



The Next Generation Needs to be a Lot of Things. Being Prepared to be Good Citizens May Be the Most Important.

Students of Mercersburg Academy and Invited Guests –

Good afternoon! I'm both honored and a bit nervous to be here today. I'm honored because I've long admired Mercersburg Academy's commitment to my favorite topic: civic preparation. So, it's great to be here and to share some ideas with you. On the other hand, speaking at the end of the school day and school week in a fieldhouse full of almost 1,000 people is pretty daunting. So, I'll try to make this interesting and personal and relatable. It's a serious topic, but I'll try not to be too serious. I've brought pictures. See, here's my family, and I promise that you won't see any more family pictures for the rest of this speech!

And before I jump in, just a couple of things about me: I've worked with young people most of my life. Starting back in 1998, I worked with a group of amazing people to start the nation's first public urban college preparatory boarding school in Washington, DC. We named it The SEED School. We took a burned out campus that looked like this:

Into a boarding school campus in Southeast Washington, D.C. that looked like this:

So that we could graduate students from high school at significantly higher rates than the surrounding community.

One of those amazing people who helped build SEED is in the audience today. She's the parent of a current student at Mercersburg, and because I don't want to embarrass Whitney Webb, I won't tell her that her parents are awesome and her mom is great, and we'll move on.

Most recently, I've gotten much more engaged in the work of democracy and young people because I was worried about the direction of our nation and the world you'll inherit. I now lead an organization called the Institute for Citizens & Scholars, which works with young people like you to strengthen democracy. Together. That's what I'm going to discuss today.

To make sure that I know who's in the audience, I'd like to get a quick show of hands:

- Raise your hand if you are a student
- Raise your hand if you are a parent or family member of a student
- Raise your hand if you are an educator.
- Raise your hand if you're not one of the above...but you're sure that you should be here.

Awesome. It's so great to have each of you here today. Though my talk is important for everyone here today, I'm going to direct most of my comments to the young people in the room.

When I think about the world you live in today and also the world you are poised to inherit, I bet many of you might be concerned about a whole array of daunting

challenges. A changing climate. Government shutdowns. Crime. Social unrest. And who knows what advances in artificial intelligence will do to the job market? The world you will have to navigate as an adult will probably be virtually unrecognizable to the adults in this room.

As a parent, I spend a lot of time thinking about how best to prepare my daughter for the future. She's your age. A bright kid who finds science as interesting as foreign languages and music. She has no idea what she wants to study in college, and her mother and I often feel like we aren't much help.

But there is one thing I do know. Whatever natural, political, or social challenges that come her way—and your way—in the coming decades, you will need to be able to work with others to solve complex problems. Americans 25 years from now, 50 years from now, will still need to get together in your neighborhoods, cities, and states and work out how to distribute resources, how to educate your children, how to care for the elderly, how to ensure public order and social justice.

In short, you will still need to be able to govern yourselves.

This is why when people ask me what's the most important thing we can do to prepare young people for the future, I always make the case for civic education.

Civic education sounds a bit old fashioned. In my day we took a course in high school called Civics. Honestly, the class was really dull.

We memorized some dates, studied the three branches of government, talked about the Constitution, but Civics teachers almost never connected the state mandated Civics curriculum to the real world.

We didn't discuss current events, we didn't attend town council meetings, register to vote, write letters to the editor, or volunteer with any community organizations.

We didn't practice the skills a citizen needs to work with his or her fellow citizens to solve their common problems, and we weren't encouraged to think of ourselves as future leaders, as future citizens.

This is why I don't usually use the term civic education. Instead, I talk about civic learning or citizen preparation. "Citizen preparation" reminds us that preparing for effective self-government takes a lot more just than a semester-long course in high school.

It takes civic knowledge, like the basics of our government and history as a country.

It takes civic skills building, like voting and volunteering and engaging in the community.

And it takes civic dispositions, like a commitment to democracy.

These are cultivated over a lifetime.

When you were a little kid on the playground, you learned to listen, share, and negotiate.

When you reached middle school, you learned how to cooperate, strategize, and execute complex plans as a team on the soccer field or at robotics club.

In high school, you learn more explicit civic knowledge in history and government classes and you learned to argue with your parents about current events.

Yes, arguing with your parents about current events is a good thing. It's an important way for you to construct your own political views. So, make sure to let your parents know that I've given you permission to argue politics at the table!

Now, I don't have to tell you that developing this knowledge, skillset, and dispositions is no small task. But I do have to tell you that if you want to live in a functioning democracy 25 or 50 years from now, we all have to take this work much more seriously.

Actually, the U.S. has never been great at preparing everyone to be great citizens. When I was a kid, we all made fun of how little the average American knew about his government and what it was doing. I used to watch late night host Jay Leno interview people on the streets of LA in this shtick he called JayWalking.

He'd ask people simple things like to point out Texas on a map of the US or to name the vice president. No one ever got the questions right. As a teenager, I laughed really hard at the answers, when in fact it was a warning sign about our lack of civic knowledge. Like so many in my generation, I didn't really worry about the future of my country. I took it for granted that there were enough well-informed citizens to keep our democracy functioning. Nowadays, I'm not so sure.

Seems to me like every headline I read is about the demise of democracy. Or that your generation is apathetic and disengaged. That too many of you don't know enough about how our government works. That you don't trust institutions, including the news. And that half of you would support violence to achieve your political goals.

That's sobering.

Honestly, I have great sympathy for those of you who have had it with our system. I can imagine why you might not trust our institutions or politicians. The planet is becoming dangerously hot, and the politicians who fill your newsfeeds spend all their time waging futile culture wars. We adults – many that you see in public office, on your screens, or even in your communities – have not been great role models. Nor have we created the space or provided the opportunities for you to practice being an empowered citizen. As far as you know, this is the way it has always been.

At the same time, you've grown up in a country that has sorted itself into like-minded camps, the "Big Sort," across our nation. Unlike past generations, most of us live in communities where most people are like us in terms of education, wealth, and political persuasion. In most big cities public schools are more segregated now than they were before the Civil Rights movement. We don't know a lot of people who have different life experiences, different moral hierarchies, different political convictions. And we certainly don't know how to discuss politics with them.

Young people today look at dialogue across divides differently than my generation. You spend most of your waking hours online, where the norms of online communication

are your regular norms of communication. You might get most of your news from Instagram and TikTok.

As clever as many of those TikTok videos are, I have yet to see one that offers a nuanced discussion of any complex issue. It's pretty hard to offer a nuanced opinion in 280 characters or three-minute videos. And if you express an opinion that the internet deems racist, sexist, or otherwise inappropriate, you're canceled. There is no opportunity to explain, clarify, or dispute the verdict. Once canceled, that can be it. That's scary; I get it.

We shouldn't be surprised that students hesitate to discuss anything remotely controversial online or in the classroom. It's just too perilous. But if that's where we are, if it really is impossible to talk to each other about serious, complex issues, well, then our democracy is doomed.

So, what do we do? How do we build the skills needed to talk about controversial topics? How do we gain the civic knowledge needed to imagine and build a democracy that lives up to our highest ideals? How do we believe that all this hard work is worth it?

There's just one answer: listen to, learn from, and work with young people to strengthen democracy. Let me provide you just a few examples of how your peers are doing this right now.

A high school sophomore in Minnesota worked with his community to raise money and design a veteran memorial.

A group of southern West Virginia youth spent a summer using their social media skills to help small businesses thrive in their communities.

A teenager in New York State designed a “I voted” sticker to incentivize young people to vote.

Two twins in Missouri launched a food pantry based on the popular Little Free Libraries, creating a model that can be replicated across the country.

At C&S, we support projects like these through our Civic Spring Fellows. We have the honor of working with and supporting young people like this every day.

If we fundamentally reinvest in civic learning, thousands--millions of you--could move the country forward, just like them.

The good news is, we know how to do this. 2500 years ago the Ancient Greeks gave us the word democracy and the concept of rule by the *demos* or the people. Since then, people have written about how best to educate and train young people to be citizens. We have no shortage of resources. We also have some encouraging news from contemporary researchers who are studying how young people learn and form habits. Finally, we have good reason to believe that with the proper education and support this upcoming generation of citizens could break out of this doom spiral and actually craft workable solutions to the crises we all face. I, for one, am very optimistic. If we all commit to doing the work, we're going to be okay.

So, today, I'm going to talk about three things. First, I'm going to share a little about how we have prepared citizens in the past. Second, I'll tell you why preparing citizens

has gotten more complicated in recent years. Third, I'm going to explain why I'm optimistic about the future of citizen preparation. At the end of my talk, I'm going to share some pointers about how you can be a better citizen and also some pointers that you can use to hold us adults accountable to be better citizens.

Prioritizing Citizen Development – The Historical Case

Okay, fair warning. Here's a bit of a history lesson. But I promise I'll keep it interesting and to the point.

Preparing citizens for self-government is something we know a lot about. In fact, civic education is the oldest kind of education we have.

2500 years ago, most places in the ancient world were ruled by kings who did exactly what they wanted to, without ever consulting their subjects. The citizens of the Greek city-states (poleis) were different. They governed themselves. In Athens, decisions were made by an assembly of all citizens and executed by city officials who were selected by lot to serve very brief terms in office. Citizens had to be able to make compelling arguments, to weigh competing priorities, and decide what was best for the community—and they had to do this together.

Philosophers like Aristotle trained young men to construct thoughtful, logical, persuasive arguments for the common good, and over the course of many years, they helped young citizens acquire the knowledge, skills, and experience they need for self-government. They called these sets of capacities “civic virtue”.

Later when the Romans conquered Greece, they adopted the Greek model of education almost without modification. They, too, had a republic. Citizens of Rome were free men who were expected to govern that republic. To do this, they needed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of free men, what the Romans called the *artes liberales*.

The liberal in liberal arts isn't the opposite of conservative; it's the opposite of unfree. It's from the same word that gives us liberty. This is where we get the notion of the liberal arts, it was the body of knowledge and skills one needed to be a free, productive citizen.

Young Roman citizens apprenticed with older civic leaders to practice being effective citizens. They practiced persuading and building alliances, arguing, and compromising—all for the good of their republic.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, public order broke down, and barbarians controlled most of Europe. For nearly 1000 years Europe was too chaotic and too violent for people to practice the arts of free men. But when pockets of peace and prosperity appeared in the XIV century, people once again needed the wisdom of the ancient republics. Italian scholars searched monasteries and libraries and found ancient manuscripts full of the philosophy, history, and poetry of ancient Greece and Rome. And with all this learning, they resurrected the civic education of the ancient world.

The merchants and artisans who ran Italian city-states relied on classical wisdom to prepare young people to govern themselves in this world. Over the next decades, they crafted a new way of living an active and productive life. They called this educational program the *Studia humanitates*, the Humanities.

Again, logic and rhetoric were most important. Science and math become increasingly more important with time, but still, teaching young people to understand each other and to work together to solve common problems was central.

Fast forward about four hundred years and we witness the birth of another great republic.

About 180 miles east of here another brave group of people overthrew their king and set up a new form of government—one that sought to guarantee the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness to all its citizens. Even though many of our founding fathers couldn't conceive of black men or women of any color as full-fledged citizens, they DID advance the principle of free citizens governing themselves. Coming generations claimed the rights proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence. Eventually, all Americans would win the right to be citizens in the true sense of the word.

Our founding fathers understood that a free republic needed an educated citizenry. As Thomas Jefferson put it, a republic can not long endure ignorant and free. As the American population grew, more citizens needed the knowledge and skills necessary for self-government.

In the early nineteenth century, the pioneering educator Horace Mann spent his career advocating for universal, free, and high-quality education for all students, rich and poor. His work laid the foundation for public education for all American children. It is this system that has allowed the United States to prepare generations of citizens for civic life, including millions of immigrants who were raised elsewhere, in unfree states. By the twentieth century, almost all American children were taught a heroic version of American history that instilled a deep sense of patriotism and reverence for American democracy.

However, in recent decades we've lost our way and our work has gotten harder.

The teaching of history, government, and civics—the humanities— has been increasingly neglected by our schools. Part of this is our recent focus on STEM education. Part of this is the consequence of high-stakes testing of reading and math skills, but a large part of this is due to deep disagreements about what exactly we should be teaching our children about history and politics today. Increasingly bitter partisan polarization means that teachers hesitate to bring up anything related to politics or anything really controversial in the classroom. Rather than risk public scandal, most teachers just steer clear. Perhaps the teachers here today know what I am talking about...I don't blame you, it's risky.

All across the country, angry parents show up at school board meetings and principals' offices to argue about what young people should or should not be allowed to discuss. Perhaps some of the parents here today know what I am talking about... I don't blame you either.

We parents are concerned about what you, our children, are learning. The problem is we can't talk to each other about our concerns. All this fear and discord has led to a breakdown of dialogue – among parents, educators, and you. The consequence of all this uncomfortable silence is unfortunate: one of the best forums young people have to practice discussing complex issues has been shuttered. Today few young people know how to talk about controversial issues, even with their peers, let alone with adults who could help them understand the nuances and historical context of such issues. That's a problem.

How do we turn this ship around? Well, we need a whole new approach to civic learning. The first thing we can do is to remember the lessons from our ancestors: preparing young people to be great citizens should be the ultimate aim of public education in a free republic. Second, we need to recognize that learning to be a great citizen isn't something a person learns to do just in school. It is a practice, a way of being in the world.

Young people emulate their parents, coaches, ministers, neighbors, friends. They practice civic virtues in clubs, social organizations, and churches. We need to remember that becoming a better citizen, much like becoming a better person, is a lifetime project.

We also need some new tools and some more robust language to talk about citizen preparation. The ancients assumed a lot under their label of "civic virtue." In the past a lot of things were left unspoken and a lot of people were left out of citizen preparation. Today social scientists are developing much more precise ways of describing what it

takes to be an empowered citizen, and their work is helping educators craft more holistic, equitable and effective methods to do it.

My organization, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars is leading on this journey. We work with young people and a great number of adult partners to reimagine what it means to be an empowered citizen in America. Yes, this includes what young people like you learn in elementary, middle, and high school. We're also thinking about higher education, and also those who join the workforce right out of high school. And, we're thinking about all of the ways in which you learn to be a citizen...outside of school, at home and online.

So, what does it mean to be an empowered citizen? Here's how we break it down.

We talk about what individuals **understand** or know, how they **participate** in American democracy, how they **connect** with others, and what they **believe** about our democracy. Each of these four pieces of the pie includes a whole host of specific qualities that ideally, add up to make a person a citizen. Under each of these umbrella categories there are a number of more specific skills and qualities.

Believe it or not, the experts in our organization and elsewhere go even deeper and subdivide our pie chart into 37 discrete aspects of citizen preparation.

For example, under the **Connect** quadrant, there's a community building piece that gets divided into interpersonal skills, convening skills, and digital skills. Behind each of these labels is a detailed description of what each category entails.

It's a lot, yes? Honestly, we don't yet have the tools to measure all these qualities. And, even if we develop these tools in the future, we have to recognize that these aspects of civic engagement can be quite subjective, vary over time, and are interconnected with other aspects. It's important to know this level of detail because we have to know the building blocks for citizen preparation, but it's not an intuitive way to think about this.

We have to balance how the experts quantify all these aspects of citizen preparation or propose to measure them. I have to talk about this issue with people who aren't steeped in this work every day. It's not reasonable to ask someone to remember 37 discrete aspects of citizen preparation—in fact, brain science tells us that we are more likely to remember three. In fact, much of life comes in threes.

So, while it's important for educators and other practitioners of civic learning to think about this task in all these dimensions and with this kind of specificity, the general population needs a more streamlined version of what we're aiming at. Here is how I translate our pie charts into plain English.

We need more citizens who are well-informed, productively engaged for the common good, and committed to democracy. That's it: a great citizen is well-informed, productively engaged for the common good, and committed to our democracy. As a society, our goal should be to increase the number of citizens in future generations who exhibit these three qualities. This is our modern version of civic virtue, and if we can increase this kind of civic virtue among younger Americans, we're going to be able to deal with whatever the future throws at us.

The Potential of Citizen Development – Optimism in the Face of National Challenges

Now, let's talk about my optimism.

There are 68 million Americans in your age group, between 10 and 24 years old. If we can ensure you get the civic preparation you need, we can shore up American democracy. Why? There's a lot of you about to enter the voting booth. And the workplace and the marketplace. You'll influence our culture. You'll have children. You'll shape the future of our democracy.

Yes, we have some sobering challenges before us, but we also have good reason to be optimistic.

First, the national conversation about civic learning is changing. Five years ago, it was all doom and gloom, pundits were writing books with titles like "How Democracies Die." Everyone was obsessed with how polarized and angry we were as a nation. The sense of crisis spurred a lot of good people into action. There are now hundreds of organizations big and small that are trying to help people practice talking across partisan divides, regional divides, religious divides. There are a number of big funders—from Left, Right, and Center, who are now working together to support explicitly non-partisan, pro-democracy work here in our country. New research suggests that even modest brushes with meaningful political engagement can improve your perception of government and shore up your own sense of agency and encourage you to get involved in the political process. For sure we have enormous work still to do, but at least

momentum is working in our favor. Like a flywheel, the force we create now will generate the momentum to keep the wheel moving in the future.

Second, I'm amazed by you, Gen Z. Technology has transformed the way we all communicate and consume information, but you take these changes in stride. You will use technology to craft new ways to connect and build social movements. And you will do it fast.

But this doesn't mean the parents and family in this room don't have a role to play. We older folks need to engage by mentoring teenagers and twenty-somethings through the difficult work of organizing and navigating our political institutions. If we give you the tools and support you need to work collaboratively with others, Gen Z will be able to solve the existential challenges before us. This is the only way to restore people's faith in the democratic process—by proving that we as citizens can solve our common problems together. Just remember to hold us accountable!

C&S is laser-focused on Gen Z because we know you hold the key to changing the trajectory of our country. We just completed a survey of 4,000 young people ages 18-24 from across the country to help us understand their civic preparedness. Some of the results might surprise you.

First, we asked if they felt proud to be American. 70% said yes.

We asked how many of them identify with a major political party. 61% said they do not identify with either party.

And of the remaining 39%, Democrats outnumber Republicans by a relatively small margin.

More interestingly, young folks are not strident ideologues, in fact, 51% describe themselves at or near the ideological middle.

Only about a quarter of them describe themselves as very liberal or very conservative.

As these results suggest, most young people do not have hardened partisan views. You are more interested in hearing from people who offer solutions to pressing issues.

The other interesting takeaway from our poll was that the young people who know more about civics expressed a greater commitment to democracy. They also reported participating in at least one civic activity – voting, attending political meetings, advocating for their position, or attending a protest – in the last year. On the flip side, those young people who reported no civic engagement, said they don't participate because they do not feel well-informed enough to do so.

Our surveys suggest that better civic knowledge correlates with more civic engagement and that higher levels of civic engagement correlate with greater commitment to democracy. We believe that more civic learning leads to more civic engagement, which in turn leads to increased confidence in our democratic system.

We're all rethinking how to prepare you and the generations behind you to be empowered citizens. While deepening your Civic knowledge, we have to remember that all the knowledge in the world isn't enough. You need more practical civic skills, like how to have productive conversations with people who think differently, and real

life practice engaging in public decision-making and collaborative problem-solving. I applaud Mercersburg Academy for taking this on – and it will require student life, parents, and neighbors to do their fair share, too.

Now, I said I was optimistic about our chances. Optimistic, but not delusional. I realize that a lot of what I have discussed today will require some serious behavioral change. I know a bunch of you checked your phone during my talk.

How many of you received an alert or update that made you angry or confirmed your political biases? Yep. Wouldn't it be great if at least some of those updates made you feel more hopeful about our ability to talk to each other or to govern ourselves?

Diagnosing a problem like this is hard, crafting a solution is harder and the hardest thing of all is executing that solution. In this case, we'll all need to at least aspire to be an effective citizen: well-informed, productively engaged for the common good, and committed to democracy. None of us does all these things all the time. Sometimes it's difficult, often it's inconvenient, yet we have to work toward this ideal.

Here are some specific things you can do to make a real difference—right now.

- Students: Listen thoughtfully to people who don't think like you and don't agree with you. Seek common ground. Learn how your government works. Be thoughtful information consumers - don't believe everything you see. Recognize that the opposite of democracy is autocracy. Don't conflate economic models with political models - you can challenge capitalism without toppling democracy. Vote. Volunteer.

Now, don't forget to remind your parents to do certain things as well:

- Parents: Don't think that this is solely the responsibility of Mercersburg or any other school. It's not. Role model what it means to be well-informed + productively engaged + committed to democracy. Listen thoughtfully to people who don't think like you and don't agree with you. Seek common ground. Vote. Volunteer. Provide the opportunities for your children AND OTHERS to become more effective citizens.

Finally, work with your teachers on the following:

- Teachers: Bring citizen preparation into your curriculum, irrespective of discipline. (For example, math teachers should consider using Citizen Math concepts of applying math to real-world challenges, as a way of teaching students more about the world around them.) Role model what it means to be well-informed + productively engaged + committed to democracy. Listen thoughtfully to people who don't think like you and don't agree with you. Seek common ground. Vote. Volunteer.

So, here's something that I remind **everyone, especially my daughter Annie.**

You need to develop your capacity for self-government. No one is coming to save you. No one else is going to solve this problem for you. In the end, this country requires you to be the citizens we need. It's time for all of you...and us to step up.

If we do this well, you will learn how democracy works in theory and in practice, locally, nationally, everywhere. You will be well-equipped to make a difference in your

communities. You will feel committed and hopeful about the future. You can, and you will, change the world. Thank you!