

Politics in the Schoolhouse

Philip Kassen, Director

LREI - Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School

From their earliest days children are deluged with media messages—news, opinion and gossip, both words and images. The 24/7 news culture, the historic nature of President Obama’s election and two terms in office, and, of course, our ever-present, years-long presidential campaigns mean that there is always a story, always something to report, always more and more. Combine this with the fact that families are ever-connected and you have an inundated childhood.

Despite all of this exposure to media, to news and to politics in their world outside of school, children’s time spent in school can be surprisingly free of political conversations. Teachers in my independent school and, as reported by my colleagues, in other schools somehow get the message that neither they nor their students should discuss “politics” in school. Presumably the belief that political conversations should not be had in schools stems from the fear that someone might be offended, that a family’s political leanings are a private matter, or that because students likely just parrot their parents’ views, the exercise is not a worthwhile one in the long run.

The Pitfalls of Politics

We should define our terms. What do we mean by politics? *Dictionary.com* defines politics as “the practice or profession of conducting political affairs,” “political” as “exercising or seeking power in governmental or public affairs of a state, municipality, etc.” Defined in this way, it seems logical that discussing politics in schools can be disruptive to the cohesion we try to create in a classroom or school community. Students arguing about who will be the best president, citing their parents’ opinions about issues that are a mystery to many of the children themselves, might be a real distraction. Also, what if the school has a student body that is, for example, overwhelmingly liberal? Will a student from a family with a more conservative point of view be able to comfortably express her beliefs? Unlikely.

Finally, is a discussion of political gamesmanship and one-upmanship a good use of the limited amount of time that children have in school each day? A hugely important question, as time is the most precious resource that schools have. All in all, discussions of partisan politics are challenging

and potentially divisive, and fairly easy to rule out when they begin to make the adults feel uncomfortable and maybe out of their depth. The question is, however, how can we not have them?

Schools Are Political By Nature

Politics not only has a place in school, it is already an integral part of life in every school, because a school's "politics" inherently influence that particular institution's student experience. Independent schools are largely excused from the politics that mandate curriculum, testing, restrictions to topics covered or discussions had, etc. Public schools, on the other hand, are governed in myriad ways by the politics of the moment, whether on the local, state or national level, while students in these same schools are often denied the opportunity to discuss these topics in class. Many of us in independent schools feel that we are free of the push and pull of the public political process. (Though it is likely that national education trends trickle down to us as they become a part of our parents' conversations.) We listen to the discussion of a candidate's plan for improving the educational experience with the interest of those who are concerned with the lives of children and who have some expertise and interest in the subject area, but also with the detachment of those whose own professional lives will not be impacted at all.

Just the same, and the interactions between employees and community members aside, independent schools are political institutions. The decisions that schools make—the curricula we choose, the experiences we offer, the people we hire—are all very much born of the politics that our founders and current leaders embrace. The ways in which we teach and the modes in which our students participate in our school communities are expressions of our political ideology. Adults experience this as well. How involved in the community's decision making are the faculty and staff? Do parents have a voice? Do students give faculty feedback? Input into leadership and governance, and participation in charting the course of the institution express the political life of the school.

Framing the Conversation

If we broaden the definition of "political" to include more than government and governing but also to refer to "'public' or 'social' affairs," as some definitions do, then no school can avoid politics. Schools have a responsibility to provide opportunities and experiences that will foster in our children an interest in politics—both governmental and social affairs—and will teach them why and how to be involved.

Professor Joel Westheimer, whose work focuses on citizenship education, poses, "[I]f you stepped into a school and asked to observe a lesson related

to the country's political ideals about governance or civic or political participation, would you be able to tell whether you were in a totalitarian nation or a democratic one?" He suggests that all too often a school's conversations do not display what we might hope for from a school that has a place in our democracy.

What if we did not avoid or limit difficult discussions but from the very earliest age we sought them out and harnessed their power to inspire our students, rather than squandered it? What if instead of using a presidential election as an example that emerges as part of our lessons in history, the roles were reversed and, for the moment, history became the tool with which we illuminated our current affairs?

What if we waded into the conflict that can come with such conversations willingly and knowingly, acknowledging the potential for difficult moments to come—difficult moments between the school and families, between students, between colleagues? As educational reformer John Dewey wrote:

Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving. Not that it always effects this result; but that conflict is a *sine qua non* of reflection and ingenuity.

Few lessons are as meaningful as those that incite our passions and feelings of deep truth and worth. Remember the student from a more conservative family who felt some discomfort when expressing her views to her more liberal peers? In a school with supported conflict, she might feel empowered to do so.

While puzzling through these conflict-filled conversations our students will develop important skills—the ability to passionately support one's opinion, the ability to truly listen to the equally passionate views of others, the ability to work through conflict and, as colleagues, towards a solution. To understand that those with whom we disagree are neither "stupid" nor wrong but that their values lead them to different conclusions, and that by working together we will find solutions that serve all, are essential lessons.

With a nod to the current concern about political correctness, one must speak plainly, but it is important to avoid conversations that are dismissive. This is easy to say, yet much harder to integrate into our daily lives. In our search for honesty, it is important that we not be bigoted. Schools must find a way to walk the line between timidity and intolerance. The challenge of finding this line, however, should not be the stumbling block that prohibits the conversations.

What Makes For a Good Citizen?

I don't want to minimize the importance of those topics one might find in a traditional civics course, designed to teach the structure and workings of our government and the rights and responsibilities of our citizens. All too often, however, without a discussion of politics and opinions, adherence to the status quo and agreement with the powers that be become the definition of patriotism and an assumed responsibility for citizens.

Just over 100 years ago, in an article entitled "Education as a Political Institution," philosopher and political activist Bertrand Russell wrote:

The prevention of free inquiry is unavoidable so long as the purpose of education is to produce belief rather than thought, to compel the young to hold positive opinions on doubtful matters rather than to let them see the doubtfulness and be encouraged to independence of mind.

To embrace conflict, and the way of participating and relating that it requires, means that teachers have to redefine what it means to be a good citizen. Joel Westheimer observes that, for many educators, good citizenship means "listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen—not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to learn how to do." I feel that it is imperative that we add questioning and dissent to any list of citizens' rights and responsibilities.

Democracy in Action

Our school was born as a political statement—as members of its community, we feel compelled to embrace contentious subjects. While we are well practiced and families and faculty expect these conversations, they are rarely easy moments. Worthwhile, but hard.

Some will be concerned that teachers might impose a particular point of view during these discussions. This is an understandable concern and one that requires significant dialogue between colleagues prior to embarking on this journey. In the late 1930s, Elisabeth Irwin, my school's founder, and three of her colleagues wrote a pamphlet entitled simply "Democracy." In it, the first grade teacher, Mabel Hawkins, wrote:

Let me repeat that I do not uphold being a propagandist in the classroom. I definitely do not, for instance, believe in sitting down with the children and say that today we are going to discuss strikes. I do, however, believe in allowing a child who has observed a picket in front of a store to discuss this. I shall answer honestly, when he asks me why the picket is there. I shall never evade his question but I shall not "preach a sermon" to him. After all we are

by the very execution of the curriculum (studying his environment) exposing the child to the world about him, taking the bad with the good, the unpleasant with the pleasant, the ugly with the beautiful.

As a former middle school teacher and administrator, I can say that nurturing the political curiosity of children in the early grades prepares them well for later growth. The adolescent energy that reveals itself in 6th or 7th grade and lasts through high school (though often hidden by the “coolness” of the high school student) is perfectly suited to these conversations. Politics, conflict, passion, change, fairness—these all excite and enthrall these children who seem otherwise hard to engage.

A Lasting Imprint

A focus on politics not only will help our students learn about history, geography, math, science and language arts, but also will allow them to fashion their own political lives. It will instill in them a desire to participate in the political process both close to home and on a broader scale. Maybe these discussions and investigations will move some of our students to work to become politicians or members of government. How proud we would be to welcome these alumni back to school.

We have an opportunity to instill in our charges habits that will last a lifetime—the habit of being informed, the habit of being involved and, most important, the habit of voting. If upon reaching the age of majority our students are even only as involved as it takes to cast a well-informed vote, they would be doing a great service to their country: according to the Federal Election Commission, only approximately 55 percent of voting age Americans voted in the 2012 presidential election. Low as that number is, it seems quite high when compared with voter turnout for the 2013 New York City mayoral election; the city’s Board of Elections reported that only 26 percent of registered voters participated.

We do not teach about politics for politics’ sake. We do not teach through conflict for conflict’s sake. We do not focus on the challenges of life and community for challenge’s sake. We should all take advantage of these opportunities to teach for our democracy’s sake.

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Philip Kassen is Director of LREI - Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School, a school for children ages 4 through 12th grade in Manhattan.

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