

# UNITED WE STAND

Charter School Educators Offer Competing Perspectives on  
Educating for Citizenship

*by Alan Gottlieb*



**BLUUM**  
LET LEARNING GROW

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Foreword.....3

Differing Views: The Conservative Perspective.....5

The Progressive Perspective.....6

Teaching Citizens and School Profiles.....7

Democracy Prep.....8

Great Hearts.....8

Success Academies.....9

Treasure Valley Classical Academy.....10

## FOREWORD

As a Boise-based education nonprofit committed to improving opportunities for Idaho's families and young people Bluum cares deeply about what is taught in our schools, and how it is taught. There is great debate and much written recently on education and what our children should be taught about American history, American government and what it means to be a responsible citizen in 21st century America. This conversation, like much else in American society, is hotly debated and polarizing. See the New York Times' 1619 Project and the 1776 Report, created by the (former) President's Advisory 1776 Commission, for evidence of the divide.

In 2020, Bluum convened a virtual conversation in Idaho with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, Jr. to discuss their book of essays entitled *How to Educate an American*. We believe teaching our young people to become responsible and engaged citizens is a critical, if not *the* critical, role for schools and education in America. Yet, as a nation, we are failing to do the job. As reported in *How to Educate an American* "more than a third of Americans surveyed by the Annenberg Center for Public Policy in September 2017 failed to name a single First Amendment freedom. Only 26 percent could name all three branches of government; 33 percent couldn't name any branch."

To better understand the opportunities and challenges of teaching history and civics in our politically charged times, and to highlight schools that are doing the work well, we commissioned veteran education journalist Alan Gottlieb to profile four charter school networks actively engaged in the battle to educate and develop American citizens. These schools have different approaches, and they offer a diversity of viewpoints. But, through this we hope there is in fact a better understanding of truth that emerges.

Bluum is privileged to give voice to the work that the charter school networks Democracy Prep, Great Heart, Success Academies and the Barney Charter School Initiative are doing, as Franklin encouraged, "on a daily basis" to keep "our country strong and free."

— Terry Ryan, CEO

**“Good citizenship is when effective citizens do simple but powerful things on a daily basis that keeps our country strong and free.”**

*— Benjamin Franklin*

As the past six months have made clearer than ever, we live in a time of profound political polarization, when existential threats to our system of government are no longer theoretical abstractions. People on either side of our yawning ideological divide would probably agree on at least that one point.

Given that sobering reality, helping young people become informed and active citizens, who as adults will advocate for a “more perfect union” seems like the work of more than a one semester elective civics course.

As with most issues in present-day public education, there is both good and bad news to report when it comes to the current and future state of civics education.

On the positive side, educators across the ideological spectrum are thinking deeply about this issue and creating classes and curricula to address it. A roadmap developed recently by an organization called Educating for American Democracy is one example.

It’s also a good sign that there seems to be consensus that civics education should in no way whitewash U.S. history, and the ways in which this country has failed to live up to its self-proclaimed ideals, in particular, that all people are created equal, and deserve equal treatment and protection under the law.

On the more troubling side, while there are some areas of agreement about what students should know about the origins and meaning of citizenship, familiar ideological disputes are dividing more progressive and conservative educators when it comes to defining both the purpose and delivery of civics education.

In the wake of the January 6 insurrection and last summer’s racial justice demonstrations, “on both sides of the aisle you do have a sense that OK, we’ve got to address this and we’ve got to look at the role that our education system plays in developing future citizens. I think there’s agreement there,” Pablo Wolfe, founder of the Coalition of Civically Engaged Educators, said.

Where disagreement arises is in how to make that happen, said Wolfe, whose writings fall in the more progressive camp. In conservative schools and communities, “we look at our founding documents and we understand what they say and that we lionize the figures that created them,” Wolfe said. “There’s a sense of looking at what future citizens need to know about our history, and, and also the way our political system works, in order for them to be informed citizens.”

In more progressive settings, Wolfe said, “you’ll talk to people who say things like ‘we need to train our young folks to be activists to know how to change the political system so that it’s more representative and more fair.’

“The reasonable answer is that you need both of those things, and I think there’s a way to come to some consensus on how to move forward, as long as we take from both elements.”

Some disagreements could prove challenging to overcome. Progressives, for example, believe that an explicitly anti-racist approach to teaching civics is essential, while more conservative educators say that pushing an agenda rather than educating students to have a deep understanding of historical trends and the flaws in human nature is a fundamentally flawed and biased approach.



## THE CONSERVATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Stephen Lambert, who runs the Treasure Valley Classical Academy, a K-12 public charter school in rural Fruitland, Idaho, said disagreements about how to prepare young people to become engaged members of their communities through civics education stem from a fundamental disagreement about human nature.

Lambert, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel, said more progressive people and educators “presume that basically, human beings are good and don’t require much improvement as long as we fix the systems around us.” But in Lambert’s view, “that’s just not the case.”

It’s more realistic, Lambert argued, to view human nature with a skeptical eye, much as the nation’s founders did when they devised a system built upon separation of powers to keep any individual or branch

of government from accruing too much clout.

Lambert referred to a 23-and-a-half foot-long timeline of human history from 4000 B.C. to the present that adorns a hallway wall in his school. The timeline is to scale, and the Declaration of Independence doesn’t appear until the last six inches.

All the time before that, with a couple of brief exceptions, featured nonstop “human tyranny or subjugation.” The Declaration represented a sincere attempt at self-governance for the first time in human history, Lambert said.

He acknowledged that the U.S. has fallen far short of its stated ideals about equality and equality of opportunity.

“We don’t do this with rose colored glasses,” he said. “Our students examine things and pursue the truth. While we admire the noble ideas in the Declaration, in the founding documents in the Constitution,



**“There’s a sense of looking at what future citizens need to know about our history, and also the way our political system works, in order for them to be informed citizens.”  
— Pablo Wolfe.**

we also examine how we have less than perfectly delivered those ideas. And we examine how we might pursue a more perfect union.”

To do this, the classical academy teaches students to, in the words of the school’s pledge, “learn the truth, do the good, and love the beautiful.” Imbuing students with those values helps tame the savage beast that is an essential part of human nature, Lambert said.

“That’s how we overcome the toxicity that is our current state of civic affairs,” Lambert said.

Ultimately, Lambert said, he’s not fond of the term civics education because narrowing the perspective to civics misses the mark.

“I don’t think teaching civics is the answer to fixing our country’s challenges right now,” he said. “We need to be considering much more deeply what a good public education ought to be, and how good human beings should be formed. That, I think, will eventually, slowly, turn things around.”

Lambert’s school is part of the Barney Charter School network. Barney schools aim to “train the minds and improve the hearts of young people through a rigorous, classical education in the liberal arts and sciences, with instruction in the principles of moral character and civic virtue.”

Barney is a project of Hillsdale College, a Christian liberal arts college located in Hillsdale, Michigan. Barney schools are secular.

Great Hearts Academies, a network of public charter schools in Arizona and Texas with plans to expand to Louisiana, Florida, and Colorado, takes an approach to civics similar in many respects to Barney charters. Dan Scoggin, Great Hearts’ founder and president, said that while studying this nation’s failures to live up to its ideals is important, so is recognizing the underlying wisdom of its founding ideals.

“At Great Hearts, we very much believe that America is a beautiful place. We need to be critical of failures in our past and study them intently and honestly. But what’s so beautiful about the Western tradition is belief in the innate dignity of every human being,” he said.

Like most schools, Great Hearts has felt pressure from some quarters to revise its reading lists and to take anti-racists stands and condemn white privilege, Scoggins said.

“The founding fathers had a fundamental gap and blindness, and even moral failures. But to throw out that tradition of freedom and innate dignity, and for students to lose the best of the tradition that they’ve inherited as Americans we think is the wrong way to educate kids,” he said.

Scoggin acknowledged that “the pressure (to adopt a pointedly anti-racist stance against a broadly defined white supremacy) is going to intensify the years to come. But we stand for something more enduring than just the political moment of today and we’re thinking in terms of educating generations of young men and women who can lead in a democracy.”

## THE PROGRESSIVE PERSPECTIVE

Democracy Prep is a network of public charters with more than 7,000 K-12 students in five regions of the country, heavily concentrated in the New York-New Jersey area. Ninety-percent of the network’s

students are of color.

Civics education has been an integral part of a Democracy Prep education since the network's inception 15 years ago. And in the eyes of Democracy Prep educators, teaching civics in a vacuum makes little sense, especially for the student's they serve.

"For us, civics is really rooted in a commitment to contribute to and lift up one's community," said Rashid Duroseau, Democracy Prep's civics program director. "Civics is evolving beyond your classical conception of what it means to be a civically engaged or virtuous citizen. What we're really striving for is a member of the community who is continuously performing a level of self-reflection that allows them to contribute to the betterment of others and themselves."

These contributions can range from organizing or attending a racial justice protest, to launching a podcast on a current issue, or starting an online social media campaign.

A slide on the Democracy Prep civics program website reads:

"We define the term citizen as any member of a community who works to lift up the people around them. In order to prepare our scholars for lives of active citizenship, we teach them to:

- Take passionate and well-informed stances on issues.
- Engage with perspectives that are unfamiliar.
- Invest in a greater good.
- Find productive ways to advocate for themselves and others."

Duroseau said students cannot take these steps without having a deep understanding of their identity and how people of color have been systematically marginalized throughout U.S. history.

"To fail to expose them to the realities of the world in which they live and the historical narrative of which they are a part would be beyond educational malpractice," Duroseau said. "It would be an injustice to deny folks a view into their own history because without that view they're not able to shape the future and they're not able

to make informed decisions based on patterns of the past."

Ultimately, Democracy Prep feels it owes its students an action-oriented civics education, Duroseau said.

"You need to seize your power as a young person and know that your voice can be heard because there is this history that doesn't always feel good to hear," he said. "And there may be folks who are pushing back on it, but for us there's just no question about how important it is to teach black and brown kids black and brown history. It is American history. So why would we shy away from it?"

The debate over the direction of civics education is summarized nicely by the following quotes. First, Pablo Wolfe:

"When I think of civic education, anti-racism is an essential part of that. Some folks will say that's too polarizing or that's too divisive. In my interpretation of civic education, if we're going to have a multicultural democracy, and actually live up to it, that means we have to have a deep understanding of how identity works in our, in our society. And that means we're going to have to confront some ugly truths about our history."

Finally, Treasure Valley Classical Academy's Stephen Lambert:

"We don't dive into the mire and the muck of current politics. In fact, we generally stop teaching history with the fall of the Berlin Wall -- right around 1989. That's because everything after that is so hyper-politicized, that you can hardly get an unbiased text or commentary out of it. It's too recent. It's too raw, and we don't profit from really looking at it closely. That's to my mind is higher ed or grad school level stuff."

## TEACHING CITIZENS AND SCHOOL PROFILES

Bluum interviewed educators from four very different public charter school networks to get a sense of how they approach teaching civics and history. Those

approaches varied significantly, from Democracy Prep’s action-oriented curriculum with an emphasis on real-life experience and current events, to Great Hearts’ close study of American history source material and great books to understand the American system of government.

Here are brief descriptions of civics and history at those four public charter school networks.

## DEMOCRACY PREP

All Democracy Prep high school seniors design and implement a “Change the World” capstone project as a graduation requirement. According to their website, “Scholars select and address social issues ranging from childhood obesity to increasing the civic empowerment of underrepresented communities. All of these opportunities help reinforce the importance of active participation in our democratic society as a habit that should last a lifetime.”

Democracy Prep educators focus on helping students stay informed about current events, using what they call a current events, or “stop the presses” protocol. So when insurrectionists breached the U.S.

Capitol January 6, or George Floyd was murdered last Memorial Day, “we immediately begin drafting a number of documents,” said Rashid Duroseau, Democracy Prep’s civics program director.

Those documents contain “what teachers need to understand, just on the human level, about what is going on right now, and also how it’s going to affect the way that we interact with our scholars and what our scholars are going to be wondering about.”

In addition to providing “varied but verifiable and reliable sources” on current issues, Duroseau said, “we are also creating space for scholars to come to their own conclusions without proselytizing. Our goal is never to get them to believe what we believe; it’s to make sure that they have the appropriate tools to explore historical narratives and examine their own positionality.”

The Democracy Prep civics program website describes the networks philosophy as civics as “committed to the revolutionary work of preparing the next generation of our nation’s policymakers, organizers, activists, and public intellectuals for the complex social landscape that they have inherited.”



Treasure Valley Classical Academy students retire a flag as part of their annual Veteran’s Day Ceremony.



## GREAT HEARTS

Great Hearts (GH) K-12 Academies, aims to prepare its graduates to become “great-hearted leaders” through a classic liberal arts education. An article from Real Clear Education in October, 2020 described the network’s approach to civics this way:

“In GH’s civic education courses, teachers carefully guide students through important Supreme Court cases, key founding texts such as The Federalist Papers, and landmark works such as Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. They trace how the Declaration of Independence’s promise of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” has extended to all Americans in the 244 years since our country’s birth...GH’s curriculum also focuses on the rhetoric necessary to sustain civil dialogue—a timely topic, given our often-explosive public discourse today.”

Dan Scoggin, Great Hearts’ founder and president, said a daily two-hour Socratic seminar for all high school students is the heart of the network’s civics program. Here is how Scoggins described the seminar in an interview with Bluum:

“Students discuss the great books in the Western tradition...It’s a class in the study of what it means to be a human being, so we pick texts – great works of poetry, literature, history, philosophy that looks at what it means to be a human being?

“What is justice? What is friendship? What is my duty to myself and to others? What does it mean to sacrifice? What does it mean to preserve the good? These two hour conversations are our civic engagement, because students have to listen just as much as they speak. It’s not speech and debate, or Crossfire. It’s students listening to one another, asking questions, using textual evidence to suss out what is this text, what is this novel, what is this play saying about what it means to be a human being.

This is where we teach students to be citizens.”

**“We believe that service is at the center of civics,” Mark Soriano said. “Our whole organization is founded on the idea that if you see an injustice or a problem, rather than just sit on the sidelines you actively try to fix it.”**

## SUCCESS ACADEMIES

As head of middle and high school content design for Success Academies, a high-performing network of New York City-based public charter schools, Mark Soriano is in charge of the network’s civics programs.

Like Great Hearts, civics at Success is centered on the study of American history, for all three middle school years and again in the senior year of high school.

“We center our (middle school) students on the primary sources; especially the great primary sources of American history so founding documents, court cases speeches and so forth.”

High school seniors take a deeper dive, Soriano said, finding an area of history or civics that interest them, and writing a 15-to-20-page research paper that includes “a proposal on how the government could do to fix or correct this problem you’ve identified.”

Success is in the process of revamping its approach to civics, adding a course on civics and economics to eighth grade, as students transition from world history to American history.

Most important, Soriano said, the eighth-grade class will be grounded in community service.

“We believe that service is at the center of civics,” he

said. “Our whole organization is founded on the idea that if you see an injustice or a problem, rather than just sit on the sidelines you actively try to fix it.”

He said Success Academies came to be because founder Eva Moskowitz perceived injustice in the poor education low-income kids of color were receiving in New York City Public Schools and decided to do something about it.

“We want to inculcate that kind of approach to American problems in our kids early,” Soriano said.

Success Academies has put its full history curriculum online for public use. It is free and downloadable, though for the time being you must register to gain access to it.

## TREASURE VALLEY CLASSICAL ACADEMY

Treasure Valley Classical Academy founder school leader Stephen Lambert explained the mission of his school this way:

“Our mission is to train the mind and improve the hearts of our students through a classical, content-rich curriculum that emphasizes virtuous living, traditional learning and civic responsibility. That mission statement is deeply rooted in ideas that have existed in Western civilization for thousands of years, beginning with the ancient Greeks. And it is that citizens have to be prepared to take on their role in a civil society. In order to do that, we need to form and shape character and to provide knowledge.”

Lambert, a retired Air Force Colonel, continued, “James Madison, the father of the Constitution, said that in order for us to keep our republic, we need citizens of virtue and knowledge. He said that in Federalist 55, in defense of the Constitution. Plato wrote that even a just man will do unjust things given the right circumstances. That’s negative inertia if you’re trying to build a civil society. So, you have to form and shape character. Plato’s most famous student, Aristotle, said it takes a lifetime of hard work to become a person of good habits. So, we’re in the daily work of shaping virtue and building good habits in these future citizens.”

Lambert acknowledges that his approach to teaching history and civics is a departure from what other schools may do. He shared:

“Our school culture and ethos has character-building deeply embedded in it...We use a content-rich curriculum that is overseen by the Barney Charter School Initiative and Hillsdale College [in Michigan] in order to build in our students what Dr. E.D. Hirsch has called cultural literacy. In other words, to become American citizens, you have to have a lexicon and the background, the idiom, the vocabulary, the knowledge to understand what these things mean in context...

...We read the great books, we read the great minds. This is a liberal arts and science education that truly is well-rounded and prepares students to, at the end of their senior year in high school, have lots of opportunities at their fingertips.”

Hillsdale’s Barney Charter School Initiative’s writings and readings on history and civic education can be found here: <https://www.hillsdale.edu/educational-outreach/barney-charter-school-initiative/recommended-reading/>

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Gottlieb is a Colorado-based writer, editor, journalist, communications consultant, and nonprofit entrepreneur who owns Write.Edit.Think, LLC. He founded EdNews Colorado, which later merged with Gotham Schools to form Chalkbeat.