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As a new teacher at Ezra Academy in Woodbridge, CT, I brought into the academic year over a decade of teaching, and merged it with what I observed was already in place with regard to student involvement and school culture. Student Life is my favorite out-of-classroom program to spearhead, alongside coaching boys basketball, and it was clear early on that there was a healthy tradition of student participation at Ezra, yet there was no codified program nor any benchmarks to guide student involvement as we started the 2023-24 year.

I am an Upper School (grades 5-8) history teacher of secular studies/American history, and the lessons of Civic Spirit as well as other external and internal pedagogical frameworks helped me aim in the proper direction. As a new student government took shape late in the fall, with 8th-grade co-presidents and other officers elected in a rather ad-hoc manner between grades 3 and 8 after several fall starts, it became clear that there was a thirst by the students themselves, the new student leadership, and myself to create a lasting, more defined student institution that would outlive any child's tenure at Ezra and be a legacy from this historic year.

Quickly, the goal became clear: draft, debate, revise, and approve a scheme that would allow for a legitimate and recognized (by the administration, faculty, and Board) new Ezra Student Constitution intended to bolster student involvement in school life and culture in the years to come.

Simultaneously, the conflict in Gaza and the horrendous and infamous terror attack that provoked it brought to the surface the need "for good people to do" something, to paraphrase Edmund Burke. Under this rubric, we invited veterans of the American Armed Forces to speak to the students in November about the reasons for joining, the benefits of service, and above all, the commitment to a project that is bigger than the person, him or herself. In this spirit we brought in Navy and Air Force veterans, who gave us their unique perspectives on service, combat, and returning to civilian life, while still, assuming duties. I also enlisted with Volunteers for Israel/Sar-El to volunteer in Israel, where I spent time at Tel Hashomer Base near Tel Aviv to help with the war effort. I was glad to FaceTime with my students while I was in IDF uniform during that stint, which hopefully informed them and certainly inspired me.

With the input and help of my Civic Spirit coach Professor Sandy Kessler, these twin projects of a new constitution and veterans' issues became the guideposts of the year in my civic spirit laboratory at Ezra Academy.

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Veterans' Awareness: A Foundational Year
With regard to the veterans, the goal remains to make veteran life a comfortable and easily discussed topic at Ezra. In addition to Americans' experiences discussed above, there is a plan for a veteran from the IDF to speak to the students around Memorial Day/Yom HaAtzmaut, and to learn about not only rights, which is our focus typically as Americans, but also our responsibilities as citizens to say nothing of duty when the military service is mandatory and existentially necessary.

Ezra's commitment to civic involvement shined through in this introductory year relating to Vets. Veterans' issues continually come up in our curriculum: from the G.I. Bill of Rights to the Bonus Army protests to POW/MIA concerns stemming from Vietnam, students' muscle memory with regard to these questions is growing more natural. There is also a plan in the works to collaborate with nonprofit organizations that benefit veterans. One such organization, ECAD, (Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities) is a local group I'd like to have Ezra get to know and work with closely in the coming year(s). The veterans project, therefore, is merely in its foundational year so we can build ever-broader initiatives at Ezra.

We, the Students...
The new constitution was drafted by a subcommittee of students who were elected to the government this year. They knew this would be part of their mandate: they are a functioning government and a 'constitutional convention' all in one.

All students were welcome to provide input, and three articles were written by the winter:

1. Article One outlines the structure of the government, the officers, and the representatives, from grades 3 through 8.
2. Article Two outlines governmental functions and processes.
3. Article Three outlines the Amendment and Ratification Processes.

The most interesting wrinkle in the document might be the role of the vice president under Article I (2) (2) (a). We debated at great length the role of that officer. While the president must assume certain roles, the vice president's job remained murky, so we designed a voting system where student government votes are run by the vice president, who does not get a vote him/herself. Only in the event of a student government tie would the vice president actually cast a vote on a student government initiative.

Also notable is Article I (5) (4). It was the students who convinced each other that if ever a class size is smaller than three people, all students who are interested, can and should participate in representing their grade. The logic that carried the day was that if there was a race between two candidates in a class of three, then the third student is in an impossible situation: he/she must play the role of kingmaker. To avoid this dynamic we agreed that any class that small can self-represent. These were good faith and reasonable compromises that the students agreed to and ultimately which made it into the final document.

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The ratification process as outlined in Article Three had to be hammered out and executed throughout the spring. Once language regarding the roles and duties was finalized, the student government voted merely to send it to the homerooms for debate, discussion, and vote. The officers presented the document to all grades and fielded questions such as why the age limits are what they are for the officers, but ultimately all homerooms (read: states) approved the constitution. We remain profoundly close to the final student government meeting on any non-substantive changes and edits for final ratification at the time of this writing.

We are planning a constitutional unveiling late this spring, so that students know that when they come back in the fall, they have adopted a brand new student government constitution under which they, the students, attend school.

Conclusion

Civic Spirit's pillar about Civic Belonging is the most common to these twin projects of law and people. The Ezra Student Constitution will now guide all future student involvement at this school, and it's a project that does not need repeating but can be ever-refined. The " Veterans Foundational Year" project is not theoretical but rather profoundly practical and human, and both the mechanics of the document and the spirit of the veterans are needed to have a fully civically involved student experience.

To view Ezra Academy's Student Constitution, click here!