

EDUCATORS COHORT

Reflections

A look into the classroom projects and reflections from our cohort of educators who utilized Civic Spirit's resources, content, tools, and pedagogies to inspire and promote civic education.



BISHOP LOUGHLIN MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL

BEVERLEY MADAR Theology Teacher



I love teaching...period. Seeing students engaged in a discussion that peaks their curiosity, encouraging their ideas and experiencing their excitement as they engage in the drama of discussions is awe-inspiring and amazing to see. There is a great sense of accomplishment when it happens. It can also feel like

a fantasy, as too often this is not the typical classroom experience. Student apathy, disinterest in the subject matter, social media distractions all lead to the crisis we seem to have in our classrooms today. Sometimes, I feel that I am the only one excited to discuss the subject matter as students tend to zone out with their devices. In truth, there are other notable reasons why we are losing ground in fostering student interest in our classrooms. Student engagement is not solely the teachers' responsibility but the village within which they, the students are housed. That I believe is the bottom line and yes,...it is my story.

Civic and religious duty do not always seem to work together... in practice. Classroom discussions tend to leave students wary as their impressions and experiences of the two can disrupt their belief of what truth is or disrupt what they learned in the classroom. To trump this further are their disillusionment when faced with disparities that challenges what their hearts tell them, what faith ask of them and what duty demands of them. They questions, "How can my teacher say to love, trust and believe in the possibility of change when the world does not allow me to have a say."



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Civic Spirit's document titled *Shared Aims* suggests that students who graduate possess a number of civic spirit skills. I chose one skill from two sections as a way of nurturing my students' civic learning and engagement. One of the sections was Civic belonging skill #1 which states: Define what it means to belong which explains, "...know intellectually and affectively how various individuals and groups in America have or have not experienced belonging, and can speak about the importance of belonging for building a society together." The other section Civic Skills skill #2 Engage in Discourse which states "...are able to form and express thoughtful opinions on controversial topics while also respectfully engaging with others whose opinions may differ." These I felt were ideal to begin student discovery into what it means to have a civic spirit.

As Adviser to our school's National Honor Society, with five newly elected officers responsible for managing eighty-nine student members, I invited Civic Spirit's Nina Taub to engage the group in bonding exercises. They needed the tools to lead the membership in a dynamic way that fostered a sense of belonging for and from their members and to do so their communication skills needed to generate an appreciation of thoughtful opinions, even when issues were difficult yet demanding. There was much they had to do: letter writing, interviews, organizing an induction ceremony, speeches and four additional events to plan meant they had to learn the rudiments of creating and engaging their peers on a number of levels.

Throughout the year our Officer meetings were conducted through the lens of a group discussion I learned at our summer workshop led by Tiphonie Shoemaker, Civic Spirit's Director of Pedagogy, in a training developed by Essential Partners. The idea was to encourage students to quiet their thoughts and focus on what others were sharing. Some students were good at listening, others found it challenging as they wanted to capture, in the moment, what was being said so there were constant interruptions and little patience with the process. I further curated the design to identify questions that were simpler to express thoughtful opinions and improve engagement with others whose opinions were different. Over time they flourished and grew into an amazing and bonded team of leaders that questioned situations in a way that led to resolutions that they all could get on board with. Meetings were efficiently run and follow through was on point. One example: The secretary is responsible for minutes but these officers bonded so well that they understood that if one of them was absent for a meeting, event, running late, etc. one of them had to take up the gauntlet and complete the task. Civic Spirit at its best.



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Here is what I discovered...although this journey was initiated to engage students in learning about what it means to have a civic spirit they were not the only ones to benefit from the process. The membership certainly experienced good leadership but the real winner was their teacher. I discovered that when this group came together in September that I felt lost, as I knew they needed a lot of guidance...and they did. Nine months later as I look at each one of the officers, I see them. In some instances, although the change I wanted to see was different however, what I did see was the effort that they made to get there. I saw the genuine intent to care for the membership, the civic spirit of belonging that they fostered in this member. At the same time the frustrations they shared when they could not resolve a difficult situation was a given. I learned to allow them to fail at tasks because not doing so did not allow them to grow but we had a unique relationship that was forged over these last months...a sense of belonging and growth to strive to be better communicators of ideas and a willingness to always engage with thoughtful opinions.



Bishop Loughlin Honors Society officers at a Civic Spirit led workshop exploring deep listening and questions of curiosity about each other's identities.