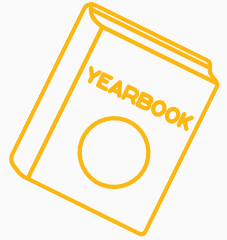


TEMPLE EMANUEL OF NEWTON



TAMAR GAFFIN-CAHN Youth Advisor



My role as an educator for the 2022-2023 Educator Fellowship was unique compared to my peers. I am an informal educator spending my weekends supporting the Youth Department at my local synagogue, giving me a different opportunity to bring civic education to students.

Starting the course in January and with the support of the religious school leadership, I taught an action civics course to a group of three energetic 8th graders

on Sunday mornings. We focused our time on understanding why a problem exists, who makes decisions, determining possible solutions, and deepening critical thinking skills, which are transferable into any space.

At first, the program was supposed to be an elective, additional course for students, and another opportunity to engage young people in the youth department. However, the synagogue (like many around the country) struggles to engage teens and keep them in the community consistently. One symptom of this challenge is the disengagement of students within the religious school; therefore, we pivoted the structure of the course to make it mandatory for the 8th-grade class. Part of our mission was to create a hands-on, action-oriented, and student-driven course to keep students engaged and recognize how civic education connected to their Jewish identity and transition into Jewish adulthood. Attendance percentages were high, one indicator of an engaging course.

The course started in January, sessions are once a week on Sundays for one hour. Despite a few canceled sessions because of school-wide events, we were able to dive deep into learning one of the many phases of action civics: understanding why and how different challenges and problems the students experience. Thanks to the curriculum provided by Generation Citizen, we identified groups and communities and the challenges and successes of those groups and communities. After we



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laid the foundation of where and how we show up, we shifted to the challenges of these groups and communities and focused on the root causes.

One of the most successful lessons from the course was a two-session activity focusing on the root cause of any given issue. Not only was this helpful for students to learn why problems exist, but also the many reasons a problem exists. One example the students proposed was around a student's back pain. At first, we identified that it was because her backpack was too heavy. Why is her bag too heavy? Because teachers assign a lot of homework that requires paper, binders with class notes, and textbooks. This brings us to discuss homework, how students learn, and homework management skills. I asked another question: Why does she have to carry her backpack? Because she lives too close to the school to take the bus. This brings us to discuss school bus routes, relationships with parents and their ability to drive the student to school or not, public transit accessibility in the suburbs, or even school funding for more buses. Students began understanding the nuanced and complicated systems of how and why problems exist.

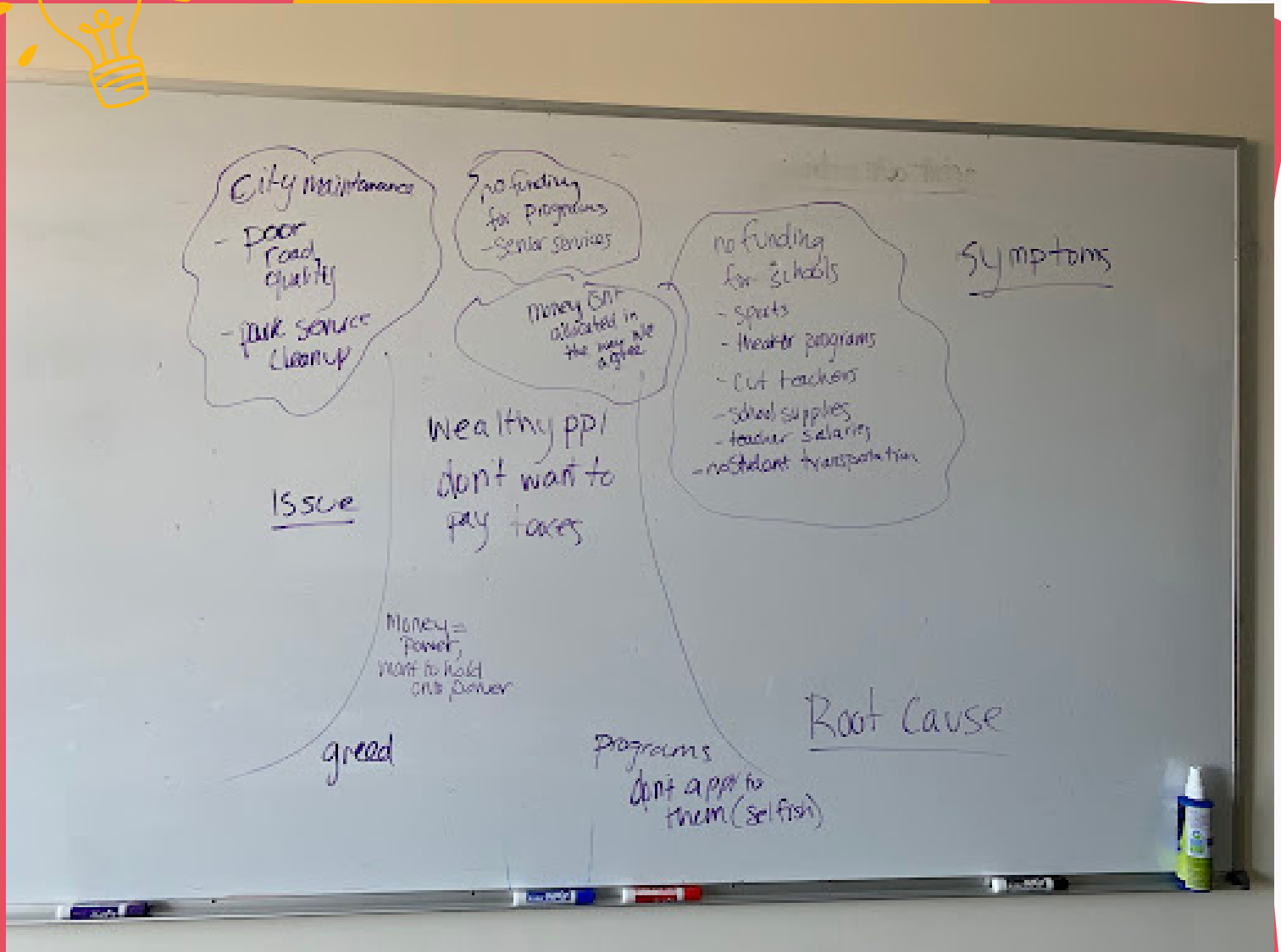
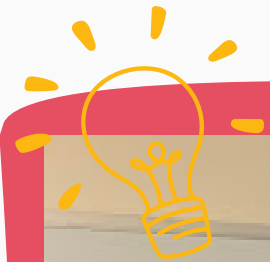
Two of my biggest takeaways from the fellowship experience were how to teach critical thinking and understanding multiple perspectives on one topic. Although we have yet to do deep dives into one challenge, the lessons have expanded their knowledge on thinking critically about why problems exist and how to see the same situation from different angles. With these skills, students can apply their abilities to new situations and find specific solutions to problems.



Check out some of their
classroom activities!



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Root Cause activity started with an issue students experienced. We discussed the symptoms and learned about the root cause of that issue.

