Youth Civic Leadership Development
Evaluation of the Civic Spirit Student Delegates Program
June 2020

Section I: Background & Rationale

After the success of **Civic Spirit Day 2019** and the student delegation who presented to the Mayor's office in follow up to the student concerning, as well as feedback gathered by the educators of Civic Spirit's first cohort, Civic Spirit leadership felt that bringing together students across demographic differences was one of the most important opportunities that we could offer our school network. In addition, Civic Spirit educators frequently expressed that their greatest challenge was finding methods through classroom or club meetings to enable students to practice urgent civic skills. As such, during the second year of the pilot study, Civic Spirit introduced a new program called the **Student Delegates Program**.

Section 2: Development & Theme

The Director of Civic Spirit hired respected youth civic development leader, **Sanda Balaban**, who is Director of **YVote** and **Next Gen Politics**, to co-create and run the program. The objective was to create a program that would provide opportunities for the student delegates to gain competency in all three Civic Spirit pillars: **Belonging | Democratic Fluency | Civic Skills.** Given Civic Spirit's theme for the academic year on the 2020 U.S. Census, the Delegates Program focused on learning census-related concepts and practices, as well as building skills and knowledge to design and implement their own civic participation projects, gathering data and exploring key questions and issues that impact their local school community.

Section 3: Cohort Selection

Over 30 students from the 14 Civic Spirit schools applied online through an extensive application, and nine high school students from across six schools were selected.Civic Spirit encouraged students who were not selected as part of the Student Delegate cohort to join a "Civic Spirit Committee" to support the Student Delegates in their project. The Civic Spirit team reminded the non-selected students that sometimes being a civic leader is about being a supporter and team player. The idea to join as "committee members" was welcomed by 8-10 students who participated in all facets of their school's civic projects as a supportive member.

Student Delegates Composition

Juniors: 8
Seniors: 1
Freshman/Sophomores: 0

Female: 6
Males: 3

Jewish Students: 5
Catholic Students: 4

Section 4: Program Description

- **Launch Event: In-Person Day of Learning**

We brought the nine Delegates together for the first time on Sun, Nov 10 for a launch event and orientation focused on *The Historic, Civic, and Ethical Implications of Counting People* (Agenda here). Our objectives for the day were to:

- Provide clarity about expectations for CS Student Delegates
- Learn more about Delegates' aspirations for participation and how we can all support one another in advancing civic leadership
- Build bonds and establish initial sense of community
- Develop foundational civic knowledge and skills
- Begin to explore concepts and history related to the U.S. Census, participation, and belonging
- Strengthen important civic skills including close reading, critical thinking, and deep listening

These objectives were resoundingly achieved, and the Delegates left feeling a strong sense of community, purpose, and commitment that fueled them for the work ahead. The Delegates also co-constructed a set of Civic Spirit Community Agreements to

support them in creating and sustaining a safe and courageous space across the various differences and divides that could otherwise arise.

- **Human-Centered Design Process "How Might We" Questions**

In order to support Delegates in working to conduct a "census" at their school and to gather data and insight necessary to create more inclusive and equitable environments, we supported Delegates in designing and executing Civic Participation Projects. Like the Census, the goal of each Delegate's Civic Participation Projects was to gain a better sense of whether members of their respective school communities feel like they "count"—that they are included and engaged by the school community—and to design and implement a plan to try to improve "civic spirit" in their schools.

The process was predicated on a design thinking approach, through which each month Delegates engaged with a component of the research development process. Here is an overview of the Civic Participation Project and the steps entailed in it. Delegates started by identifying an issue of personal importance to them, and creating a clear rationale for why it matters to them and their school community, using this criteria to guide them. From this, they each developed a clear "How Might We?" (HMW) question to help them frame their inquiry in a positive and action-oriented way. Fuller description of the task is available here. Sample HMW questions include "How might we address and improve the respect that students have for people and their cultures?," "How can we create a stress-free yet academically challenging school environment?" and "How might we make student elections relevant and important for each student?"

Delegates shared their rationales and HMW questions with one another through our What'sApp group, deriving actionable feedback and inspiring one another to develop and deepen their respective exploration and analysis.

- **Follow-Up Zoom Meetings**

We conducted Zoom Calls on a bimonthly basis to continue to strengthen cross-school community and to provide additional skill building and support. In January, our group meeting focused on ways for Delegates to design and conduct surveys and interviews in their schools in order to gain deeper understanding of the issue and/or the population impacted quantitatively and qualitatively.

- **Survey Design & School Buy-In**

Throughout Jan and Feb, we focused on gathering data to more deeply inform their understanding of the issue--and to gain credibility with external stakeholders down the line. We talked about the value of both quantitative and qualitative data--that is, what

you can count and what you can see--and the complementarity between them for a project like this. We encouraged them to examine their data with an open mind, look for patterns, revisit their hypotheses, and formulate some initial strategies to address them.

We supported them in developing Research Plans using a Student Delegate Research Tracker we created. Through this, they had a scaffolded way to draft survey and interview questions along with an action plan for conducting them. They were required to get feedback from Project Consultant Sanda Balaban, Director of Education Tiphanie Shoemaker, and their respective Civic Spirit mentor in order to be credible and collaborative--and to ensure that issues that could be hot potatoes were handled sensitively.

In addition to addressing research strategies, we focused on ensuring equitable representation in response. This was in tandem with our reflection on the challenge of undercounting more vulnerable and historically disenfranchised people and populations in the Census, highlighting that it plays out in many contexts including within their school.

As such, we equipped the Delegates and their teams to proactively prepare for how to ensure that they surveyed and researched as representative of a cross sample as they could, engaging with guiding questions like:

- Who am I most likely to miss in my research (not naming names here, but describing subpopulations in your school that tend to be under-represented)?
- What can I do to try to ensure that I get participation and feedback from the most traditionally under-represented populations? (this includes thinking about the use of incentives)
- How many surveys, representing how many different populations within your school, will you ideally need to collect in order for your sample to be statistically significant?

- **Civic Field Trip**

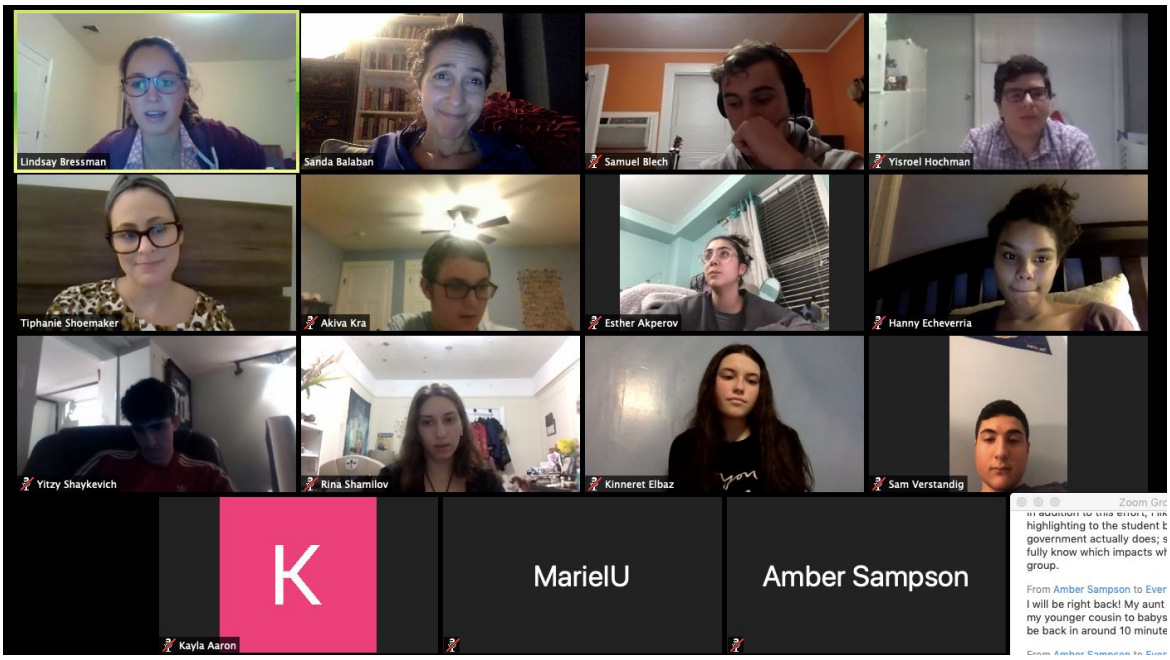
We kicked off the month of March with a field trip to the **Museum of the City of New York** for the engaging and interactive Who We Are: Visualizing NYC by the Numbers exhibit, again amplifying our themes around the Census. The agenda for the expedition and notes from the discussions before and after going through it are available here. The afternoon was a huge success, deepening Delegates' understanding of the depth and dynamism of Census data, enabling them to share progress and get feedback on their projects with and from one another, and strengthening and solidifying bonds across the

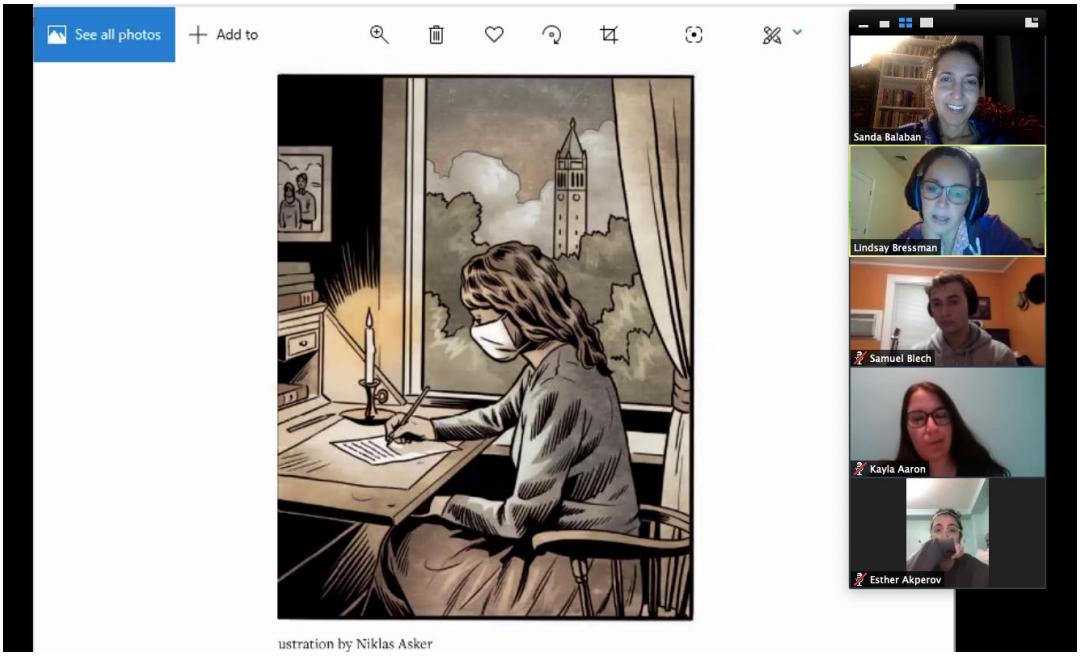
cohort. We also distributed an array of incentives for them (lollipops, stickers, a gift card as a raffle prize) to encourage survey and interview participation.

civicspirit
Museum of the City of New York
we believe
everyone counts.

YOU ARE HERE

The field trip was so successful that we decided to follow it up with another one, which was initially intended to be in person and toggled to be via Zoom, exploring art from the 1918 pandemic and making connections to our Civic Spirit themes around the Census, inclusion, participation, and belonging (agenda here.)





- **Survey Implementation**

We were at the beginning of the survey implementation process when COVID-19 hit and schools closed. This required some reorientation of strategy for inclusion and response rate. One of the school teams had already implemented their survey, receiving several hundred responses, whereas the other teams had to reorient to online administration, which required more layers of administrative approval, slowing down their processes. Nonetheless, Delegates remained committed to the work and we provided them with advice on how they could make adjustments here. All of them continued to make strides throughout the spring, demonstrating persistence and resilience and garnering support from an impressive number of peers, which they shared with fellow Delegates during our April Zoom session.

- **Data Analysis / Findings**

Survey design and data analysis are often graduate level work, yet our Delegates were intrepid in taking it on, compelled by the drive to understand how the issues were playing out in their communities. For example, the team from Central had a burning desire to understand Sephardic representation within their schools, and wanted to look at correlations between students from different backgrounds and financial aid, honor roll, sports and clubs. They learned how to use Pivot Tables and Count If functions within Excel in order to do so, and this level of analysis led to a key finding that went

AGAINST their hypothesis: that Sephardic students DON'T seem to consider themselves second class citizens and there isn't a clear data pattern that indicates otherwise.

The Frisch team also immersed themselves deeply in data analysis in conducting their study into stress and mental health. They made some astounding findings through their surveys, discovering that more than 25% of the 180 respondents to their survey expressed having been diagnosed with mental health conditions, and then drilling into the implications of that in order to brainstorm ideas and proposals to address the stressors students are dealing with. The survey was conducted BEFORE the pandemic, and thus the challenges are and will be even more serious on the other side of it. We were very impressed by the students' constructive and creative thinking in ideating about responses to the issues they investigated, and by the civic-mindedness they demonstrated in wanting to tackle the challenges proactively.

- **Presentation / Celebration of Learning**

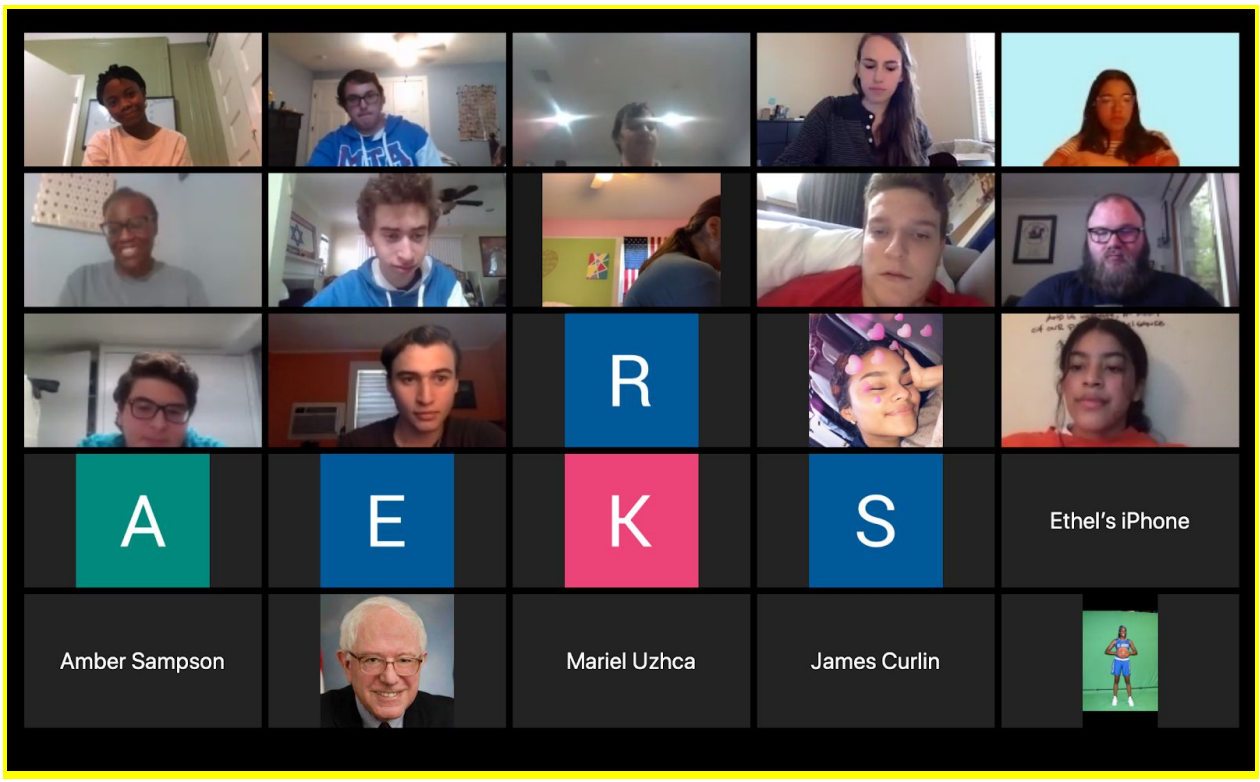
Delegates had the opportunity to share one-minute overviews of their Civic Participation Projects and findings with a broad array of CS students from across the network as part of the culminating afternoon of Civic Spirit @ Home day. The work was well-received by fellow students, inspiring them to think more deeply about their school communities.

These one-minute overviews provided the nucleus for Delegates to create five minute presentations to share with a diverse panel of civic leaders as part of a public Celebration of Learning on June 18. Each delegate addressed the following:

- Introductions: Who you are (names/school), what did you address, and why
- Research methods: Brief description of how you went about conducting your project
- Fostering Participation: What strategies did you use to foster participation and how well did they work? What was successful and what barriers did you face?
- Key findings: Share one or two insights--about process or findings--that you think are of particular interest
- Reflections: what was the process like for you? What did you learn and/or how did you grow? What next--what do you feel are the implications of your findings and/or what open questions are on your mind?

Following each presentation, the Delegate team addressed questions from the panelists for an additional 10 minutes, with an emphasis on implications and ways to extend and amplify their work. All five teams of fellows made strong presentations, available here:

Central, *Bishop*, *MTA*, *St Jean*, *Frisch* The assembled civic leaders, alongside our Civic Spirit mentor teachers, were very impressed and inspired by the Delegates thoughtful inquiry and analysis, and the resonance of their work beyond their specific school communities. A recording of the powerful afternoon is available here.



Section 5: Impact

Overall, the Student Delegates felt the program was impactful and worthwhile. Feedback from the students was gathered in a post-program survey designed to assess increased civic knowledge, skills, confidence, and sense of responsibility.

Below are some of the questions and answers included in the survey.

What was it like working with students of other faiths and cultural backgrounds? What was positive? What were the challenges?

- I found working with students of other faiths and cultural backgrounds to be a remarkable and engaging experience. I don't really think there were any challenges for me personally, and it was just a very positive experience. I wish we could have met more in person to make real bonds with all of these amazing people. It was really a unique experience that made me feel more in touch with my own thoughts and beliefs, which is something I really value especially now with all the difficult and terrible things going on.

- It was amazing! I truly enjoyed it and don't think there were any negatives.
- I had fun! And I learned so much!
- It was such a positive experience, I wish I could do it again. No Challenges!
- It was phenomenal; I had the chance to learn with/ from such an incredibly diverse group-- both educators and students alike. At first I thought that it would be hard for us to communicate and understand each other, especially since I've led a pretty cloistered life and mostly just associated myself with my community, but I soon realized (after exchanging ideas and thoughts) that we were so similar and cared about many of the same causes. We all wanted to create safe platforms for people in our schools, for people we felt were underrepresented. With patience, curiosity, and the help of our mentors, we were able to create a project we felt would resonate with our school community at large.
- I feel that it was a positive experience. The only setback was the initial awkwardness which arrives whenever a group of strangers meet regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

What is one new tool you gained from this program which will help you talk with people with whom you disagree?

- One new tool I gained from this program which will help me talk with people who I disagree with is when receiving a question from someone that might be a little forceful or lined with anger, to first thank them for the question and accept it in a pleasant manner because a disagreement doesn't have to be a yelling match.
- Sometimes you actually do agree, but you're each defining the topic you're debating in different ways.
- More information to talk about these issues confidently
- I can’t give my opinion in a biased approach and if people disagree I learn to respectfully accept that.
- Always listen. Be patient, be respectful, and go into a conversation willing to learn more, not necessarily shut down diverging opinions. It is important to always keep an open mind and hear what others have to say.
- Patience in the face of ignorance.

Do you feel your participation in the Delegates Program will impact your behavior moving forward in high school and college? How?

- I think my participation in the Delegates Program will definitely impact my behavior moving forward in high school and college because I don't feel as alone or crazy as I used to in wanting to be someone who advocates for change. The program has really made me feel like despite the sheltering nature I've grown up in, it's ok and even encouraged for me to be an advocate of others, for others, and with others who are not necessarily people I'm "used to." This program made me feel that it's okay to be accepting even though I've grown up in a way that's a little more narrow-minded, and I felt like something was wrong with me for that, so I really want to thank you all for accepting me into this program because it's made me feel less wrong, and a little more right.
- I think it may lead me to wonder why people are doing certain things, but only time will tell.
- Yes, its opened my eye to many more cultures and types of people
- Most definitely! It makes me want to be open about my opinion and address issues with evidence like visual data.
- Absolutely; coming from a close-knit Jewish community was lovely but inhibited me from making meaningful connections with other people. Now that I have worked alongside others, I believe I have become more open-minded and understanding of different cultures and religions.
- Yes, I feel after the program that I am more inclined to hear other people and groups' problems and am now more equipped to make positive change.

In what way do you feel you grew as a result of this program? Be specific!

- I feel that I've grown in my knowledge of government and of what I used to deem impossible, as a result of this program. Before this program, I didn't really think that it mattered if I cared about this cause or if I had feelings about this issue, but being in this program I truly feel like not only is it okay that I have thoughts and

feelings on issues important to me, but that I should have my own opinions. This might not be such a groundbreaking revelation to some people, but for me, I've grown up in a very guarded way that doesn't allow me to fully express myself at times, and so being in this program I've learned that it's not only okay that I want to be apart of society in a meaningful way, but it's encouraged. I really want to thank you guys for that encouragement and creating such an accepting environment for young adults to get together under guidance that isn't judgmental in the least. It's hard not to have grown as a result of this program because it's just such a positive atmosphere, and I hold onto it now when things are difficult.

- I think I learnt a lot about the survey and got to hear a lot about other very interesting surveys.
- I became more aware and mature when speaking about issues that might get some people emotional
- I knew how to conduct questions and learned new things that I didn't know before.
- I was able to enhance my writing and research skills. I was able to speak persuasively with students and teachers to convince them to join our initiative. I also gained proficiency in Google Forms, Slides, and Sheets.
- I feel that I have improved in my ability to delegate and work with others towards a common goal.

Section 6: Lessons Learned

We designed the Student Delegates program to be a learning experience for all involved and indeed it was. Here are some of our key takeaways:

- **Collaboration across differences and divides is powerful and enhances learning**

One of our hypotheses in bringing youth together across different religions, cultures, and kinds of schools was that it would expand their frames of reference and deepen their insight and understanding of our diverse world. This was borne out. The Community Agreements we co-constructed at the outset helped foster a culture of collaboration and cross-pollination, in which Delegates helped one another shape and strengthen their respective lines of inquiry and analysis. We were inspired to see how organically they built off of one another's ideas and the degree to which their

interchanges informed and enriched one another's Participation Projects across their different school settings.

- **Engaging youth in an in-depth process of inquiry and analysis, and providing them with the tools to understand their communities and themselves more deeply, equips them to be stronger citizens and leaders**

None of the delegates had engaged in work like this before and it was very eye opening and empowering. They all had thoughts and feelings about their schools that were based solely on their own lived experiences. Broadening their lenses, both by learning about other Delegates' school communities and by engaging in a structured research project focused on their own, helped them appreciate a broader range of perspectives than they ever had before, and enabled them to "see" things in their respective communities they never would have otherwise. Furthermore, it equipped them with advanced skills in conducting sophisticated independent and collaborative work that will serve them well in college.

- **Cross-school youth civic connections build civic resilience and individual and collective empowerment**

We are living during a particularly fraught time in American history, in which many young people feel very turned off by American government. This can render young people who have opted to lean in to try to bolster civil society through their engagement in it feeling isolated and at odds with their peers. Our delegates established a strong kinship with one another that buoyed them up during what could have been a darker time. We could see the degree to which they were fortified by interacting and building bonds with other young people with a strong civic mindset, and we hope they will remain a powerful network for each other for years to come.

- **In-person engagement and connection matters--and online interaction can be a valuable substitute**

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic during which young people have been stuck at home, the value of in-person engagement has of course become abundantly clear. The delegates bonded in a deep way at our initial Orientation and our March field trip, as well as on the monthly Zoom Calls and through our What's App community. There was an electric energy as they recognized the resonance of their "civic spirit" across students with backgrounds different than themselves. Having those in-person anchors lay a good foundation that was strengthened through our monthly Zoom meetings. Our online meetings had very high attendance throughout the pandemic despite the multiple competing pressures young people were dealing with adjusting to remote learning. Further, the Delegates and Committee Members were very resilient in dealing with the

disappointment of the in-person Civic Spirit Day they would have been a major presence in being replaced by an online series of Civic Spirit@Home events, in which they participated enthusiastically. The culminating Celebration of Learning, and the opportunity it afforded to share their work and get authentic feedback from a range of civic leaders, also provided an important capstone that was almost as satisfying as an in-person gathering would have been.

Youth are our future leaders, and they see possibilities where others see challenges

During the unprecedented challenges of the last few months, we were consistently elevated and inspired by the Delegates and Committee Members--first by their ambition in taking on complex questions like, “How might we celebrate the diversity of our school community and ensure that people of all cultural backgrounds are included and honored?” and then by their commitment and positivity in staying focused on this work and connected to each other through the pandemic, despite articulating how challenging remote learning was for them in various ways. This provided a powerful reminder that young people have the potential to see and create paths through some of the endemic social issues of our time WHEN equipped with the skills, knowledge, and support network through which to do so.

We are so grateful for your support in bringing this pilot to fruition.

Leadership
Hopeful
Meaningful
Connected
Pressure
Empowered
Proud
Patriotic
Powerful
Responsible
Creative
Nervous
Helpful
Unified
Encompassing
Hopeful
Mature
Pressure
Responsible
Leader
Scared
Useful
Bold
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Tikun Olam
Nervous
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