Bruriah High School for Girls

ELIZABETH, NJ

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Recently, while preparing for our Bruriah Middle School Presidential Banquet, a student covering President John Tyler complained there was “no information” on this lesser-known political figure. Thinking for a minute, I pulled up Rabbi Charlie Savenor’s PowerPoint presentation from a PD I attended. As we explored Tyler’s “accidental presidency,” her perspective shifted, and she framed him in an engaging way for the program. This ability to provide fresh perspectives and resources is what Civic Spirit offers teachers.

I teach middle grades English and History at Bruriah Middle School, and over the past five years, I’ve benefited from Civic Spirit’s professional development, including Zoom sessions and workshops. Their practical tools for civics education in religious schools have transformed my teaching, enriching lessons and complicating students' perspectives. I was excited to join the Civic Spirit 2024-25 Educators Cohort, gaining access to a community of like-minded educators.

Teaching middle grades civics during a presidential election year was challenging, especially in a politically homogeneous school. While teaching a U.S. Government unit, I realized my 6th-8th grade students needed more to develop complex political ideas. The missing link seemed to be a broader global perspective, one that fosters empathy for diversity and difference. With this in mind, I designed a new 8th grade English unit to broaden students’ perspectives by connecting their prior knowledge of U.S. History to diverse global experiences and essential questions they were already familiar with.

Previously, my students read *I Am Malala*, but without a strong connection to their prior learning, they struggled to engage with it. After three years of student disconnection, I sought a new book with a similar geography and message. When my AP recommended *The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani, a novel about a Hindu girl living through the 1948 partition of India, I knew it was the right fit. I read the book daily on my way to Civic Spirit seminars, and the new unit began to come to life.

Since *The Night Diary* is geared toward younger middle grades, I paired it with *Animal Farm*, Orwell’s critique of state socialism, to provide a more challenging text for some students. Pairing these novels with texts about people and borders sparked rich discussions about the human condition, resonating with the students personally while expanding their global awareness. For example, a reading about the Chișinău pogroms broadened their understanding of Jewish experiences and borders beyond the Holocaust.

For the final project, I offered two visual and two writing options. Students could create a

propaganda poster series or an illustrated postcard exchange between characters or switch genres (e.g., turning *The Night Diary* into a narrative or *Animal Farm* into a diary). These options drew on the tropes we'd studied in English and History.

Pedagogically, execution was key. I provided a project organizer with tasks like selecting an essential question, gathering evidence, and completing a drafting process—graded prerequisites before starting their projects. The entire process spanned two weeks, with four 40-minute classes per week. Thanks to the thorough in-class planning, students could complete their physical project pieces smoothly at home.

All fourteen students submitted their projects on time, fully completed. With a range of abilities, interests, and accommodations, everyone succeeded through Universal Design for Learning. I used a project checklist as the basis for a grading rubric, aligned with my "exceeds," "meets," and "approaches" expectations. Each student received personal feedback and a rubric.

After discussing with my Civic Spirit coach, Dr. Caroline Toumazatos, we decided to have the 8th graders showcase their work to the 6th and 7th graders. They created a bullet list summarizing the unit and project process, along with advice for success (their top tip: actually read the book!). The 8th graders presented this in a slideshow, followed by a gallery walk and reflective discussion across all three grades. Finally, they wrote a formal reflection on the process of presenting their work.

The most rewarding takeaway for me as a teacher was seeing how the 8th graders recognized that their success came from engaging with hard work. This effort broadened their perspectives, opening their minds to a wider world and showing the continuity of knowledge over time. While I've had the unique opportunity to teach them English and History for three years, this depth of understanding can also be achieved through interdisciplinary collaboration. Their

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knowledge of historical, cultural, political, and social ideas has expanded, and I hope they are now more worldly citizens than when we began.

At the start of the summer, I envisioned expanding the scope of this unit. It was through the Civic Spirit Educators Cohort Summer Intitute, with its engaging professors, esteemed peers, and thought-provoking texts, that the unit truly took shape. It is essential for my students to broaden their perspectives and develop empathy for the world beyond their immediate communities. Through this revamped 8th grade English unit, that goal is beginning to come to fruition.