The Weber High School

COHORT 6

Michael Nance, Teacher

When I was approached by my department Chair, David Lakin (Cohort 5), about attending the Civic Spirit Educators Cohort for 2023-2024, I was thrilled. Not only am I always looking for professional development opportunities during the summer, but he and another Weber School colleague who participated in Cohort 5, about how much they knew I would love the experience. My expectations were high as I journeyed to New York, and Cohort 6 exceeded them. I had been struggling to bring a new “freshness” to my classroom, to find a way to not allow the demands of an Advanced Placement curriculum on an alternate day block schedule to dominate my and my students' time and attention. Cohort 6 provided me with the motivation to find that way and with a direction that matched my desire for students to embrace civic virtue, of placing society over self. As the week progressed, my thinking on this became deeper and more focused and seized upon a goal for the coming school year of reviving a school club that had become moribund during COVID. Little did I know that this would only be the initial way to apply the knowledge I gained that week.

The school club is called Peace By Piece, and involved self-selected Weber School students partnering with students from two other Atlanta area faith-based schools in a series of cultural exchanges. The other schools were both private schools, The Marist School, a Catholic high school, and The W.D. Mohammed High School, an Islamic school. Civic Spirit’s Three Pillars, especially Civic Belonging, provided the initial inspiration. Little did I know that the club’s faculty sponsor had already expressed his desire to revive the club so that on my return to school arrangements were ongoing to have four exchanges, one on the campus of each school and an initial gathering at a “neutral” site which turned out to be a local park. Each of the first two meetings occurred as planned and the all students were clearly developing relationships with the other schools. The second on-campus exchange was planned for October 31 and then came October 7, 2023. Although the faculty sponsors initially attempted to move forward, the next exchange was

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canceled and no further exchanges have occurred. It was disheartening to our students and to me. Thus ended my initial goal for carrying the Three Pillars forward.

With the assistance and encouragement of my Civic Spirit Coach, Audi Hecht, I pivoted to a different project, one that Cohort 6 also encouraged me to think about. Dr. Roosevelt Montas, Columbia University, had stimulated my thinking when he spoke on “engaged civics” and how teachers need to equip students with the intellectual characteristics which will allow for meaningful participation in our society. Then he said “things which will nourish our system.” I was hooked! Even before January 6, 2021, I had been troubled by the degree of political polarization and especially by how political rhetoric had become increasingly violent or likely to encourage violence. It seemed to me that I needed to create a project for my students which would require them to research the personal qualities of several American Presidents for whom they had some level of admiration or were highly rated in one or another of the several rankings of U.S. Presidents. I put the project together with Audi Hecht’s assistance and used a list of moral/ethical values recommended by Essential Partners. I have further planned to use dialogue as the format of the summative assessment.

On May 28 and 29, 2024, my AP U.S. History students took part in a dialogue on “Presidential Leadership: Exploring Desirable Qualities in U.S. Presidents”. Due to end-of-the-year time constraints, the student groups and presentations from the original project were replaced by short, individual research papers on a specific U.S. president, assigned randomly. I used ChatGPT to do the assigning of presidents by instructing it to select random numbers for each class between 1 and 46. I made no modifications (one student did get William Henry Harrison and his 30-day presidency). Students were instructed to research their president, looking especially at 3-4 “key moments” in each presidency. Prior to being assigned a president, each class engaged in a discussion of ethical/moral/religious values, beginning with a set list that they believed was proper for presidential candidates. Some items were eliminated from the list (environmentalism, for example, which students regarded as too policy-oriented) and some were added, charisma and adaptability, for example. Their papers were to address the significance of the “key moments” and then evaluate presidential performance through the lens of 3-4 chosen qualities. The paper would represent 50% of a final summative assessment and the in-class dialogue the other 50%. The dialogues were scored using the following criteria:

1. Frequency of contribution
2. Quality of contribution
3. Making Connections
4. Accuracy

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I facilitated the dialogue by posing two questions which were answered in “rounds” (each student replied in turn). Those questions were about what each student learned that they did not already know, which 3-4 qualities they selected, and how they were selected (i.e., were the qualities selected to match the individual’s performance in office or were they selected on the basis of importance to the student). Thereafter, I asked questions and students volunteered answers. Some of those questions were:

- Which one of the qualities you selected do you think for a president to have and why?
- Of the qualities you DID NOT select, which do you consider most important for a president to have and why?
- To what extent was your president able to “govern his emotions/passions/ambitions in order to serve the public good”? (which I adapted from Jeffery Rosen’s The Pursuit of Happiness).
- How has President Biden performed in managing the Israel-Hamas War and the resulting campus protests?

The discussions were better than hoped for. All the students were engaged and eager to explain their president’s performance via the selected qualities. Some of the most often cited qualities were dependability, commitment, perseverance, patriotism (which often became controversial, especially when linked to or merged with nationalism), integrity, and open-mindedness. The discussion on President Biden and Israel I left for the end so as not to allow it to dominate the conversation. Many students were, of course, critical, seeing President Biden as catering to a traditional ally at first but then tilting in favor of the left wing of his party as criticism of the IDF grew on human rights violations. Some saw the issue as “black and white”, with no nuances, which surprised and frankly bothered me. One student was adamant that the President had absolutely cut aid to Israel, which also shocked and saddened me as it is false (I shared a Politifact fact check with this student). Overall, students performed well and nearly all agreed the project was worthwhile and provided them with more tools for understanding the issues facing the nation as the 2024 election approaches.

To view Mr. Nance’s American Presidents project, click here!