



IN SOLIDARITY

Season 4, Episode 1: Building a foundation for civic health

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>> This is, In Solidarity. A podcast where we draw connections between power, place and health, and discuss how our lives, our fates, are all interconnected. Here are your hosts, Ericka Burroughs-Girardi and Beth Silver.

>> Hi there, and welcome to, In Solidarity. A podcast from County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, a national program of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I'm Ericka Burroughs-Girardi, here with my co-host, Beth Silver, for the first of three episodes in our series on civic education.

>> Hi Ericka, so glad to be with you to continue our conversation around civic health, and specifically to focus on the role civic education plays. The foundation it can lay for a lifetime of engagement in civic life. When we talk about civic health, we mean the degree to which people can participate in their communities and in government and the overall wellbeing of those communities. And when we say "civic education" we're talking about what schools are teaching about democracy. How we're equipping students in K-12 to think critically, to take informed actions and whether we're giving young people the skills and knowledge to participate and make change. This matters to the health of young people, to their communities, and to a healthy democracy.

>> That's right Beth. Young people are voting in greater numbers, as we saw in the 2020 presidential election. At the same time, recent test scores show they know less about history and government. Knowledge of how our democracy works is at an all-time low. So is public trust in government institutions. The Department of Education reports that social studies test scores are the lowest on record in 29 years. And according to Annenberg Public Policy Center survey, only a quarter of all Americans, not just high school students, can name all three branches of government.

>> Ericka, we're seeing civic education in the news all the time these days. Whether it's about cuts to education funding or limits on what students learn in history and social studies. Hundreds of recent proposals and state legislatures have made attempts to restrict what's taught on race and racism, inequality, sex, gender, and LGBTQ issues. And more than a dozen states have enacted those restrictions. To improve civic health, Ericka, we have to start young to build good habits and to encourage all young people to get involved and effect change, that's why I'm so glad we have Dr. Kelly Siegel-Stechler from Tufts University with us on this episode. She is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement or CIRCLE. And she's focused on civic learning and improving the skills those in K-12 schools have so they can participate in civic life.





>> It seems especially important and timely to have this discussion, given the issues we're facing as a country, and the upcoming presidential election. I'm excited to hear from Dr. Siegel-Stechler, on ways that we can improve civic education for all students, get them more engaged in civic life and continue to increase voting rates.

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>> Welcome Dr. Siegel-Stechler, so glad you can join us on, In Solidarity.

>> Well, thanks so much for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

>> You know, first I want to ask you, why is civic education important? How does this connect to a strong democracy? And ultimately, to health and equity?

>> So, civic education has always been a core goal of public education in America, sort of premised on the idea that a healthy, functional democracy, right? A government run by and for the people requires people who know how to run a government. People who are knowledgeable, skillful, and prepared to actually do the work of deciding who to elect and holding those people accountable. So really, it's at the core of what makes our democracy tick and it's always been a big, important part of living in a democratic society. And I would say the second piece for why civic education is important, is really this equity issue, right? A lot of civic education in America and the way we come to be members of our society, takes place at home. We learn from our parents how to vote, how to talk about what's going on in the world, how to follow the news and what we think is important. But not everybody has parents who were born in the United States, who are citizens, or who have the time and capacity for economic reasons or otherwise, to sit down and have those conversations with them. Those kids deserve the same opportunities to learn about the world, and school can be a really great equalizer for making sure that everybody has the same access to information and experiences that they need, to develop the skills to become active citizens. Not just those kids who already are from backgrounds that have access to power, or experience navigating institutions, right? Everybody deserves to know what they're doing and how to get the help and support that they need from the society that exists around them. I would also say, you know, a lot of those same skills are really applicable to managing our own health and well-being and social health and well-being, right? Understanding how to navigate institutions, how to look for and synthesize information and make good choices as a result. These are things that we use all the time when we're understanding healthy choices for ourselves and families and they really define our ability to be comfortable and thrive in the world. And so, you know, making sure that we know how to find information and make choices that we feel good about is really, really crucial.

>> Yeah, I appreciate that context. I want to talk a little bit more about the state of civic education more broadly. So, kind of set the stage for us, like where we are today, what is the state of civic education and more broadly, young people's understanding of their role and responsibility in civic life?

>> This is a tough question in some ways, because the answer really varies a lot from place to place and from kid to kid, right? The kinds of opportunities that some young people have, depending on where they



live and their background, are going to be really different from others. But a few things I will say, you know, in a lot of ways it's very clear that civic education is not where it needs to be. For the last 40 years or so, social studies has really taken a back seat in the U.S. to initiatives around literacy and STEM education, which are also super important. But there are a number of scholars who would definitely argue that our sort of current moment of political polarization of susceptibility to misinformation is the result of, sort of not investing in and paying attention to social studies for a long time. The good news is that people are recognizing this, I would say especially in the last five or 10 years, there's really been a resurgent interest in civics and in social studies, and a lot of places across the country are doing a really good job of trying to bring that back. At the same time, it's naturally a very heavily politicized topic, it's something that people have a lot of strong feelings about and that makes it sort of, ripe for getting taken over or sort of intercepted by ongoing culture wars in education and how we think about what it means to be a citizen, to be an American, to exist in the world. And that can make progress on doing things differently or making change in what schools look like, really challenging. So, there are certainly places where I think civic education is thriving and we're moving in the right direction, and there are also places where, you know, it's really hard for young people to access the kind of information and experiences that need.

>> Yeah, let's talk about that a little bit more, this variation that we see happening. How does civic education vary across the country? Like, how are K-12 students experiences different depending on where they live?

>> One thing that has always been true about all education in the U.S. is that there's no national curriculum, right? There's no, like one size fits all model for education. It really is left up to individual states, districts, even schools, to decide what they teach, how and when. And so this means that not only is there massive variation in what gets taught and what students are experiencing, but also that it's really hard to have a clear picture on a national scale of what's actually going on in a lot of different places. We can know, you know, what state policies look like, but what's actually happening in Ms. Smith's classroom down to street, is very hard to know and it often doesn't really reflect exactly what's going on at the state or national level. Though there are some things that we know, right? We know most students take U.S. history in 10th grade, for example. But what that history class actually looks like, is going to vary a lot from school to school and even based on teachers individual interests and experiences as well. One thing that we do tend to know is that students from more economically disadvantaged schools or schools that are predominately made up of students of color, are less likely to have opportunities for high quality social studies instruction.

>> Mmm-hmm.

>> Sometimes because their instructional time is lost to ELA or math as priorities, especially in elementary schools that might be struggling. And sometimes because, you know, teachers in these schools are making choices about how to use their time and they might be, by no fault of their own, less likely to see those students as agents in their own learning, as capable of engaging meaningfully with really complex topics and ideas, and they might not be supported in those environments when they do make those kinds of choices. So, we do tend to see inequities across the types of schools that students attend. But, there are some states that are working really, really hard to ensure that all students have



access to high quality civic education, that the history they're being taught is culturally responsive, that it reflects, you know, a wide array of communities and experiences. For example, Illinois is a state that has really led the way. They've passed laws in the last decade or so, mandating civics instruction in high school and then in middle school, that specifically addresses not just that there needs to be a civics class, but how that should be taught. That teachers are using best practices. And then the legislature has been following up with mandates to make sure that, that history is inclusive, right? That they're talking about Asian American and Pacific Islander role in history, that LGBTQ folks are included, that indigenous history is taught a certain way. And so, there are places where people are really paying attention to this and trying to ensure that they can do what they can, at a policy level, to try and make sure that every student has access to the kind of history and civics education that's going to work for them.

>> Yeah, I appreciate you sharing those bright spots. It's good to know that in some places, we are, you know, making progress. What does the research say about how we can educate young people to become engaged, responsible citizens? Like, what knowledge and skills do students need to participate in civic life?

>> So, increasingly, so much of our research really points to this idea that what matters about civic education is not just what is taught, but really how it's taught. That the pedagogy teachers use and the environment students are learning in, have a really big impact on their outcomes. Students need the opportunity to apply what they learn and to practice the skills of citizenship, foundational and knowledge and understanding of how things work and the history and sort of underlying principles behind it is important. But beyond that, they need to be able to apply that knowledge to think about how that actually functions on a day to day basis. So students should have an opportunity to think and talk about real world challenges and issues, to explore their own opinions and those of their peers and to make up their own mind about things, and to draw connections between what they learned in school and their own lived experiences out in the world. It's also super important to recognize that civic education isn't confined to a civics class that I take in one semester, in social studies classroom. It is happening all around me, all the time. For most students in the United States, going to a public school is the longest and most sustained interaction that they will have with a public institution throughout their entire lives. And the ways that they interact with and either feel heard and seen or not, by that institution, is going to influence the relationship that they have to the government and to public life throughout the rest of their lives. So building schools and communities within those schools that are responsive to student voice, that have mechanisms for change, where students feel like they belong, where they feel like their problems can be heard and addressed. That's a really important component of civic education that goes above and beyond what's being taught in the classroom.

>> Yeah, and your research shows that taking civics in high school actually increases voter participation. So, can you talk a little more about those findings?

>> For sure. So, this was a study that looked at young people's voting behavior, as young adults and their recalled experiences from high school. And what I found is that just taking civics, was positively associated with turning out to vote. While this isn't perfect evidence, to me it really points to the idea that even though, like I said, how we teach civics matters, there's a lot that goes into determining outcomes for young people and so much that influence whether or not they show up to vote, we



shouldn't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. That doing something, even if that something isn't perfect, is really better than doing nothing. And that just getting started, making sure that students have access to civic education and a civics course and then working from there to make sure that, that civics course is really high quality, is an important first step that is meaningful and has meaningful change in young people's lives.

>> Yeah, that's interesting. In addition to increasing voter participation, what are some of the impacts of civic education on K-12 students through adulthood?

>> Yeah, so there are a lot of really good signs. Some of them are also civic outcomes that aren't voting, right? We know that positive experiences in school can be associated with increased participation in communities, something we call like, social movement oriented citizenship, which includes things like appreciation of diversity, welcoming people who are different than you, and supporting marginalized communities, caring about the environment. So things that tend to have a positive impact on communities. And then at the same time, civic skills are very closely related to workforce skills and the kind of individual skills young people need to be successful after they leave school. Things like, making phone calls, running a meeting, listening and synthesizing information, knowing how to talk to people. That interpersonal work. Those are civic skills and they also have a really big impact on our ability to be successful in every aspect of our lives. So, just because something that I'm learning and doing is good for my community, it can also be good for me and my own economic and social outcomes later in life too.

>> Yeah, it's so interesting. You know, there are so many things you're mentioning about these impacts of civic education that I hadn't even thought about. So, learning a lot. What are the best curricula or practices in civics education?

>> This is an area where I think we're still learning a lot and figuring out. As we go along, new things emerge and best practices in education continue to change over time. Right now, I think I would really point towards inquiry centered instruction. So thinking about education as a process of asking and answering compelling questions, right? And rather than absorbing information that already exists, asking a question about the world and going out and finding out for myself how I want to answer it, drawing from a variety of different sources and perspectives, learning how to make sense of those things and then sort of putting them together to come up with my own conclusions and figure out how to communicate that and make decisions as a result. Students need access to discussion and exposure to multiple perspectives, in an environment that's welcoming to them. They need access to content that is culturally responsive and draws connections between what they're learning and their own lives or the way that the world is now. Support for media literacy and making sense of those multiple perspectives and information. Really, there's a lot of different components that go into it, but really at the end of the day, it's about supporting students to be agents of their own learning, to give them the tools to make sense of information in the world and to sort of take a broad approach to making sense of what is presented to me, how I want to think about things and given the time and space to recognize that there are different perspectives, those can be valid and I have a right to have my own opinions and views of the world.



>> Yeah. You know, researchers talk about partisan considerations in social studies and civics curriculum. And there are certainly a lot of examples in the news. But what does politicization in this context mean?

>> I really love this question for a few reasons. And I think the most important thing to keep in mind when you think about this is that, there is no such thing as a values neutral education and there never has been. Right? Even what we think of as being neutral, is highly steeped in our own values, our own ways of seeing the world, our own ideas about what is and isn't true. Everything that we do is based on values and so part of the reason that we see this come up so much in the news or that we feel like it's such a political time is because we're really at a place where people's values aren't aligned, right? The people who have power and voice and agency in society, have a couple of very different sets of values on which they're making decisions and understanding the world. And so that makes it difficult to reach agreement about what is the right thing to do.

>> Mmm-hmm.

>> From a practical perspective, the best way we can address these challenges is by embracing that controversy and those different ways of seeing the world, rather than trying to avoid it, right? And offering a curriculum and an approach to civics and social studies, that centers around this idea of multiple perspectives, multiple viewpoints, ways of seeing the world. For historians, that has always been what history is. Right? You're trying to make sense of a lot of competing narratives and sources and make our best guess about what actually happened. But for most people who aren't historians, that is not how we were taught history. We were given a very settled, clear timeline, a set of main actors, right? A very concrete, clearly defined narrative about what happened in the past, that may or may not be accurate. Right? Historians are constantly re-evaluating things, having access to new information and trying to make sense of the world. And so that feels like a really big leap and really scary for a lot of people, who have grown up and this world where everything was clear cut and made a lot of sense. But, I think it serves our students much better to have to do that work for themselves, to see how our -- like where to our narratives come from? How did I get here? What information contributed to me understanding this as being the way the world is? Because dealing with that ambiguity is going to serve them so well as adults, navigating the world every day. Right? And understanding that people are coming from different places, right? You don't know what people are dealing with, what's going on, what kind of information and background they have. That's just how life is. And giving them access to that kind of experience in a safe environment where they're able to learn to do that, is really valuable.

>> Yeah, you know, embracing those differences and appreciating those multiple perspectives, kind of leads me to my next question. Because you wrote a guidebook in 2020, for teachers and administrators on civil dialogue. What can schools and teachers do to encourage students to engage in political discussion? Especially in such a politically divided climate.

>> So, the first thing I would say is that even though it's difficult, resist the urge to shut it down, right? Don't shy away from these kinds of conversations. I think a lot of administrators or teachers are thinking, "Oh, I'm not prepared for this and so I'm just going -- we're not going to talk about that here." But the reality is that your students are still talking about that. They are just doing it somewhere else, where you aren't there to make sure that they are kind to each other, that they are using information and evidence to support their ideas. And it's going to go very differently than if you were able to manage those



conversations in a classroom or in school. So, don't buy into the idea that saying "no" is actually going to remove those conversations from your students' experiences. The second thing is to, right before you dive in and to think sort of long-term about trying to create a school and classroom climate that is conducive to these conversations now and every day, so that when things come up, students already have the tools and the know-how and the experience to handle those really difficult things, because it is a skillset, right? It's a muscle that you have to practice and flex and build. Diving right in on day one with, you know, talking about January 6th on January 7th, when you've never had a conversation about something controversial or difficult in your classroom before, is going to be much harder than if you work towards it and practice and build a community where students are comfortable with disagreement, where they've had opportunities to address complex issues, and had different opinions from their peers and then were able to walk away, and it was okay, right? That takes practice, that takes time, and that is a constant ongoing way of being that schools need to be cultivating every single day, not just every other fall around elections. So that students trust and they know that it's a safe place to be having those conversations, they know how to handle them and how to manage themselves when things do get controversial, rather than just diving right in with no preparation.

>> Before we wrap up our conversation, I want to ask you, what is the role of public health and healthcare in all of this?

>> Yeah, you know, increasingly a lot of my work these days is really centered around youths' voice and agency and seeing young people as assets. And I think that that is an area where public health and healthcare can really play a huge role, right? Not seeing young people as a risk or a deficit to overcome, but to recognize them as understanding where they are, what unique experiences they have, sort of a harbinger of what's to come in the world and learning from and serving them, so that they learn to advocate for themselves, to get involved in the things that they care about and to contribute overall to the kind of healthy and functional society that we want. I think young people who are able to engage in the political world, are able to look out for themselves, to take care of one another, and that is a huge part of what makes us healthy and it's a huge part of what makes our university healthy too.

>> Thank you so much Dr. Siegel-Stechler, we really appreciate your wisdom.

>> Thanks for having me, this was great. It's great to be able to talk about these things.

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>> Beth, that was definitely enlightening. Dr. Siegel-Stechler helped us understand how we teach civics in this country and how content varies depending on where we live, why that matters to civic health and health equity and the systems and structural barriers that have de-prioritized civic education.

>> Exactly, Ericka. If we're to increase voter participation and make sure everyone has a voice, we have to understand the rights and responsibilities that go along with a democracy. We can lay that foundation early. You know, I appreciated how Dr. Siegel-Stechler said that we have to show that we value civics education, and civil dialogue.



>> Right. And it's not just about being polite. Civil dialogue means promoting interactions that focus on learning, using supporting evidence, evaluating news sources for bias and teaching these skills can increase civic engagement by helping students appreciate different viewpoints, not just now, but throughout their lives.

>> There's more to come Ericka. In our next episode, we'll talk with Eric Liu. He worked in the Clinton administration and advised the Obama administration. He describes himself as the son of immigrants, an author, creator and civic evangelist. He's also the CEO and co-founder of Citizen University, an organization working to build a culture of powerful, responsible citizenship. Looking forward to a great conversation, until then I'm Beth.

>> And I'm Ericka.

>> And were In Solidarity. Connecting power, place, and health.

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