



Education as Midwife: K12 Schools Role in Democratic Renewal

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America’s civic culture.”

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All authors’ bios are found on the [Civic Scholars Council Biography Page](#).

Abstract

The crisis we face is matched only by the opportunity every day in K-12 education. We must reimagine and recommit to education that prepares young people academically and economically, ethically and spiritually, as citizens prepared for life's responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities. This paper provides a framework for public, democratic education starting with the inherent worth and potential of each individual and highlights effective practices that can be spread throughout schools and districts.

“Democracy has to be born anew in every generation, and education is its midwife.”

John Dewey, The Later Works, quoted by Steven Rockefeller in Spiritual Democracy in Our Schools, (p. 28)

Crisis and Opportunity

Today's social crisis is matched only by the opportunity present every day in K-12 schools. To meet the moment, build civility in the near term, and guarantee our democracy for the next 250 years, we must recommit to an education that prepares young people not only academically and economically, but also socially, emotionally, ethically and spiritually. We need schools to prepare meaningfully engaged citizens for a roiling but thriving democracy.

There are reasons many schools have been struggling to meet our democratic needs. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) narrowed instruction in many schools to focus only on literacy and math. Students lost so much of the social studies, science, art, and music that engages them, sparking awe and wonder. During COVID (2020), schools closed, and young people lost the critical, caring relationships they had with teachers and classmates. Today, students empowered with technologies including smart phones and AI find it harder to focus or understand why they need to learn what's presented in school. As a result, too many schools struggle to support young people's healthy democratic development.

Educators recognize the crisis and are answering the call to action. Some are already working to reimagine, innovate, or transform public schools. But we don't need to wait for a complete transformation of the system to prepare young people to be courageous citizens. We can learn from the many inspired educators who provide examples every day. Practitioners can support each other to refine their practices. All citizens can productively engage in their school communities. And those designing new schools can include these as a core element of their new school designs.

A Democratic Purpose

For millennia, philosophers argued that the way we educate young people should prepare them for the roles they take on later in life and the particular social order. Educators then used logic and observation of children to advocate for specific practices in schools. The differences across cultures, regions, or religions over time illustrates how differently each conceived of the individual's role in the social order.

In the last century, schools in the United States have been most influenced by John Dewey. He wrote about the importance of people's individual and collective experiences, and the learning that comes from reflecting on these experiences. He argued that education is not preparation for life; it is life. He advocated for practices that provide rich, playful, engaging, social, dynamic, and challenging experiences, in which young people are active and supported to become full members of their classroom, school community, and society.

Only recently, scientists have been empowered to study learning not just by observing behaviors, but with the latest tools of neuroscience, to see what's happening inside a person as they learn. This new [science of learning and development](#) demonstrates that our brains are malleable, plastic, and develop in context. It highlights that relationships shape learning and development. It shows that academic, behavioral, social, and emotional learning is more than just the accumulation of content, skills, and habits of mind, but a profound remaking of the individual in the context of their community. "Educators need to simultaneously develop content-specific knowledge and skills along with cognitive, emotional, and social skills. These skills, including executive functions, growth mindset, social awareness, resilience and perseverance, metacognition, curiosity, and self direction, are malleable: they are not "hardwired" but develop in response to experience. All are correlated with achievement, and all can be taught, modeled and practiced just like traditional academic skills." ([Design Principles for Schools](#), p. 85)

In 2016, Dr. Lisa Miller - a neuroscientist and professor in the Clinical Psychology Program at Teachers College, Columbia University - published [The Spiritual Child](#). She writes that spirituality is innate, a fundamental part of our biology and humanity. Our spiritual mind knows we are created with inherent worth, connected part of something much bigger than ourselves, with the ability to feel awe when experiencing transcendence and feel the love that connects us and permeates everything. Her research demonstrates that young people whose spirituality is cultivated are less isolated, and far less likely to be depressed. They are less prone to poor decision making and less likely to abuse substances. They are more likely to have an increased sense of meaning and purpose, and to achieve higher levels of academic success.

Perhaps most importantly, spiritual development connects the particular and universal, the individual and the collective, the self with peers and with others. As young people strengthen their particular spiritual core, they can be more empathic, expansive, and inclusive. They are more prepared to be courageous citizens.

Steven Rockefeller's [Spiritual Democracy and Our Schools](#) (2022), integrates the work of Dewey, the science of learning, and spirituality, advocating for a particularly American, democratic schooling. He calls for a renewed faith in education with spirituality and morality at its core - with attention given to the mind, body, heart and spirit - to prepare young people to be actively and meaningfully engaged in our democracy.

In a democracy we have to assume differences of opinions. We need ground up processes for hearing differences and deriving decisions for the common good. We must live with our neighbors, together, and avoid the temptation of living increasingly narrow lives.

This informs a framework for understanding how our public schools can cultivate courageous citizens, and for us to ensure our schools are what our democracy needs.

Framework

This framework puts spirituality at its conceptual core. It applies what we know about the science of learning and the development of young people. It recognizes that in each level, young people are developing not only physically, cognitively and academically, but also socially and emotionally, morally and ethically.

The Framework provides questions we should ask young people as they develop content knowledge, skills, and the habits of mind necessary to be courageous citizens. They are also questions practitioners can use to tune their practices. Cultivating Courageous Citizens in K-12 Schools

<i>Pre-School Early Childhood Ages 3 – 5</i> <i>Spirituality:</i> innate; experiencing connection and wonder; beginning to differentiate from important adults in their lives. <i>Socially and emotionally:</i> an opportunity to develop self-awareness and autonomy; trust, social awareness and attachment; strategies for stress management; a sense of purpose.	▪ What helps you feel love? Awe? Connection? ▪ Who is in your family? The classroom and the school? ▪ What are their roles? How do they help each other? ▪ What do you need? What do others need? ▪ What can you do for yourself and others? ▪ What are emotions and how can we regulate them? ▪ What do we do when conflicts arise? ▪ Who do we trust to help us? ▪ What does it mean to listen to others? To contribute to a group?
<i>Elementary Middle Childhood Ages 6 - 11</i> <i>Spirituality:</i> differentiated; young people “use it or lose it”. <i>Socially and emotionally:</i> opportunity to develop self-awareness; social awareness; competence; executive functions; cultivating a growth mindset, a sense of belonging, understanding the relevance of school.	▪ Where do you feel love, awe, and connection? ▪ Who are you? What are different groups of which you’re a part? ▪ Who’s in the broader community? the school? neighborhood? The world? ▪ How do we interact with people, near and far ? ▪ Can you name and recognize your emotions? How can you use negative emotions productively and nurture positive emotions? ▪ How can we help others with their emotions? ▪ What rights do people have? What responsibilities do we have to each other? ▪ What’s your role? What do you contribute to the classroom and school?

	▪ What's the purpose of school? ▪ How can we effectively listen and learn from others? ▪ How can we effectively speak and share our thoughts and feelings? ▪ How do we grow over time? How do we help others to grow over time?
Middle School Early Adolescence Ages 12 - 14 <i>Spiritual Surge:</i> Questioning purpose and meaning; feeling a drive to connect with something larger. <i>Socially and emotionally</i> Developing sense of identity and fidelity; developing resilience and agency; academic tenacity.	▪ What is unique about you? ▪ How can you cultivate feelings of love, awe, and connection? ▪ How do you connect with things greater than yourself - your communities - including people who are like you and people who present differently? ▪ How do beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors impact the way you interact with others? ▪ How are your rights and responsibilities interconnected? ▪ How are your rights and responsibilities related to those of others? ▪ How can you be of service? ▪ How can we listen and learn from others - with empathy for their experience and curiosity about their ideas? ▪ How can we speak and share with others - to communicate clearly what's on our hearts and in our minds, and know that others understand us? ▪ How do we sustain ourselves over time, with resilience and tenacity?
High School Adolescence Ages 15 - 18 <i>Spiritually:</i> experiencing shifts in awareness; there are both risks for depression and opportunities to strengthen their developmental core. <i>Socially and emotionally:</i> forming identity and group fidelity; more curious and self-directed; developing civic identity.	▪ What is most important to you? What helps you to feel love, awe, and connection? ▪ Who are you interacting with in the community and the world? What characterizes those interactions? ▪ How can you be of service? What might be your purpose in life? ▪ How does your identity relate to your rights and responsibilities - those you have in high school and those you will have as an adult in our democracy? ▪ What agency do you have now, and will you have over time? ▪ What legacy will you leave in our community? ▪ How can we most effectively communicate our hearts and minds? How can we demonstrate to others that we hear them and understand? ▪ How do we apply these communication strategies effectively in different contexts - with individuals, groups, and in civil society? ▪ How can we communicate courageously, using a range of tools and media?

Educators are invited to offer [feedback](#), and contribute to a more robust Framework over time.

Practices

Courageous citizenship can be understood as a set of behaviors and mindsets with which we interact to sustain democracy and help it thrive. These require we understand ourselves and others, listen to and hear others, and speak our hearts and minds. They help us deal with conflict productively and work towards civic cooperation. This can be modeled in schools and taught explicitly.

I highlight a handful of practices I've seen recently in my work with schools. Of course, this is not comprehensive, but illustrative of how these ideas are applied to create an environment, teach skills, and provide the experiences young people need.

The summary at the end of each section highlights what these practices have in common. The questions should help educators tune their practices or encourage them to adapt new ones.

School Environment

All schools must be physically safe and orderly. Some create an environment that is, additionally, predictable and restorative. Young people are seen and heard. They learn to use their voice, listen to others, knowing that people will disagree - and that things go wrong - and that these skills help build civility through these challenges.

1. Collaboratively designed [Classroom Charters](#) establish positive expectations, starting with how students and teachers want to feel, and what behaviors maintain that environment. Importantly, they also describe what members of the community will do when someone is struggling, to restore the community when something (inevitably) goes wrong. Charters help create a supportive culture, emotional intelligence, and safety. They help even young children understand not only rights but also responsibilities and agency.
2. [Advisories](#) or [Crews](#) create a caring, supportive community, with regular practices to ensure each person speaks and is heard. Students learn to listen to one another. Commonly, students sit in circles, passing a talking piece to ensure that each is recognized and given time. The group learns how to listen carefully and ask respectful questions which prompt further understanding. At NYC's School Without Walls (SWOW), [Crew](#) is integrated as an academic class. It builds a strong social and emotional foundation for small groups, and provides a base for the development of skills and the exploration of academic content.
3. Many schools schedule **town halls**, providing opportunities to reiterate community values, build relationships within the larger community, and support restorative practices. [Social Justice Humanitas Academy](#) hosts regular "councils", and [Valor Collegiate Academy](#) hosts weekly "Valor Circles". [Campbell Hall](#), an Episcopal school in LA, has evolved their previously traditional chapel program. Students may choose to talk about scripture, but they are also encouraged to talk about their classes and their lives, to

talk about their emerging understanding of spirituality, their values, and the issues that are important to them.

4. Some create **collective decision-making spaces** where students can raise issues and address challenges or opportunities in the community. At SWOW, students and staff meet weekly for collaborative decision making sessions. Students or staff can add items to the agenda. Together, they contribute to discussions and weigh in on decisions.

These practices demonstrate that the individual matters. Young people learn to use their voice, and to take responsibility for their community, collaboratively with students and adults, addressing issues respectfully and constructively. These practices shift the relationship of adults and students from being about power to being one of mutual respect for each other's rights and responsibilities. They cultivate agency.

For practitioners: how can you adopt or adapt these practices in your classroom? What structures would you need? What foundational content, skills and habits of mind would you have to teach for young people to be successful?

Core Skills

All schools teach core skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening. Some practices also help schools teach self and cultural awareness. Young people learn to express themselves and engage those who are different.

1. Teachers can be mindful in the **selection of texts**. Remember, Dewey wrote that learning builds on experiences and the learner's reflection on their experiences. So texts should connect to students' experiences, providing a basis for students to engage, reflect, and learn. Many educators are already familiar with Ghoddy Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy framework and her directive to choose texts and design tasks that encourage students to "think critically, exploring social emotional competencies, and designing opportunities for inquiry-based learning".
2. We can teach students to **question the author** of the texts they read. This helps ensure learning is active and socially constructed. It empowers young people, elevates their position in their learning, and models that even "experts" need to be able to justify themselves. This helps students think critically about the choices people use when communicating ideas and helps them to be critical of their own expression.
3. We can teach **listening** as a set of behaviors and an important, practicable skill. The EARS models, for example, teach students to make eye contact, acknowledge what they hear with things like a bobbing head or questions, reflect feelings, and summarize. We can teach them the neuroscience of maintaining attention, recognizing when they are having an emotional response, and how to regulate their emotions.
4. We can manage more productive and collaborative **class discussions**, so that students are engaged every day in the sort of presentation and reflection, listening and speaking that is key to courageous citizenship. Many teachers implement Socratic Seminars. These

require students to prepare for discussion, participate, and summarize learning based on their contributions and those of their peers. Other teachers use prompts to break out of the ping-pong like experience in many classes, where teachers call on students to respond, one at a time. Teachers ask students to elaborate on their answers before calling on a second. Teachers ask multiple students “What do you hear?” or “What clarifying questions do you have?” or “What does that make you think and feel?” or “How can you respond - with your heart, engaging your head?” With time, students learn to respond in these ways, without having to be prompted by the teacher, so that the class is engaged in vital conversations.

5. Many schools move beyond the typical **research** within content area classes. They empower students to activate their passions and address concerns in their community, moving beyond the typical research and report writing students might do within a content area class. At [El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice](#) where the mission is “to create community led movements of self-determination”, students pursue “Integrated Arts Project”. They identify, research, and analyze problems in their community, and use the arts to create and present a solution. At SWOW, students develop [Passion Projects](#). They build on the design thinking they’ve learned in Crew and applied in collaborative decision-making meetings. They identify and work to address a need in the community, integrating class work, work-based learning, and the input of experts. Students in FIRST Robotics programs not only learn STEM through robotics. They learn [collaboration and competition](#), and how to be global citizens. Teams take on social impact projects: addressing issues in the environment, or assisting people with disabilities, or [building custom, low-cost prosthetics](#) for young people who otherwise couldn’t afford them. FIRST’s highest honor is their [Impact Award](#).

All of these practices cultivate courageous citizenship - shifting practices so that students connect the learning of core content and skills with the meaningful impact they can have in their classroom, school, and community. Young people consider what they can do for themselves and how they can help others. They practice skills they need as citizens: communicating with passion and collaborating to address communal needs.

How are your students being taught these important skills? How can learning more explicitly connect the skills they are learning with the impact they can have on their community?

Civics Programs

Many schools adopt civics curriculum or schoolwide programs that explicitly teach social studies content and citizenship skills.

1. NYC Public Schools launched the [Civics for All](#) program to empower all NYCPS students with high quality civics education. The program includes SoapboxNYC, a public speaking competition that supports students to address issues affecting them and their communities, and develops the competencies fundamental to being an active citizen.

2. Facing History and Ourselves provides a yearlong [civic education](#) program for students in grades 6 - 12, preparing them to be informed and ethically engaged. Teachers can implement lessons, units, or use their materials to guide whole courses. There are many other non-profits and centers across the political spectrum that provide their own resources.
3. The [Northwest School](#) in Seattle produces socially responsible citizens who actively contribute to their community through a curriculum that centers on values such as social justice, sustainability, and the development of global perspectives. Students learn about themselves in affinity groups, and about others through days of learning. They write: they “foster the understanding that responsibility for the needs of the community does not lie with one individual or the group, but with every student”.

These programs provide opportunities for young people to meaningfully engage and practice the skills of courageous citizenship in organized and formal ways.

Where are there opportunities in your school? What lessons and unit plans might you borrow? What would it take to adapt curriculum maps and course sequences to provide even more attention to these practices?

Competencies

In the last decade or so, many schools, districts, and states have thought differently about their goals, breaking out of the silos of narrowly focused content areas, and specific exit exams. They’ve articulated a discrete set of competencies they want to cultivate, and align curriculum and instruction with these competencies. They focus on how learning can be applied and what’s meaningful in the real world. Many are explicit or well aligned with the requirements of courageous citizenship. This helps build coherent curriculum and student experiences, and helps make school more compelling for young people. They help young people see their education as purposeful.

1. Some schools use **student-led conferences**, during which students share their struggles and success, with teachers and their families. They share samples of their work with which they demonstrate competency. They reflect on their process and narrate their learning. At [Gateway Middle School](#), in San Francisco, students attend to more traditional academic competencies; they also are expected to share how they’ve contributed to the community, whether that’s with their peers, their class, the school, or the wider neighborhood.
2. In individual schools, educators are developing a **Portrait of a Graduate**. They articulate [core competencies](#) around which all curriculum is organized. These may still include the expectation students master core content knowledge, that they communicate effectively, and demonstrate understanding of the arts. Many include the expectation that students learn beyond the four walls of the school - in the community, at institutions, and with local experts in the field. Some include community or global citizenship explicitly, requiring that students demonstrate ways they’ve been involved in issues or campaigns, or that they have participated in local political activities.

3. A growing number of states are **augmenting graduation requirements**, modifying or eliminating the requirement that students pass content-based exit exams. They are instituting their own Portrait of a Graduate, and empowering students with different ways to demonstrate their competency. New York State is committed to [six core capacities](#), ensuring each high school graduate is: academically prepared; an effective communicator; a critical thinker; a creative innovator; reflective and future focused; and a global citizen. While the State has not yet set policy and guidance, they suggest students will be able to demonstrate competency by participating in their community, in local council meetings, for example. According to [XQ Schools](#), 32 states plus D.C. have already identified competencies as part of this movement to change to graduation requirements.

These examples illustrate how teachers, schools, districts, and states are thinking differently about the end of education and how assessment can better align with our understanding of the whole child. This is an education that not only prepares students for more schooling or jobs. It engages them in democracy, prepared as courageous citizens.

What competencies are important for your young people to be courageous citizens in your community? How can you provide opportunities for young people to practice and demonstrate competency while still in school?

Again, this is just a brief description and sampling of practices that exist in schools today, that educators can use to shift their existing practices, and interested others can point to when engaging with educators in their schools.

The Call to Action

I invite people to [join](#) the community, share their practice and refine them over time. We can connect with others in the same grade level, discipline, or geography.

Share the [Framework](#). Ask questions about how your school is preparing courageous citizens. Listen. Highlight what already exists and is good. Consider also what you can beta test in your communities and improve over time. Encourage reflection and increased alignment with the goals over time. Start conversations in your schools and professional associations. Share and iterate on practices that align with your curriculum and this Framework. It's vitally important we address the social crisis of our times. To survive as a democracy and thrive over the next 250 years, we need schools to prepare courageous citizens.

How fortunate! We know schools can.

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