



CULTIVATING YOUNG VOICES FOR CHANGE

Lyle Greenfield

For a democracy to survive, and thrive, it must remain “of the people, by the people, [and] for the people.” And for that to happen, each generation must participate in renewing the nation’s commitment to the ideals upon which it was founded. In the case of our country, that means upholding and celebrating the principles set forth in our Constitution—the world’s longest-surviving governing document.

Of growing concern today is that a majority of young Americans lack the most basic knowledge of their own country’s history and founding principles. A 2022 survey conducted by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation revealed that only 1 in 5 adults ages 18 to 29 could pass a multiple-choice U.S. citizenship test.

Not a good sign! And it begs the question: What has happened to civics instruction in our country? Are young people—the fabric of our nation’s future—being taught enough about America’s history and how our government works?

REMEMBER CIVICS?

In the broadest terms, civics education, as defined by the Center for Civics Education, is the study of the rights and duties of citizenship and the functioning of government and society. It encompasses the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for informed and engaged participation in civic life. In other words, the things necessary for being a good citizen in a democracy.

For those who may have missed it in school, civics is the study of the civil and political rights and obligations of citizens in a society. According to Wikipedia, “Civic education includes the study of civil law, the civil codes, and government with especial attention to the political role of the citizens in the operation and oversight of government.”

HAVE OUR CHILDREN BEEN LEFT BEHIND?

While it might seem counterintuitive, the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush, may actually have hurt civics and social studies learning. The law, updated under the Obama administration, mandated standardized testing in all states for math, reading, and science. But not for civics.

The result was that teachers deemphasized civics and social studies proficiency in favor of the required subjects. And things worsened, of course, for learning in all subjects during the pandemic, when classroom teaching was no longer possible.

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REVIVING CIVICS EDUCATION

Thus, is our democracy headed for dark days ahead? Not if we act on the knowledge we have today. For the future isn't some abstraction we'll just wake up to 10 or 20 years from now. It will be the result of the actions we take today. And there is good news to celebrate and build upon.

Sandra Day O'Connor became the first female justice of the Supreme Court in 1981 and served for 25 years before retiring from the Court in 2006, at the age of 76. But she did not retire from public service. In 2009, deeply concerned about the decline in civics instruction in American schools, O'Connor founded iCivics, an organization committed to providing modern tools of engagement in civics and government to schools across the country.

In her words, "I made a commitment to myself, my family, and my country that I would use whatever years I had left to advance civic learning and engagement ... It is my great hope that our nation will commit to educating our youth about civics, and to helping young people understand their crucial role as informed, active citizens in our nation."

iCivics provides materials, curriculum points, and interactive games to make learning about government and the importance of active citizenship an engaging—even entertaining—experience. Today, over 145,000 teachers and 9 million students utilize these tools. As noted by David Buchanan, Director of Massachusetts Programs, iCivics, "At its root, civics is about how we all live together, as different as we all are from each other." In terms of bringing young Americans into the fabric of our living democracy, this initiative is definitely a step in the right direction.

A NEW STUDENT EXCHANGE INITIATIVE

What if we took another bold leap forward in terms of preparing our young people for their role in this great, diverse country? We're all familiar with the idea behind student foreign exchange programs, right? Again from Wikipedia: "Students of study abroad programs aim to develop a global perspective and cultural understanding by challenging their comfort zones and immersing themselves in a different culture."

So how about an Interstate Student Exchange Program designed to give willing students and their families the opportunity to experience part of their junior or senior year of high school in homes and schools in another state?

Imagine a student from Montpelier High School in Vermont relocating to Tuscaloosa County High School in Alabama, and a student from Tuscaloosa heading to Montpelier in Vermont for part of his or her junior year. Or a kid from the Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School in New York City heading to Memorial High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with the exchange student from Tulsa relocating to Brooklyn.

The hope would be, of course, that the experience deepens their respect and love of this larger place, America, that is their home.

The idea, of course, is to immerse the student in a culture not entirely his/her own, to give the student a greater understanding of the beliefs, traditions, and, yes, prejudices and concerns of the people living in a distant part of the country. Our country.

Okay, it wouldn't be for everybody, just as the idea of a foreign exchange semester isn't for every student. But imagine the learning experience those kids would have, and the dynamic in their classrooms as the teachers and students contemplate the meaning of this unique exchange. Would they be on their best behavior? Would they reject the very idea of this "interloper" invading their social space? Would there be curiosity about the "new kid in town," about his or her family, their community?

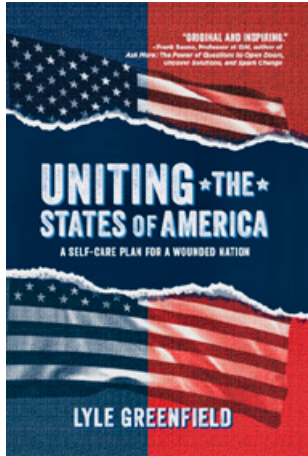
There are over 20,000 high schools in the U.S. Imagine the impact on the students and communities if a third of them participated. The positive publicity and role modeling these kids and their families would represent. The hope would be, of course, that the experience deepens their respect and love of this larger place, America, that is their home.

THE FUTURE DEPENDS ON WHAT WE DO TODAY

We could probably all benefit from a refresher course in civics. But if we make sure our children are learning about their country and its history, and participating actively in school and community programs, they'll be better prepared to take on leadership roles in our remarkable democracy. **And that's the future we should be building in the present.** 🇺🇸



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lyle Greenfield is a man of many experiences. He's worked in landscaping, construction, door-to-door sales, and a brewery before starting his career as a copywriter in NYC. Greenfield has served as president of the Long Island Wine Council, started a music production company in New York, and is a founding member and former president of the Association of Music Producers (AMP). Greenfield is the author of several books, including *Uniting the States of America: A Self-Care Plan for a Wounded Nation*, which was written with the goal of finding solutions for the current state of political divisiveness in our country.

Learn more at lylejgreenfield.com.



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