MILWAUKEE JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

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Throughout the course of the year, the Milwaukee Jewish Day School (MJDS) team has been working on expanding and strengthening our Social Studies curriculum for fifth through eighth grade classes. Using the techniques and guidance from Civic Spirit, we have expanded our usage and incorporation of civic values and dispositions to shape the development of a new scope and sequence. Motivated by these intentionalities, we have begun to implement civic practices within the classroom to promote authentic student engagement in civic thinking and more broadly, to focus on the education being provided to our future citizens and leaders.

MJDS strives to be a place “where academic excellence and Jewish values prepare children for a lifetime of success, leadership and engagement with the world.” This mission, our rally cry: “Moving From Me To We”, and our three core values of wonder, empathy, and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) drive us to create educational experiences for our students that go beyond

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simply learning content. Instead, we work hard to engage students in learning experiences that offer voice and choice and help them develop skills necessary to understand themselves, their place in the world, and their potential for influencing positive change. Our work with Civic Spirit has helped us to begin to create a cohesive and meaningful fifth through eighth grade Social Studies curriculum that fosters development of these values through civic belonging, democratic fluency, and civic skills encouraging students to feel connected to community, ask questions, understand foundational knowledge, value differing perspectives, collaborate, engage in discourse, and serve as ambassadors of their community. These values guided our planning, as we intentionally considered --How an experience helps students understand themselves and their sense of belonging? What knowledge students are gaining that will help them be informed citizens? And, what skills each experience targets and helps students develop and practice?

In implementing civic practices within the Social Studies classroom, we found that developing strong essential questions was key to creating a foundation for broader thinking. By utilizing complex questions as a launching point for discovery, students were forced to begin considering the effect and results of historical events within their lives today. The first example of this kind of learning occurred in an eighth grade unit around founding documents where students were considering the essential questions of: 'What are the foundations of American democracy?' and 'Has America always aligned with its founding principles?' As a way to digest the big ideas of the Constitution and understand the considerations made by the founding fathers, eighth graders participated in Constitutional debates where they researched and argued about concepts like Federalism, Popular Sovereignty, and Separation of Power. Throughout these debates, students were finding evidence of perspectives from today's current events and arguments and applying them to topics that Constitutional writers were consistently debating. Students were able to evaluate their own opinions on divisive issues without connection to partisan leanings or outside persuasions. Eighth graders were naturally cultivating a democratic fluency in which they prioritized the understanding of democracy as well as comprehension of historically significant texts.

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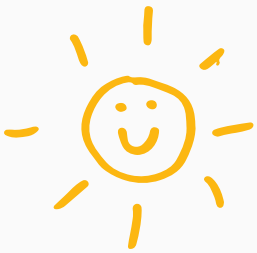
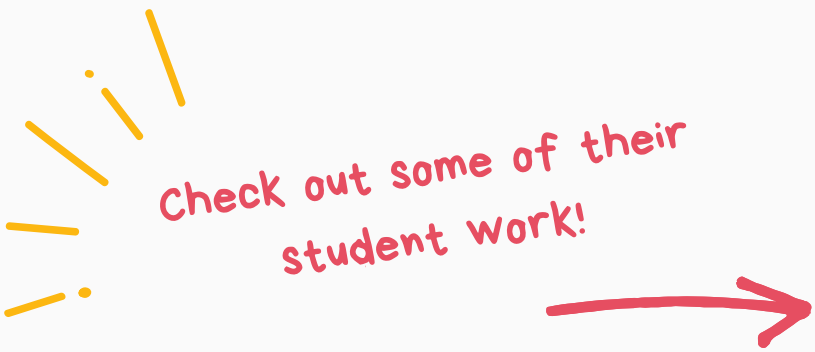
The second instance of intentional civic focus was within the seventh grade class where students were considering the essential questions of: 'What does an inclusive community look like?' and 'How is an inclusive community achieved?' These specific questions directly correlate to the civic value of belonging and were addressed in Immigration and Civil Rights units where seventh graders tackled what it means to belong, barriers to belonging, and translating belonging into action. After learning about the foundations of Immigration, students entrenched themselves in the learning process creating a final gallery walk, compiled of *Immigrant Stories Interviews* that they had written and compiled. Students interviewed a family or community member, who immigrated to the United States, about their experiences and made connections amongst stories. During the Civil Rights unit, students wrote a trio of film reviews related to the historical accuracy and depiction of movements within three Civil Rights movies. Additionally, seventh grade students read the graphic novel, *March* by John Lewis and analyzed Lewis' experiences in the Civil Rights movement within a peer book club. Their culminating project was the creation of a mind map using symbolism and interpretation of the text within their team to answer the essential questions and make connections related to belonging and inclusive communities.

It was the Civic Spirit dispositions, values, and practices that centered our focus around belonging and civic responsibility for students. Ultimately, these frameworks drove our cultivation of experiences where the student was at the center of the discovery process and was thoroughly engaged in developing civic skills that help them to become informed, productive, passionate citizens who are able to consider complex social climates. As we continue to expand this project and begin to focus on Social Studies learning for grades first through sixth, these practices and ideas will be invaluable in centering our approach and in making consistent connections for learners.





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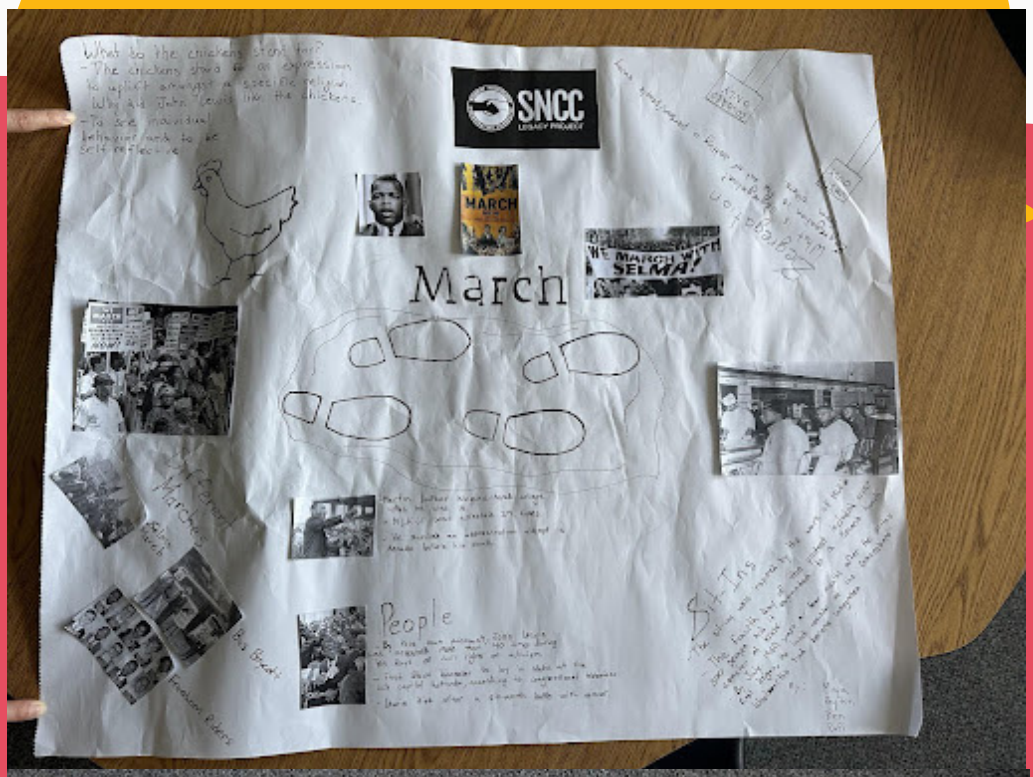

Mind Map Learning

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