power of their community and of joining together to effect change.

4. Teach explicit strategies for empowerment. This emphasis on collective action's empowerment of poor, minority, historically disenfranchised group members brings us to my final point. Schools need to be forthright with students both about the opportunities they have and the obstacles they face, and schools also must teach students the skills that will help them overcome these obstacles. These skills include the ability to speak Standard American English at appropriate times, to dress according to mainstream norms (no baggy pants or do-rags when talking to a city councilor), and to interact in ways that accord with the cultural practices of those in power. Looking a city councilor in the eye when speaking to her, for example, is crucial but contrary to how my African American students in Atlanta and my Vietnamese students in Boston have been taught by their families to show respect. Teachers and schools can teach such skills in ways that demonstrate respect for students' own cultural traditions and community norms while simultaneously imparting the knowledge and skills necessary for broader civic and political empowerment.

As schools put these reforms into place—increasing instructional time and other resources for civic education, helping students construct multiple historical narratives, implementing experiential civic education, and teaching students civic and political strategies for empowerment—they will provide students with a set of empowering civic experiences that are likely to increase their sense of political efficacy and civic identity, and hence to inspire their acquisition of civic knowledge and skills as well as continued productive participation.

There is no doubt that the reforms I propose face impediments. Schools, especially those that serve predominantly minority, poor, or immigrant students and have a history of low test scores, will continue to feel pressure to focus on reading, math, and possibly science, to the exclusion of civic education. These schools are also the least likely to be self-governing, since many are part of large urban systems subject to both bureaucratic and union regulations, and they are also more likely to have large student bodies. Both conditions make it hard to create opportunities for widespread student democratic participation in school governance. Finally, many school administrators and teachers may be concerned that experiential civic education has the potential to foster partisanship, and they may hence worry about bringing up or involving students in controversial issues.

Although these concerns are valid and important, they are not dispositive. Experiential education can energize student learning in many areas—including in math and reading. Preparing a speech to deliver to the school board, or analyzing a budget in an attempt to improve the cafeteria food, can profoundly motivate students to develop and apply communication and math skills. In addition, it is worth remembering that experiential civic education can be built into the school day; hence it need not distract from other subjects. Furthermore, even the most regulated schools can create pockets of control to be exercised jointly by adults and students in the school building. And finally, although schools should be worried about *partisanship*, they should not avoid touching on *politics*, which is central to civic engagement: with thoughtfulness and care, teachers and administrators can distinguish between what is political and what is partisan and engage their students in the former without running afoul of the latter.

The value of reducing the civic achievement gap, and thereby of civically and politically empowering poor, minority, and immigrant students, is hard to overstate. In addition to empowering the students themselves, schools will help strengthen local communities, both via the direct work that students accomplish and by building a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults. Reducing the civic achievement gap also strengthens democracy. It broadens government representation, increases its responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities, and thereby also reinforces its political legitimacy in the eyes of historically disenfranchised community members. Reducing the civic achievement gap strengthens schools, as students turn their attention to solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out. And finally, it promotes civic and political equality and fairness—ideals that are central to our American democracy. These are goals all schools can and should embrace.

Meira Levinson
Eighth Grade Civics Teacher
Boston Public Schools
meira.levinson@aya.yale.edu

Sources: All names of students have been changed to protect their privacy. I discussed my students' response to the September 11th attacks with a few African American friends and colleagues; they were both less surprised by and less critical of my students than was I. They, too, however, were unconvinced by my students' claim that President Bush himself had

ordered the attack. In retrospect, they tended to agree more with Walter Mosley's recent comment in the *New York Times Magazine*: "I have never met an African-American who was surprised by the attack on the World Trade Center. Blacks do not see America as the great liberator of the world. Blacks understand how the rest of the world sees us, because we have also been the victims of American imperialism." This quote appears in Deborah Solomon, "Questions for Walter Mosley: It's the Money, Stupid," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 (2004); information on race-, income-, and gender-correlated differences in civic knowledge can be found in Anthony D. Lutz, Andrew R. Weiss, Jay R. Campbell, John Mazzeo and Stephen Lazer, *NAEP 1998 Civics Report Card for the Nation* (Washington, DC, US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Statistics about different rates of civic participation can be found in *Voting and Registration in the Election of November* (Washington, DC, US Census Bureau, 2002), Mark Hugo Lopez, *Electoral Engagement Among Latino Youth* (CIRCLE, 2003) and Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard Univ. Press, 1995); Robert Smith and Richard Seltzer discuss the "chasm" in race-correlated political attitudes in their book, *Contemporary Controversies and the American Racial Divide* (Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); information on the point that the poorest individuals express political interest and political efficacy at levels almost a full standard deviation lower than the wealthiest is found in the Verba, Schlozman, and Brady volume; information regarding the response to the 2000 presidential election voting irregularities in Florida is found in *Race and Ethnicity in 2001: Attitudes, Perceptions, and Experiences*, sponsored by Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University (Washington, DC, 2001); the adoption of "enlightened self-interest" is discussed by, among others, William A. Galston, "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education," *Annual Reviews Political Science*, vol. 4 (2001) and Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, in their volume; data on the majority minority population of urban schools are found in Gary Orfield, *Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation* (Cambridge, MA, The Civil Rights Project, Harvard Univ., 2001) and also Gary Orfield, Susan Eaton and The Harvard Project on Desegregation, *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education* (NY:

The New Press, 1996); data regarding the minority population in schools in large American cities (and in Puerto Rico) are found in: US Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics, *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2000-01* (Washington, DC, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), especially Tables 8 and 9; for data that civic education improves civic outcomes, see the Delli Carpini and Keeter work of 1996, Richard D. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1998); William Damon, "To Not Fade Away: Restoring Civil Identity among the Young," in *Making Good Citizens*, edited by Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven, CT and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), William A. Galston's 2001 work, Judith Torney-Purta, "The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries," *Applied Developmental Science*, vol. 6 (2002) and Judith Torney-Purta, Carole L. Hahn and Jo-Ann M. Amadeo, "Principles of Subject-Specific Instruction in Education for Citizenship," in *Subject-Specific Instructional Methods and Activities*, edited by Jere Brophy (New York and London, JAI Press, 2001), and Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York, Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003); the point that in 1960s students took as many as three civics courses in high school but now students tend to take only one is made by Niemi and Junn (1998), and Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE work of 2003; for a discussion of principals reducing social studies instructional time, see Claus von Zastrow, *Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America's Public Schools*, (Washington, DC, Council for Basic Education, 2004); for a discussion of historical dialogue needing to be open to multiple contemporary interpretations, see Albert Shanker Institute, *Education for Democracy* (Washington, DC, Albert Shanker Institute, 2003); for discussions of kinds of active civic learning approaches, see Carole L. Hahn, *Becoming Political* (Albany, State Univ. of New York Press, 1998); Jo-Ann Amadeo, Judith Torney-Purta, Rainer Lehmann, Vera Husfeldt and Roumiana Nikolova, *Civic Knowledge and Engagement: An IEA Study of Upper Secondary Students in Sixteen Countries, Executive Summary* (Amsterdam, IEA, and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2002) and CIRCLE work of 2003; for a discussion of interactions that follow the practices of those in power, see Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York, The New Press, 1995).