

Democracy Prep

Generation Citizen: 3 things adults can do to empower students to live a political life

Amid this time of political decline, “young people feeling compelled to take action is not necessarily sufficient on its own,” writes author and Generation Citizen founder Scott Warren. Instead, he proposes “three specific but fundamental transformations we can make to help lift up young people as real and legitimate political players.” In a new excerpt from his book, *Generation Citizen: The Power of Youth in Our Politics*, Warren points to the value of richer civics education and proposes lowering the voting age, as well as advocates for a democratic system that puts equity at the forefront.

Teaching Democracy: Inside a School Network Where Citizenship Is At the Core

Students at Democracy Prep Public Schools study social change and debate current events; even more strikingly, they complete an impressive array of civics-centered requirements to graduate — from writing policy briefs to petitioning lawmakers. Now a new study shows that the network’s alumni go on to vote at a much higher rate than their peers. Kevin Mahnken goes inside Democracy Prep to better understand the groundbreaking model.

For High School Seniors, a Project to ‘Change the World’: At Democracy Prep, all high school seniors complete yearlong capstones, called Change the World projects. Students must identify a social problem, complete a research review into its causes and implement some remedy. This year, a few students are studying mental health in the Democracy Prep community; one is raising funds to distribute hygiene products to homeless women; another is directing her own film to draw attention to the unfairness of the foster care system. But does such work veer into activism? And if so, is that a bad thing?

Can DP’s Civics Focus Be Brought to Scale?

Some wish that Democracy Prep’s practices could be exported to public schools around the country. Fueled in part by millions of dollars of federal grant money, the organization has expanded from one sixth-grade class in Harlem to 21 schools in five states. But its growth has been troubled by setbacks: overly ambitious enrollment goals, a stubborn attrition problem and resultant financial shortfalls. As the network regains its footing, a question will linger: Can Democracy Prep’s civics-focused model be brought to scale?

Our Democracy Is a Mess — Can Civics Education Offer a Way Out?: How do you revive a moribund democracy?

Kevin Mahnken asks the experts, and many agree that if there's a way out, it's through education. Teaching the realities of American government and politics to students was a foundational mission of public education; but decades of inattention and a general aversion to bringing politics into the classroom has led to a decline in civics instruction. Over the past few years, a growing consensus has formed around more and better civics in the classroom as an antidote to our democratic morass.

Video

T74 Documentary: Inside the school daring students to change the world

When Democracy Prep students stream into their classrooms each morning, their school motto follows them. It’s written on the blue and gold banners slung in their hallways, alongside packets of graded student work and on rows of university pennants. It peeks up from school-issued planners. And it’s occasionally found on pieces of the school uniform, a variegated ensemble that makes room for branded button-downs, sweatpants, ties, cardigans and vests.

Not every school can boast a mantra, [but as you'll see in our new documentary, Democracy Prep chose one that leaves no ambiguity about its mission](#). Unique among both charter and district schools, Democracy Prep's institutional focus lies in preparing kids not just for the rigors of college, but also for the demands of citizenship. Through an emphasis on government and social change, as well as a heavy dose of extracurricular civic involvement, the schools seek to transform K-12 students into future voters, volunteers and activists. In short, adults who could — and might see it as their duty to — change the world. Filmed over the last couple months, and featuring a wide array of former and current students and network leaders, [the documentary captures the ways in which Democracy Prep's classroom lessons are tied directly to student-driven activism on the street. Watch the complete film.](#)

Gallery Photo Tour

Over the last several weeks, we've been amassing rolls of photos from Democracy Prep's past and present, images of activism, student projects and class trips that point to a very unique high school experience. Spanning campuses and several cities, we've assembled nearly two dozen colorful shots into a photo tour of sorts. We invite you to join us — "[The Students, Educators, Classrooms & Activism That Define Democracy Prep, a School Network Built Around Civics.](#)"

Good morning and — at least for a moment — check your cynicism at the door. The reason: today we roll out the second installment of our [four-part series on Democracy Prep](#) and the focus is all on the students themselves. As seniors at the civics-driven charter school network, [each one must find a local issue or social ill they care about and devise a project or plan of action to address it.](#)

With passion, persuasion and a burgeoning sense of their own power — just [watch](#) director Nyashia Hughes tell people what to do on the set of her movie about the foster care system — Democracy Prep students have designed and completed hundreds of Change the World projects, tackling mental health awareness, gentrification and the achievement gap, just to name a few. One organized a march through Harlem to protest police brutality. Another traveled to the Dominican Republic to distribute supplies to rural schools.

"It makes me think about the bigger picture in terms of how do I contribute to society, how can I live my life, how can I be the outlier instead of just complying to the bigger system," said Samantha Hernandez, whose Change the World project this year is to supply homeless women in her Bronx neighborhood with sanitary products.

If their self-awareness and energy makes you wonder why more public schools can't get a dose of Democracy Prep's model, reporter Kevin Mahnken, who spent months inside the network, [also offers an examination of its expansion struggles](#). While Democracy Prep has grown from its initial class of 130 sixth-graders in Harlem in 2006 to roughly 6,500 students in 21 schools today, its leaders concede that critical missteps have led to underperformance and parent opposition in some locations. Perhaps the most painful setback was in Washington, D.C., seat of American democracy, where the network for the first time this year had to retreat from a school. Mahnken reports on how Democracy Prep's new leadership is slowing down, making needed fiscal adjustments and heeding community lessons while still trying to meet the mandates of nearly \$22 million in expansion grants from the U.S. Department of Education

Change in Action Change the world: Democracy Prep seniors attempt to live up to their

school's mantra

The school motto at Democracy Prep is ambitious: [“Work hard. Go to college. Change the World!”](#) [The Harlem-based charter network manifests those imperatives most fully in its requirement that all high school seniors complete yearlong capstones, called Change the World projects.](#) Students must identify a social problem, complete a research review into its causes, and implement some remedy. This year, a few students are studying mental health in the Democracy Prep community; one is raising funds to distribute hygiene products to homeless women; another is directing her own film to draw attention to the unfairness of the foster care system. But does such work veer into activism? And if so, is that a bad thing? [Kevin Mahnken explores.](#)

Action Civics Spreads A needed reform in civics education

Scott Warren wants civics to be everyone's favorite class in school. That's why the nonprofit he started, Generation Citizen, helps schools adopt action civics, an approach to civics education that empowers students to find a problem in their community and work to solve it.

In addition to teaching students skills like critical thinking and problem-solving, [hands-on civics education could begin to combat inequality in the United States](#), he says. “Given the extreme stratification and extreme polarity that is occurring right now, this is a necessary reform and shift that needs to occur,” Warren told The 74. With the help of Generation Citizen, students in California have successfully lobbied for their city council to give more money to keep a local homeless shelter open, and students in Oklahoma are advocating for better HIV education for themselves and their peers. [Laura Fay reports.](#)

Civics Education

Today Kevin Mahnken asks the experts: [How do we fix things — if, indeed, they can be fixed?](#) Few hold out hope for taking down the temperature of partisan discord, and the political media's influence isn't helping. Participation in the nation's vast network of voluntary organizations, which have historically allowed us to form small communities around VFW halls and Boy Scout dens, has entered a phase of potentially terminal decline.

If there's a way out, [many political scientists agree, it's through education](#)

Teaching the realities of American government and politics to students was a foundational mission of public education; but decades of inattention and a general aversion to bringing politics into the classroom has led to a decline in civics instruction. Over the past few years, a growing consensus has formed around more and better civics in the classroom as an antidote to our democratic morass. Can they give way to a movement? [Today Kevin takes the long view on the role civics education can play.](#)