

Civic Education in the Elementary Years

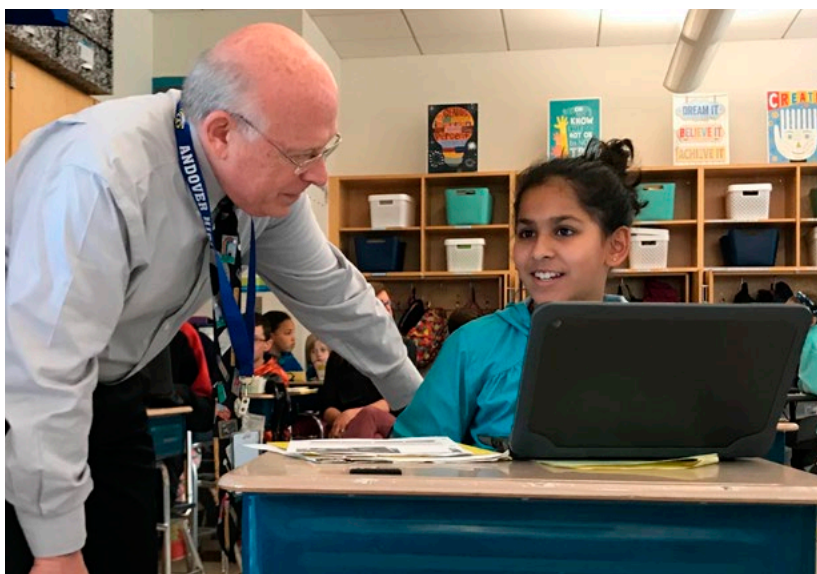
A school district's curriculum for teaching community values, affirming cultural diversity and formulating young students' skills for contributing in a democratic society.

BY SHELDON BERMAN

Media coverage of racism, intolerance and street demonstrations has brought the fight for social justice into the nation's living rooms. Elementary school children, who expect fairness and are at a prime age to develop political understanding, are trying to make sense of what they see. How can educators help them interpret these events in a way that prepares them to take a positive and active role in our democracy?

Our school district is developing the One Community, One Nation curriculum to capitalize on young students' readiness for civic education; enable them to experience the value of community, culture and civil rights; and empower them to participate in making a difference for themselves and their community.

Given the emphasis on literacy and numeracy, elementary students typically receive minimal social studies instruction. Because of time constraints and the insufficient depth of most commer-



Sheldon Berman, superintendent in Andover, Mass., has been a central force in developing a curriculum framework promoting civic dispositions in elementary school students.

cially available programs, civics instruction often defaults to teaching children to abide by the rules, understand patriotic symbols and learn a simplified version of early American history.

The absence of quality elementary-level civics is especially detrimental to students living in poverty. Economic inequality, racism and other forms of injustice leave multigenerational disempowerment in their wake. Social studies content often is presented from the perspective of the majority culture, further disenfranchising students of color from their rightful place in history.

For these students in particular, but on behalf of all elementary students, we can and must do better. They deserve a strong social studies curriculum that teaches the value of community; honors and affirms cultural diversity; and develops the knowledge, skills and convictions to face societal challenges and contribute to our democratic way of life.

A New Framework

Building on earlier work by the Hudson, Mass., Public Schools, and the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Ky., the Andover Public Schools in suburban Boston and a dozen other school districts in Massachusetts are co-creating an integrated program for elementary social studies that provides coherence and continuity across grades. Collaborating in this endeavor are Kurt Wootton, cofounder of the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University, whose work on the Perform-

mance Cycle has deeply influenced our integration of literacy and the arts, and Tina Blythe of Harvard University's Project Zero, whose work on thinking routines has enhanced students' conceptual understanding.

One Community, One Nation is not a written curriculum we can share but rather a framework and approach we are constructing across districts. Any school district is welcome to access the resources we've gathered and the work we've accomplished thus far and join us in its evolution and development. (See related story, page XX.)

Acknowledging the scarcity of instructional time, One Community, One Nation uses literacy instruction as an avenue to raise civic understanding. The framework integrates with and advances students' literacy development through the use of children's literature and nonfiction in such basic instructional components as interactive read-alouds, independent reading, Reader's Workshop and Writer's Workshop. Introducing each unit through a compelling read-aloud text gives focus to the units. By next encountering an array of reading-level-appropriate fiction and nonfiction on the topic, students expand their knowledge while improving literacy skills.

The program also incorporates visual and performing arts to deepen and demonstrate understanding and is grounded in a set of civic dispositions (see table, page XX) that tie directly to students' social-emotional development. Consequently, One Community, One Nation provides a richly integrated learning experience for students while helping teachers address instructional expectations for literacy, social studies, the arts and social-emotional learning. Elementary teachers embrace this transformative approach to teaching traditionally separate silos of knowledge because it saves time and elicits engagement.

Three Core Ideas

At its heart, this new approach interweaves three core concepts — community, culture and civic participation — to teach students:

- ▶ We are all part of a larger community and have a responsibility to ensure the community works together to protect and promote the common good;
- ▶ We can learn much about our commonalities by studying the traditions and values of the world's diverse cultures; and
- ▶ Civic participation matters and we can make our community and our world more just through individual and collective actions.

The ultimate goal is to bolster students' confidence in and commitment to civic engagement.

Scaffolding Concepts

One Community, One Nation presents a coherent sequence of concepts from kindergarten to 5th grade. The foundational building block in civic engagement is to grasp that we are members of a community and that our relationships, decisions and actions matter for the benefit of all.

The framework begins with the concepts of community and culture. The focus for kindergarten and 1st grade is on creating community

from diversity, and the essential question is: How do people with different backgrounds and skills live and work together in my community? Children learn about self-identity, the cultures represented in their classroom and how individuals with diverse backgrounds benefit from working together.

In 2nd grade, a framing question is: What does it mean to be part of a cultural community? Students study countries that reflect the cultures present in their community. In Andover, those nations include Mexico, China, India and Kenya. For example, in studying Mexico, teachers read-

Building Civic Dispositions

Among educators, there is a growing acknowledgment of the need to develop children's social-emotional skills — yet integrating these skills into instruction has been elusive.








The One Community, One Nation framework places a set of civic dispositions at the heart of the program, with each unit exploring and encouraging the development of different dispositions. These civic dispositions align with the social-emotional skills (the five core competencies) in the CASEL framework.

For example, the civic disposition of individual responsibility aligns with responsible decision making, open-mindedness with self-awareness, negotiation and compromise with relationship skills, and promotion of the common good with social awareness. Each is the civic embodiment of the core social skill as it plays out in the civic arena. This intentional alignment helps to equip students with the social-emotional tools to enter civic life with a sense of optimism and confidence in their ability to make change.

The accompanying chart articulates the civic dispositions covered by One Community, One Nation. The right-hand column frames each disposition in language more appropriate to elementary students. Appreciation is extended to Paul Graseck, who developed this chart during his time as director of cultural studies in the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Ky.

— SHELDON BERMAN

One Community, One Nation

	CIVIC DISPOSITIONS	ELEMENTARY DEFINITIONS
	Commitment to Social Justice Promotion of and respect for others' right to be an equal voice in government, to be equal in the eyes of the law and to be treated fairly.	Help others to be treated fairly.
	Individual Responsibility Involvement in one's community be serving, staying informed and accepting consequences of one's actions.	Understand and believe you make a difference in your community.
	Promotion of the Common Good Support of beliefs and actions that benefit the community.	Support what is best for the community.
	Open-Mindedness Willingness to understand the perspective of others and honor differences.	Carefully listen to and consider the ideas of others.
	Critical-Mindedness Ability to remain neutral, ask probing questions and evaluate positions (including one's own).	Ask questions and consider the views of others before reaching a decision.
	Compassion Concern for the well-being of others.	Show kindness and care for one another.
	Negotiation & Compromise Ability to share ideas and work together to solve problems or reach agreements.	Solve problems together through discussion.

SOURCE: Courtesy of Shelley Berman

aloud books about such Mexican artists as Frida Kahlo, then engage students in thinking routines to explore artifacts of Mexican culture. The thinking routines ask students to slow down their thinking, to notice details of the artifacts and to raise questions, such as why is the Mexican flag red, green and white?

Students select from level-appropriate fiction and nonfiction books on Mexico for independent reading, then share their stories and insights and write reflections. Using the Performance Cycle, students identify meaningful phrases in a text and create tableaux to illustrate understanding of the text. In art class, they produce pieces that reflect Mexican artists' styles. The students' goal is to understand Mexico's diversity and richness through exploring Mexican folk art.

Broader Understanding

Grounded in the experience of community and appreciation of diversity, 3rd-grade students are prepared to address this essential question: How do people make community decisions and improvements that benefit the common good? After an introductory unit exploring the impact of individuals such as Malala Yousafzai, Jane Goodall and Ken Nedimyer, students pinpoint a need in their own community. Each class identifies organizations addressing that need and works with them to help achieve their goals. Through this collaboration, students experience what motivates people to make a difference and the avenues for doing so.

Similarly, students explore how local government works by meeting local leaders and watching as decisions are made. Building on understandings of how individuals serve their community, students explore state government

and meet their state representatives. By studying civics through personal connections, 3rd graders develop foundational knowledge in how organizations and governments work. Understanding the diversity of ways people make a difference empowers and inspires them to see how they, too, can act to improve their community.

Broadening these civic understandings, 4th and 5th graders

— who are developmentally attuned to issues of justice and fairness — study U.S. history through the lens of the evolution of civil and human rights. Their essential question is: What has enabled people in the U.S. to expand rights in order to work toward a more just and inclusive community?

One Community, One Nation offers inspiring and experiential case studies of people and organizations making a difference across American history. Through biographies on Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams and William Penn, 4th graders delve into the advancement of religious liberty in the American colonies while researching the diversity of religions within their own community. They study First Amendment rights to dissent as represented in the American Revolution and explore civil rights through the abolition of slavery and the life of Harriet Tubman.

In a profound unit on child labor, students examine Lewis Hine's photographs of children toiling in mills and mines in the early 20th century and learn how these photographs galvanized public concern. They then take and exhibit their own photos that reveal community concerns and the progress being made in addressing them.

Fifth graders undertake case studies on the experiences of immigrants at the turn of the 20th century, the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1965, and the expansion of rights for children and adults with disabilities in the last half century, focusing on the individuals and organizations that moved change forward.

Engagement as Goal

Through One Community, One Nation, students learn that the civic participation of individuals and organizations has been the indispensable moving force in the expansion of civil and human rights in the United States — and that challenges continue and work remains in order to sustain and enhance these rights.

As a result of their experience in community, culture, civil rights and civic participation, children realize the answer to the essential question posed in each grade is civic engagement. Consequently, they begin to feel inspired and empowered to make a difference in their own lives and in the life of their community, as well as becoming motivated to delve more deeply into social studies. ■

SHELDON BERMAN is superintendent of the Andover Public Schools in Andover, Mass. E-mail: sheldon.berman@andoverma.us

Additional Resource

One Community, One Nation, an elementary social studies curriculum framework, can be accessed at <https://sites.google.com/k12.andoverma.us/ocon/home>.

The framework remains in development by the Andover, Mass., Public Schools. Andover has invited other school districts to join in further developing the framework and curriculum in various ways, including partnering at the district leadership or teacher level or sharing resources to support the creation of instructional units.

Those who join the OCON project gain access to the resources already developed plus future resources.