May 2023 Newsletter

Executive Director Message

Dear Friends,

The results from the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics show that only 25% of American students have a working knowledge of civics and how the government works. While these recent results certainly affirm the need for more attention to civic education, a closer look at the test itself reveals that this national “report card” of eighth graders may be limited in its scope.

**NAEP sample questions** focus almost solely on factual knowledge. The topics of government and citizenship represent the foundation of democratic fluency, yet there is more to civic education than that. In addition to a facility with facts, what we call “Comprehensive Civic Education” also engages our hearts and hands. It’s not enough to know how the government works, we also have obligations to our democracy and to one another. Civic skills and civic belonging may be more challenging to measure on this type of exam, but their cultivation is vital to the future of our country.

Bringing students and schools together across faith communities to develop connections and work side by side creates a mindset of collaboration. That is why our lay and professional team is so excited about Civic Spirit Day.

Last week, for the first time since before the pandemic, we held Civic Spirit Day for middle school students. Over 90 students from Luria
Academy of Brooklyn, De La Salle Academy, Ramaz and Ezra Academy attended the experience hosted by Luria. Civic Spirit Director of Student Experiences, Hillary Gardenswartz, crafted a program with the topic “Civic Spaces, Empowered Voices: Designing Intentional Public Places for Teens.” This experience afforded students the opportunity to explore a shared civic challenge and collaborate across differences.

It was inspiring to witness how participants from different schools, faith, and backgrounds came together to express ideas, engage in respectful dialogue, and apply their civic knowledge to identify solutions to a civic challenge. I will always cherish the memory not just of students working together, but also watching them talking and joking with one another. In a short amount of time, students went from strangers to friends, a partner in creating a stronger society for all of us.

Civic Spirit’s experiential educational offerings are intended to reinforce formal classroom learning. At the same time, these experiences are intended to create bonds and opportunities highlighting the connections between us and what we can accomplish for our democracy when we work together.

Looking Forward,
Rabbi Charles E. Savenor

If you would like to support our efforts, consider making a gift.

Donate Today
Staff Transition

Nina Taub, our Director of Education, will leave Civic Spirit in June, to return to the classroom. She will teach world history and coordinate Jewish history integration at Ma’ayanot High School. We are grateful for the dedication, expertise, and enthusiasm that Nina brought to this position and to Civic Spirit. Her teaching, writing, and coaching helped Civic Spirit reach new heights.

Looking ahead, we are pleased to announce that Audi Hecht will join our Civici Spirit team as the Director of Education and Innovation. Ms. Hecht currently directs and teaches the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics program for the Tikvah Fund at the Frisch School. Previously she served as Dean of Academics at Torah Academy of Bergen County in Teaneck, NJ, and as Chairperson of the History department at Yeshiva University High School for Girls (Central) in NYC, where she taught courses in history and political science and played a critical role in professional development, academic innovation, curriculum design, and in directing civics and experiential education initiatives. Prior to her time at Central, Audi Hecht was an adjunct instructor of political science at the College of New Rochelle. She holds a BA and MA in Political Science from Brooklyn College and is a doctoral candidate at the Azrieli School of Education, researching the impact of school leadership on institutional health and culture.

We are excited to welcome Audi Hecht to the Civic Spirit team beginning on July 5.
Upcoming Events

Join us for the last two "We the Educators" Sessions of the School Year

- Four Freedoms, Four Lenses; Constructing Civically Engaged Arguments - May 23rd
- Monarchs vs. Presidents: A European Insight into American Democracy and Leadership - June 7th

These sessions will bring inspiring perspectives and practical resources for you to bring to your classrooms and communities. Educators who participate in at least three sessions over the course of the year will receive a $100 Amazon gift card.

Inspired by The Weitzman National Museum of American History's current exhibition, The Future Will Follow The Past exhibition and their OpenBook curriculum, we will take a fresh look at Rockwell's Four Freedoms, juxtaposing his artwork with others and asking the question: how do we interpret these freedoms and who has access to
them today? Using related primary sources, teachers will then workshop a framework for students to construct civically engaged arguments. This is the final session in our four-part series exploring FDR’s Four Freedoms.

**Tuesday, May 23rd**  
7:30pm ET / 4:30pm PT

**Register Here**

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**We the Educators**

**Monarchs vs. Presidents: A European Insight into American Democracy and Leadership**

Clive Lawton  
Commonwealth Jewish Council

Tuesday, June 7th  
7:00pm ET / 4:00pm PT

**Register Online for Zoom Link**

civicspirit.org/we-the-educators/

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Ever wondered if the US Presidency is truly an upgrade from a constitutional monarchy? As a loyal subject of King Charles in England, Clive Lawton guides us through the significance of monarchy and democracy in contemporary society and offers a European perspective on America's strengths and challenges today. Join us for a royally informative discussion, as we hop "across the pond" to explore modern democracy. This is the second session of a two-part series with Clive. The series is co-sponsored by the Community Scholars Program (CSP).
To view part one of Clive's sessions and recordings of our We the Educators exploring FDR’s Four Freedoms series, we invite you to visit our Vimeo page here.

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**Student Experiences**

**Civic Spirit Day**

On Thursday, May 11th, over 80 6th and 7th grade-students from Luria Academy, De La Salle Academy, Ezra Academy and The Ramaz School gathered together for our first-ever Middle School Civic Spirit Day! This was the first time in four years that we were able to gather in-person for an event like this, and the energy and enthusiasm throughout the day was palpable.

Students explored the day’s theme, “Civic Spaces, Empowered Voices: Designing Intentional Public Places for Teens,” through group discussion and projects, understanding what it means for teens to gather and utilize public space in today’s world. By the end of the day’s activities, students presented 20 different models of their ideal spaces in their communities.
More than problem solving about a civic challenge that impacts teens’ lives, Civic Spirit Day is about building connections with and between others. Students had the opportunity to meet and work with people from schools they otherwise would likely not cross paths with during their school experience. Providing the time and space for students to cultivate learning opportunities and leadership skills together is what Civic Spirit Day is all about.

We are looking forward to hearing how these schools and students continue this conversation within their own community. And we are already excited for next year!

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**Student Delegate Program**

This year, 19 Student Delegates in high schools around the country have been exploring the question “What does it mean to be a citizen in the digital age?” in our Student Delegate Program. During our bi-monthly meetings, we have examined how social media shapes the way we communicate, how we understand information, and the type of positive messages we want to put out around the issues and policies about which we feel most passionate.

We look forward to celebrating our Student Delegates and the work they did on Tuesday, May 16th as we conclude our program for the year. We will share more in next month’s newsletter.

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**Education**
Educators in Civic Spirit’s **Cohort Fellowship** gathered together five times this year to learn and discuss new strategies for strengthening civics education in their classrooms. Last month, we held our final 2022-23 Cohort Learning Gathering with the **National Constitution Center**. Kerry Saunter, Chief Learning Officer at the Center, led us through a deep dive into the Educating for Democracy Roadmap which provides a framework for inculcating civic habits and dispositions in the classroom through thematic lessons and design challenges. Kerry also shared the Constitution Center’s framework for teaching students to engage in reflection and dialogue around key Constitutional debates in American society. Teachers were then guided by Tom Donnally, Chief Content Officer at the Constitution Center, to use the recent Supreme Court case, Kennedy v. Bremerton, to explore first amendment issues around public prayer. This exploration provided teachers with methodology that will allow students to use constitutional briefs to ask and answer their own constitutional questions. This session, along with the four other learning gatherings, provided educators in our Cohort a chance to collaborate together and explore new strategies for civic engagement in their classroom.

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**Educators Cohort Closing Gathering**
Join us on May 30th from 7:30-8:30pm ET on Zoom to celebrate and learn from the 18 graduating fellows of the 2023-24 Educators Cohort. Fellows will present their Civic Spirit projects in small groups. Prepare to be inspired and come away with ideas for bringing civic education opportunities to your school or community.

Please [RSVP here](#) by May 20th.

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**Memorial Day Resource**

This year at Civic Spirit, we feature resources connected to civic holidays. These texts provide students with a richer understanding of
the civic holidays that bind us together as Americans. This month we feature sources that discuss the origin of Memorial Day and its emergence after the Civil War. These sources provide a rich opportunity to discuss the ways in which we can unite after strife and tragedy.

Check Out Our Memorial Day Resource Here

Civic Spirit School Visits

- Executive Director Rabbi Charlie Savenor and Director of Student Experiences Hillary Gardenswartz recently met with the students and faculty at St. Benedict’s Preparatory School in Newark, New Jersey. St. Benedict's Prep was featured in a segment on 60 Minutes titled The Resurrection of St. Benedict's Prep where the school's exemplary programs and success with urban education were showcased. Rabbi Savenor and Ms. Gardenswartz attended the morning Convocation where Rabbi Savenor was invited to speak to the school. The Civic Spirit team also had the opportunity to meet with Head of School, Father Edwin Leahy.
Educators Cohort alum, Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz, was also visited by the Civic Spirit team at SAR Academy in the Bronx, NY. Rabbi Charlie Savenor joined Dr. Schwartz’s AP Government Class as they explored cases before the Supreme Court.

In April, Rabbi Savenor taught a session at CUNY’s “Political Polarization and Democracy’s Future” seminar. This class is coordinated by Maury Harris and Jerry Webman.

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**“Hear ye, hear ye!” Announcements**

**Civic Spirit's acceptance to the DEEP Consortium** - We are honored to announce that Civic Spirit has been accepted to the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge's DEEP Consortium. Our Director of Programs, Yael Steiner, will be representing Civic Spirit and joining a cohort comprised of organizations dedicated to providing professional development to educators working in Jewish Day Schools.

**Educators Cohort members join The KIVUNIM Fellowship for High School Teachers** - Educators Cohort members join The KIVUNIM Fellowship for High School Teachers - Civic Spirit educators, Petrus Fortune and Beverley Madar of Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School, David Lakin, Melinda Goodwin, and Dr. Rachel Rothstein of The Weber School, and Eileen Postler of Xaverian, are taking part in The KIVUNIM Fellowship this summer. High school teachers joining the program will have the opportunity to expand their historical and
contemporary understanding of race and religion during an intensive study mission to Morocco. Civic Spirit is proud to partner with KIVUNIM to enable our Educator Cohort alums to continue their professional development. We can't wait to hear about their experiences and create a session for them to share their learning with the Civic Spirit community.

Executive Director, Rabbi Charlie Savenor, attends Interfaith Iftar at Turkish consulate - Civic Spirit's Executive Director joined the Turkevi Center in an Interfaith Iftar dinner, sharing with the Muslim community as they observed the conclusion of Ramadan last month.

Remembering Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People' - We are saddened by the passing of Rabbi Harold S. Kushner last month. To read more on his legacy and contributions to civic society and civil discourse, we invite you to read the article here.

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