

AEI PROGRAM ON American Citizenship

POLICY BRIEF 8 • APRIL 2013

Creating Capital Citizens

César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy and Civic Education

By Richard Lee Colvin

This policy brief is the fifth in a series of in-depth case studies exploring how top-performing charter schools have incorporated civic learning in their school curriculum and school culture. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit www.citizenship-aei.org.

Chukwuma Isebor, an 18-year-old high school student whose father emigrated to the United States from Nigeria for college, says that prior to his senior year he was cynical and distrustful “of the government and the way it treated lower-income citizens and minorities.” Yet, there he was in December, arguing with two classmates before a panel of three judges that the patriotic spirit of the nation’s founders could be revived and the quality of American democracy improved if citizens participated more actively.

Chukwuma, Joseline Barajas, and Chyna Winchester are seniors at the César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy campus on 12th Street Southeast in Washington, DC, 11 blocks east of the Capitol. They offered up their thoughts on citizenship and democracy as they participated in the annual “We the People” competition at their school. The nationwide competition, sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, tests students’ knowledge of the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights in a congressional hearing-style format. Teams research an opening statement that responds to questions on one of the competition’s six themes and then answer queries from a panel of judges. The goal of the competition is to promote knowledge and appreciation of the Constitution as the foundation of democracy in the United States.

The three students and their classmates had spent several weeks preparing for the competition during American Government class, which all Chávez students are required to take and pass to graduate. The previous day, they had practiced their statements and answered questions posed to them by their teacher, Ayo Magwood, an economist who formerly worked as a researcher at the World Bank. She had urged all of them to include more

specific illustrations and examples from contemporary politics, policies, and US Supreme Court cases. “Look for cases where executive power was checked or where federal power was checked,” she told one group. “Don’t worry about the Articles of Confederation,” she told another group. “Get to the Constitution and current examples.”¹

When it was their turn to present their argument, Chukwuma, Joseline, and Chyna settled quickly and nervously into their seats at the front of the crowded classroom. The judges were a consultant with Deloitte, a policy analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation, and an enthusiastic former member of the US Coast Guard. The students were to discuss whether they agreed or disagreed with the idea that American democracy could be improved through the renewal of political institutions and citizen activism.

Joseline, a bright and outgoing student who takes care of her chronically ill mother and three younger siblings, was the first to speak. She said her team agreed that engaged citizenship and “a healthy skepticism of power can help keep our democracy strong because it can lead to people participating more and acting upon things they would like changed.” At the beginning of the school year, Joseline had thought the government class would be boring. But much to her surprise, it turned out to be her favorite—so much so that she began sharing the civic knowledge she was learning with her mother, who was preparing to take her American citizenship test. Her mother also got hooked on the class and eagerly looked forward to her daughter’s reports.

Next was Chukwuma, whose main interest when he came to Chávez was basketball. In his statement, he cited

the work of Meira Levinson, a Harvard political philosopher whose latest book, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Harvard University Press, 2012), examines the gap in civic engagement and empowerment between low-income minority students and their more affluent peers. It is a problem he and his classmates, who are all African American or Hispanic, relate to, Chukwuma told the judges. Last fall, he was among a group of Chávez students who fanned out into the Capitol Hill neighborhood to register voters and found deep apathy.

He credited Magwood with broadening his views of the government and his ability to affect it. She “has shown me that, instead of just being mad at the government, and not participating in it, I can actually have a voice and do something about my placement and treatment in this country,” he wrote in an email later. “I feel now that with hard work and diligence that you can move up in this country and improve the lives of yourself, others, and future generations. Though it may be harder for me because I am an African-American male, I still feel that I can accomplish great things and lead others to do the same.”

Chukwuma said he plans to major in American and African American history when he goes to college. “I have always been intrigued by the way this country was founded, and how, in its history, leaders have tried to claim that they are upholding [American] values when, in actuality, they’re not,” his email continued. “Also, though, I like the way that this country allows people to protest their grievances and . . . express themselves without prosecution.”

The third student to offer her views was Chyna, a quiet, thoughtful young woman who plans to major in performing arts at a community college in Western Maryland. She pointed to Martin Luther King Jr. as an example of how people can make a difference. “He protested non-violently and questioned the government . . . and argued that things needed to be changed,” she told the judges.

In answering questions from the judges, Joseline, Chukwuma, and Chyna discussed the Electoral College, super PACs, and the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* Supreme Court case and their effects on voting. Other classes participating in the competition were having similar conversations throughout the battered former furniture warehouse that now houses Chávez’s Capitol Hill campus. Students reflected on the importance of the Supreme Court’s *Marbury v. Madison* decision establishing the concepts of judicial review and separation of powers between the courts and the executive branch, the influence of natural law philosophers on the founders, Second Amendment rights, the tension between liberty and security inherent in the Patriot Act, and federalism.

In a classroom down the hall, a deep-voiced, serious senior named Tokumbo Adedeinde asserted that federalism and the balance of power between the central government and the states “was the greatest contribution of the Constitution to government.”

They were celebrating their knowledge of the Constitution and American government.

After all of the groups finished their presentations, and while the judges huddled privately to pick the winners, Krista Fantin, a former Teach for America fellow who teaches the Advanced Placement US Government class at Chávez, reconvened her students to celebrate their efforts. Soon, the students were packed together in an excited scrum in the center of the room with Fantin in the middle, hugging, jumping, shouting, and dancing. “As a class together, we all did a good job,” one student exulted. They were not celebrating a football or basketball championship. They were celebrating their knowledge of the Constitution and American government.

Results from the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam showed that, on that score, there is not a lot to celebrate at many other schools. Only one in five eighth graders and only one in four 12th graders could demonstrate proficiency in their knowledge and understanding of the Constitution, the presidency, Congress, the courts, and how laws are made. Over one-third of 12th graders did not possess even a rudimentary understanding of topics such as how the Constitution reflects the “purposes, values and principles of American democracy.”²

When the numbers are broken down by race and income level, they are even worse. Of white eighth graders in the United States, 29 percent are proficient, compared to only 9 percent of black students and 11 percent of Hispanic students. The disparities among 12th graders by race and ethnicity are nearly the same as they are by income level.

A lack of knowledge translates into lower rates of voting. A study by Richard J. Coley and Andrew Sum for the Educational Testing Service concluded that “the nation’s less-educated, lower-income and young adults have voluntarily disenfranchised themselves from the voting process.”³ Unsurprisingly, those groups reported paying hardly any attention to public affairs. This lack of

awareness and participation “should be viewed as a fault line in the bedrock of the nation’s democracy that must be addressed,” the authors wrote.⁴ Civic apathy “may lead to the ultimate death of democracy, or the moral and social decline of the state.”⁵ Chávez aims to teach its students to reverse these trends.

Closing the Civic Empowerment Gap

But knowledge alone is not enough to reverse what Levinson calls the “civic empowerment gap.” “I am convinced,” she writes, that “schools need to teach young people knowledge and skills to upend and reshape power relationships directly, through public, political, and civic action, not just private self-improvement.”⁶

Capitol Hill is one of two Chávez high schools; the other is located in the Parkside-Kenilworth neighborhood of Northeast Washington. A Chávez middle school operates on the Parkside-Kenilworth campus and another, Chávez Prep, operates in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. The mission of the four schools is to empower students by helping them both succeed in college and learn to use their knowledge of government, public policy, and effective advocacy techniques to become “civic leaders committed to bettering our communities, country, and world.”⁷

The school also wants students to “gain a sophisticated understanding of America’s founding principles by exploring how others have viewed and used these principles, uncovering connections between big ideas, and applying those ideas to current events.” To do that, “Chávez scholars learn and discuss Constitutional principles” as well as the stories of “individuals working for justice” to “more fully understand complex public policy problems, debate their details, and advocate for solutions.”⁸

Chávez’s approach to its mission has three components. First, the school wants students to be able to analyze issues and understand the nation’s founding principles and how they can be used to frame potential solutions. Second, Chávez wants students to be well equipped to take action to solve problems, so they are taught advocacy, communication, and interpersonal skills. Finally, the school wants to teach students to “believe in their own potential as change-agents and value their own personal experiences and identity.”⁹

The We the People competition is one of the highlights of the year for seniors as well as for eighth graders, who participate separately. Students spend three weeks preparing for the competition, and all are required to participate. This year, Fantin’s AP class came in first at the

Capitol Hill campus, and her students as well as the winning team from the Parkside campus later competed for the District of Columbia title. Chávez teams had won at that level and gone to the nationals the previous three years.

In 2013, as in previous years, there were only a few contestants: the two Chávez schools, National Cathedral School, an elite private girls school in Northwest Washington, and the Capital City Public Charter School. No schools from the District of Columbia Public Schools entered. Fantin’s class won again, and in June will go on to the nationals. Accomplishments such as that have given the schools, as well as their founder, Irasema Salcido, a national reputation.

In 1997, pregnant with her fifth child, Salcido left her job as an assistant principal at a DC public high school to start one of the first charter schools in the nation’s capital. She had worked in her previous job for six years and was frustrated that so many of her students were dropping out or graduating barely able to read or do simple arithmetic. She also was frustrated because they and their communities were marginalized politically, ignored by local political leaders and unable to do much about severe issues such as poverty, housing, crime, health care, the limited availability of healthy food, and a lack of jobs.

Salcido knew about challenges. She had arrived in the United States at the age of 14, the daughter of Mexican immigrant farmworkers, unable to speak a word of English. On weekends she worked in the fields of Southern California but also studied hard in school and learned to read English by memorizing textbooks. It took her seven years to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration from California State University, Fullerton. “I cannot tell you how painful it is to go to college . . . and not have the skills,” she told a group of students, urging them to “keep pushing yourselves harder and harder and harder.”

Salcido recalled that, once she got to college, she looked around and thought to herself, “Where are the people who look like me?” She then took the bold step of going across the country to Harvard to earn a Master of Education degree. Education had been her ticket to a better life, and she wanted that for the students at her school in DC as well. “At the end of the day,” she said, “it is about justice and equality.”

She named the school after César Chávez, the civil rights and labor leader, because she wanted her students to know that even a poor farmworker could accumulate enough power to change people’s lives. “Students need to understand that who they are matters, and what they bring matters, and that they have access to the system of government, just like César Chávez did,” Salcido said.

But they also need to learn that “they need a college education to continue to be a change agent.”

The high school opened with 60 students in the fall of 1998 in the basement of a Safeway store. She expected that it would attract students who were behind academically because that had been her experience in the DC public schools. She was not prepared, however, for just how far behind they were. To help the students catch up, Salcido recruited 60 personal tutors. At the end of the year, she decided that 75 percent of the freshman class was not ready to go on to the next grade. It was a setback. How could the school teach kids to change the world if they did not know how to read or write or use mathematics to argue for changes in policy?

“Students need to understand that who they are matters, and what they bring matters, and that they have access to the system of government.”

Salcido did not want to just prepare students to raise their voices in protest. She wanted them to have something significant to say and to be able to use logic and reason and evidence to persuade others of the merits of their point of view. That meant they needed to know history, be able to conduct research, be effective writers and communicators, and understand their rights and obligations under the Constitution. “We have to make sure they understand our country and our democracy, and can take their knowledge and skills and design public policy solutions,” she said.

Helping students achieve these goals has been and, 15 years later, continues to be a daunting challenge, although she and her faculty have made significant progress. They serve 1,400 students in four schools on three campuses. About three-quarters of the students are African American, and nearly all the rest are Latino. Eighty-four percent of the students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches, and 14 percent qualify for special education services.¹⁰ Almost every year, 100 percent of the schools’ graduates are accepted into college, despite the fact that many of them were years behind academically when they came to Chávez. About 75 percent actually enroll in college. More than 80 percent of the class of 2011 returned to college for their second year.

Over the past five years, the schools’ leaders have worked hard revamping the curriculum to make it more rigorous and to make sure civic education and public policy are incorporated more fully into every class. They have put in place supports for students who are behind academically. And they have established strong cultures that invite students to get involved and engaged and give them opportunities to influence what happens at their schools. The schools are still far from where Salcido knows they need to be. But her commitment to the dual purposes of preparing students to function effectively as citizens and succeed in college remains as strong as ever.

What Citizenship Means on Campus

The emphasis on public policy and civic education at Chávez starts with teaching students what it means to be a citizen of the schools. At Chávez-Bruce Preparatory Charter middle school, for example, new students and their families are required to attend meetings over the summer at which they receive the school handbook and discuss uniforms and the discipline code.

During the first week of school in the fall, new students are taught how to walk in the hallways, the proper way to sit in class, and what it means to collaborate with their peers. Students are expected to participate in activities designed to knit them into a strong, cohesive community. “We spend a significant amount of time as a school analyzing, preparing for, delivering, and monitoring the school culture,” said Chávez Prep principal Bryan Eberwein. “We are very, very deliberate about reminding kids of their part in the school. We don’t have security guards. We don’t have metal detectors. But because the culture is strong, we don’t need those things.”

The school also works hard to help students develop a strong sense of identity. In the sixth grade, students explore who they are and what they have to offer those around them, including their family, peers, and community. In the seventh grade, students focus on understanding their relationship to the world, and in the eighth grade, they explore their relationship to the nation. “Kids with a strong sense of identity become their own advocates, and they can say what they need, they can set goals, make a plan to reach those goals, and then reach them,” Eberwein said.

Because students are clear on their roles and responsibilities, teachers feel comfortable sharing control of the classroom with them. “We’re not one of those schools telling kids what to do all the time,” Eberwein said. “Kids are a very active part of the school community, and then

broaden that to their homes, their neighborhoods, and DC at large. If they can see themselves for who they are, they can figure out how to make a difference.”

The Columbia Heights campus, perhaps not surprisingly given the school’s emphasis on participation, also has an active student government. “The kids are really vocal about the things they like about the school and the things they don’t like,” Eberwein said. On the list of dislikes are school uniforms and the school lunch menu. “Kids will say, ‘I don’t understand why we have to have uniforms. It impedes my right of self-expression and stifles my creativity,’” Eberwein said. “They’ll also offer solutions and . . . take an active role in changing what they want to see changed.”

A 2011 analysis of the level of students’ civic empowerment at the Chávez Capitol Hill campus found that many students had learned how to be political activists.

A strong sense of shared culture is needed to channel that activism in productive ways. “You have to be prepared for what is going to come your way when you cultivate in kids a strong sense of self and agency and empower them to make a difference,” Eberwein said.

The same philosophy is evident at the Parkside campus. There, during an orientation session at the beginning of the 2012–13 year, students were briefed on the school’s P.A.R. behavior code, which stands for “Professionalism. Active engagement. Respect.” On the first day, some students who were talking when they should have been listening were admonished, “If you’re talking, you’re not on P.A.R.” But the students also were encouraged to become leaders. “Tell us the things you want to do, and we’ll make it happen for you,” assistant principal Mark Sturdivant told them. “We love students to come and speak up and to lead.”

Students at the Capitol Hill campus meet with a teacher in an advisory period each morning. One of the regular strands of discussions in those meetings is the students’ likes and dislikes about the school. When the students identify an issue, they research possible solutions and present them to Principal Daneen Keaton in a town hall–style meeting. “When students are empowered, they want to challenge everything,” she said. “We

want them to be critical, but we also want them to stop and say, ‘Thank you.’ You can’t just complain. The school-wide structure is designed to get them to focus on being solution-oriented.”

Keaton said one class proposed allowing students to go off-campus for lunch. “Not going to happen,” she told them. “But it forces me to explain and clarify why I won’t do something. I can’t just say no. I can say, ‘No, and here’s why’ or ‘Yes, but’ or ‘Yes.’”

A freshman advisory class was concerned about bullying at the school. The students researched the issue and made a presentation to the entire school in which they suggested setting up boxes to collect anonymous reports on incidents of bullying. “We did it that very day,” Keaton said. “The kids were so excited that their idea was accepted on the spot.” In previous years, students had developed petitions, lobbied school leaders, and used other tactics to push for healthier meals, exceptions to the strict uniform policy (like the freedom to wear different types of shoes), and permission to bring cell phones to school if they remained off during class.

A 2011 analysis of the level of students’ civic empowerment at the Chávez Capitol Hill campus found that many students had learned how to be political activists. They had learned how to identify solutions to perceived problems, collect evidence in support of their position, write petitions, gather support from other students, and make their case to administrators.¹¹ The analysis found that students did not always think they were being listened to, nor did they always agree with the outcome of their activism. But they did possess and use political skills that they could draw on in other contexts outside of school. That, of course, is the school’s goal.

Keaton said she wants to “create space where they can be heard in school and where I can ask questions of them and respond in real time to their real concerns. It teaches them self-advocacy skills and it teaches them to advocate to leaders about what they want. It gets kids to analyze the problem, and the closer they get to that, the closer we get to fulfilling our mission.”

Preparing Students to Be Effective Advocates

All Chávez students are required to apply what they learn in class about issues, government, and activism to real situations. Sixth graders at the two Chávez middle schools, for example, learn about local governance by making a case for solutions to problems before the DC City Council and writing letters to the mayor. Seventh graders examine a

federal issue and take a field trip to nearby Capitol Hill to discuss their ideas with legislative staffers. In the eighth grade, students learn about the judiciary branch by taking part in *We the People* and in moot courts that focus on constitutional issues.

Ninth graders participate in a town hall discussion of local problems chosen by teachers and learn about public opinion and community organizing in the context of a science unit on pollution in the Anacostia River. In the 10th grade, students spend three weeks learning about an international issue, which teaches them the concepts of national sovereignty, liberty, and security. In recent years, the topic has been the drug trafficking crisis in Mexico. They then organize a “youth summit,” at which they present both written and oral reports on domestic and foreign policies that might help.

A group of 10th graders also spends a week in New Orleans helping it rebuild from Hurricane Katrina. Before they go, they hear from speakers who address different aspects of low-income housing. Once there, they meet with community activists and organizers, local politicians, lobbyists, and other leaders. One of the purposes of the trip is to demonstrate to the students ways individuals can influence policies and transform communities. Another is to broaden students’ experiences. In the 11th grade, students learn about an economic issue, after which they organize a teach-in forum. This year, the students will study the federal budget deficit and negotiations.

From the ninth grade on, students also spend the last two or three weeks of the school year working on public policy full time. Teachers help students identify the topics and guide them in how to conduct research and communicate their insights to relevant groups and agencies. The projects earn students credits toward graduation as well as toward fulfilling the school’s requirement of 100 hours of community service. In the ninth grade, they do a public policy capstone project. For it, students examine a problem in the community, bringing to bear the concepts of freedom and equality. They then work on getting attention for a solution by writing letters to the editor or discussing it with local officials. Tenth graders complete a “community action project” in which they analyze an issue their teachers have helped them identify in greater depth and write a policy report.

During the spring semester, high school juniors have a college advisory class that meets twice a week and covers how to function in a professional environment, how to prepare a résumé, interviewing techniques, and networking skills, as well as how to apply to college. That class culminates in a full-time, three-week fellowship with a public policy nonprofit, a lobbying or advocacy organization, or

the office of an elected official or a governmental agency. Teachers choose three organizations for each student based on their interests and performance in the advisory class. Students then have to interview for the slots, and the organizations select the student they would like to have work with them.

The organizations design an internship that will teach the students about a policy issue, the types of jobs available to public-interest professionals, and the basic job skills required in a professional setting.¹² During the internship, students are paired with a mentor from the workplace, who helps guide them. Students have done fellowships with the Congressional Black Caucus, congressional offices, the Alliance for Justice, the office of the US Attorney, the World Bank, the DC Department of Public Works, the American Lung Association, the Central American Resource Center, and many others.

**“You can really make a difference
 if we all collaborate to
 demand change.”**

The fellowship is much more than a break from school. Students are required to draft an op-ed and a speech they might give at a legislative hearing on an issue they learned about during their fellowship. After completing it, students are required to prepare a presentation that summarizes their experience and what they have learned. They then present it at a formal evening event at which they are expected to dress in a professional manner. They are judged on their presentation against a rubric, and their performance affects their grade for the course. If they fail the course, they have to retake it and do another fellowship their senior year.

All of these activities are designed to lead up to the senior thesis and advocacy project. All seniors take a full-year thesis class, a one-semester government class, and a one-semester class on the history of the District of Columbia. Whereas the 9th, 10th, and 11th grade advocacy projects are organized and closely supervised by Chávez teachers, the thesis is a 15- to 20-page policy analysis on a topic or issue that students choose and work on independently. Students have to present their analysis publicly to a panel of judges who work on policy issues. Then, they have to use the thesis as the basis for “supporting a cause or attempting to influence public policies affecting a cause.”¹³

Students can meet this requirement by working to “influence government officials to change or adopt a public policy” or to “fund or eliminate a program affecting a topic” by speaking at a hearing or writing a letter. Or they can get involved in “community or grassroots organizations to convince residents to work together to solve a community problem.” A third option is to build community awareness of a problem or urge a change in behavior in a community by distributing flyers or organizing an event.

In 2010, one student made a presentation to the Capitol Hill campus PTA that debunked myths about the US Census and urged the parents to complete and submit the Census form. He arranged for an automated robocall carrying the same message to be made to all of the parents. And he gave Spanish-speaking students Spanish-language guides to the Census to give to their parents.

That same year, another student lobbied the DC City Council to bring the Nurse-Family Partnership Program to the District of Columbia. This program provides support to low-income teen mothers to help them stay healthy and learn to be good parents. The student worked with the DC Campaign against Teen Pregnancy during her fellowship and became passionate about its mission.

“Before doing my advocacy project, I would hear people say it makes a difference when it comes from the youth, but I never actually believed that,” the student later wrote. “But now, after I have completed my advocacy project, I believe it. You can really make a difference if we all collaborate to demand change.” The student kept working on the issue even after satisfying the advocacy requirement. “Because of [my] thesis I have found an issue I feel really strong about and will not stop until I feel as though I have made a difference in the lives of teen mothers and their children,” she wrote in a testament to her teachers.

Another student had a fellowship with the Campaign for Youth Justice, a DC-based organization that fights the incarceration of juveniles as adults. For her advocacy project, the student persuaded 100 organizations nationwide to sign onto a resolution opposing those policies and wrote an article for the organization’s newsletter. “It is an extraordinary experience to know that I have had a hand in fixing the problem that we are faced with,” the student wrote in an essay. “My advocacy project taught me that raising public awareness and gaining public support are key steps in making change.”

Sitra Addus-Salaam was among five Chávez seniors from the graduating class of 2012 who discussed their work last June at a symposium in the elegantly restored, wood-paneled César Chávez Auditorium at the US

Department of Labor. In the audience of about 45 people were representatives of the White House Domestic Policy Council, the White House Office of Public Engagement, the Department of Labor, and the US Department of Education.

For her capstone and community action projects, Sitra, an honor student who earned a 3.7 grade point average, researched AIDS, HIV, and obesity. That work led her to focus on health care policy for her thesis. She reported that 50 million Americans do not have health insurance and that half of bankruptcies are caused by health care costs arising from a serious illness or accident. For her, the issue also was personal. “My mother died of cancer at the age of 53, and she spent her last days of life in a hospital room, arguing with an insurance company that said her cancer was a preexisting condition,” Sitra told the audience. She called for policies that would broaden the right to adequate health care, whether it was provided by the government or underwritten by private insurers.

Khadija Jones, another 2012 graduate, had researched the use of the death penalty in the United States, and she was poised as she presented her findings at the Department of Labor event. She discussed *Furman v. Georgia*, the 1972 Supreme Court case that suspended executions because the penalty was being applied inconsistently, and *Gregg v. Georgia*, a 1976 Supreme Court case that reinstated it. She also presented data that showed that “the race of the victim does play a very important role in determining whether the person who committed the crime is executed,” she said. One day, she told the gathering, “I believe the death penalty will be abolished.”

Khadija had been accepted at Coppin State University in Baltimore, where she planned to study history and education. She said she had intended to become an actress, but the public policy curriculum at Chávez inspired her to become a teacher instead. “Our curriculum is awesome,” she said. “Now, I want to do something in my community.”

Tensions Fundamental to the Constitution

The thesis class has been substantially revised over the past several years, part of a broader overhaul of the Chávez curriculum to make it more intellectually demanding and engaging. Ayo Magwood, the teacher mainly responsible for the thesis class at the Capitol Hill campus, said that until recently the class focused more on teaching students to write a research paper than it did on helping them hone their ability to analyze public policies. In the past, the students’ final reports documented what

they had read and, in their presentations, they “just spit back what they had memorized.” They were almost like book reports, she said.

One of the first changes was to add the advocacy requirement. “I’m very, very strict that it has to be community organizing or testifying or advocating in some way,” Magwood said. “It really helps them to make the connection in their heads that, instead of just a paper about animal abuse, they’re really doing something about animal abuse.”

The advocacy projects, the fellowship, and the required public policy thesis are distinctive features of the Chávez schools.

She and her colleagues wanted the thesis to also serve as an opportunity for students to test their analytical powers and boost their knowledge of the Constitution. One way to do that was to have students enrolled in both the thesis class and US Government at the same time so that students could use a concept such as federalism to analyze policies rather than just memorizing them.

Magwood also revised the curriculum of the government class. Instead of just teaching students to memorize the mechanics of the government, she now stresses inherent tensions at work in the Constitution. One is the tension between individual rights and the common good, an example of which is the trade-off between liberty and security. Another is the tension between state and federal power. A third tension lies between the concepts of equity and efficiency, which requires students to think about the circumstances under which the government might serve the interests of a minority over those of the majority.

She devotes an entire unit to each of those tensions and uses actual policy dilemmas to bring them into focus. During one class, for example, students discussed whether, in the case of abortion, the rights of the mother or the rights of the fetus should be more important. Another discussion dealt with the No Child Left Behind Act and whether education policy is best made at the local, state, or national level. A third discussion focused on mandatory minimum sentencing posed the question of whether “it’s OK for a policy to disproportionately affect minorities if it succeeds in improving neighborhood security.” This approach is now being used in all of Chávez’s non-Advanced Placement Government classes

at both the Capitol Hill and Parkside campuses. The AP students have to study a curriculum designed to help them pass the exam.

In an article about her teaching, Magwood writes, “In each unit, the students first learned the historical, philosophical, and Constitutional roots and contexts of each conceptual tension. For example, they learned that the value of individual rights is rooted in Natural Rights philosophy, the experiences of colonists under King George and the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Due Process clause.”

She continues, “Once they understand the historical and Constitutional context for the tension, students spend the bulk of each unit exploring the tension through current public policy Supreme Court cases. For example, in the individual rights vs. common good unit, we used *Morse v. Frederick* (free speech clause of the 1st Amendment), *U.S. v. Jones* (search and seizure clause of the 5th Amendment), and *Lawrence v. Texas* (Due Process clause of the 14th Amendment).”¹⁴

Frequent moot courts give students opportunities to practice that skill as they argue different sides of famous Supreme Court cases. Last fall, for example, her class debated the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, in which the justices ruled that the military commissions set up to try prisoners held at Guantánamo Bay violated the Geneva Convention. Magwood had assigned students to be the justices and the attorneys for each side. She had discussed with them the government’s assertions that the president had broad powers to protect the nation in a time of war and also the limitations on those powers lawyers for the defendant claimed should exist.

As the six students who had been chosen as justices filed into the room wearing black robes, the rest of the students stood and one called the court to order, solemnly intoning, “Oyez, oyez, oyez.” The students acting as lawyers for Salim Ahmed Hamdan, a Yemeni national who has been described by prosecutors as a driver for Osama bin Laden, went first. They argued that Mr. Hamdan had been treated inhumanely and denied his rights of due process, that the executive branch had overstepped its bounds, that the Geneva Convention had been violated, and that only the Supreme Court had the power to create special courts. The government’s attorneys argued that Congress had given the president the power to fight terrorism and that the Geneva Convention did not apply because war had not been declared. After several questions to each side and time for rebuttals, the student justices ruled 4–2 in favor of the executive branch, reaching a different conclusion than the real justices had.

The moot courts and other opportunities to discuss sensitive, emotionally charged topics in class also serve another purpose, helping students learn to engage in civil discourse despite disagreement. “This is a part of civics,” Magwood said. “Not just voting, but also participating in civil discourse with arguments backed up by reason and evidence. Not just yelling and screaming, but trying to understand the other side by exchanging views. Kids now routinely volunteer on their own for which side they’ll defend, and they even take sides that they disagree with, which helps them understand the other side better.”

Integrating Public Policy throughout the Curriculum

The advocacy projects, the fellowship, and the required public policy thesis are distinctive features of the Chávez schools. Ever since the schools opened their doors, Salcido and other leaders had said that all classes should include some lessons and projects related to public policy. But five years ago, when the Chávez schools were going through the process for renewing their charter, it became clear that was not happening routinely and that the public policy activities were disconnected from the rest of the school’s curriculum. That was one of the reasons that the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, the authorizing entity for DC charter schools, gave the schools only a provisional charter renewal. The board directed the schools to integrate public policy into the curriculum and not relegate it to a few projects or a specified time of the year.

The rewrite of the curriculum began in 2009 and accelerated in 2011–12, when the leaders of the schools decided to embrace the Common Core State Standards, which emphasize problem solving, critical analysis, and gathering evidence to evaluate the strength of claims—all of which are relevant to the study of public policy.

“The Common Core gave us another opportunity to . . . reexamine our mission of being a school for public policy and analyze in a concrete way how to make this very abstract and ambiguous thing come alive in our classrooms,” said Tracy Wright, the chief academic officer for the schools. “And we realized it wasn’t just about incorporating knowledge about public policy and the political process. It was about teaching kids how to influence those things.”

Now, the school’s curriculum is organized around public policy as it relates to four large themes: power, identity, freedom, and relationships. “Facts are important,” said Juliet Mohnkern, the director of public policy

and curriculum innovation who led the curriculum overhaul along with her predecessor, Julie Harris Stern. “You can’t understand concepts without facts. . . . They still need to know about the Civil War, but they learn about it in the context of freedom. If we don’t make it meaningful, they’ll lose the facts. It’s a lost cause without a conceptual framework to put the facts into.”

What that looks like in practice is a unit in a health class that examines food and nutrition in the context of public policies and personal freedom. The class also studies the enormous health disparities in the country and researches ways that policies have helped create or ameliorate that situation.

A science class learns about cause and effect by studying the relationship between humans and natural resources and researching pollution in the Anacostia River and how it got that way. A mathematics class learns about ratios and proportions by studying the distribution of parks compared to the distribution of liquor stores by neighborhood.

Emily Olsen, a third-year teacher at the Chávez Parkside campus, served as the main writer for Chávez’s seventh grade math curriculum. A political science major, Olsen said that, for her, Chávez was a “match made in heaven” because of its focus on civic education. She acknowledged that it can be challenging to figure out how to combine the disciplinary thinking of mathematics and public policy issues in the same lesson. But she said those lessons are more intellectually rigorous than ones in which students just learn mathematics in isolation.

“In order for students to develop innovative solutions to the problems of the 21st Century, students must become expert critical thinkers,” the school’s explanation of its public policy philosophy says. That means they need to understand “the thinking of each discipline, the big ideas and ways of reasoning.”¹⁵

To support the curriculum, Chávez merged its public policy and curriculum teams and invested heavily in professional development, much of which is delivered by Mohnkern and her team. Teachers receive several weeks of training in the summer, three hours each week during the school year, and a full day once per quarter. The sessions focus on the substance of the curriculum as well as how to teach it effectively.

Wright said teachers have to learn how to preview unfamiliar content, create specific learning goals, help students generate and test hypotheses, and use rubrics so that students can monitor their own learning. Teacher evaluations also are closely linked to the curriculum, she said.

Teachers assess students’ mastery at the end of every unit in every class “via authentic intellectual performance tasks that require critical and disciplinary thinking.”¹⁶

The schools' 17-page midterm for the eighth grade English class in the fall of 2012, for example, asked students to complete a variety of tasks related to the concepts of justice and power and their relationship. They had to read and analyze several passages from a 1964 Malcolm X speech in which the famous political activist argued that, in some cases, bringing about social change "by any means necessary" is justified. The students then had to respond to a hypothetical letter from the women of Afghanistan asking them how Malcolm X would advise them to gain power over their lives. Students had to read several articles about the situation in Afghanistan and justify their answer to the letter by quoting his speeches.

Revamping the curriculum also led to a reexamination of the capstone, community action, thesis, and fellowship projects. Now, in each of these, students evaluate policies in terms of power, justice, equality, and identity. During the fellowship, for example, students are expected to learn that "there are no right or wrong answers to whether the government should intervene in issues or what the best solution to that issue is, but there are better or worse reasoned answers."¹⁷ Another goal is for them to learn that "a healthy civil sphere is vital to a healthy democracy."

The changes in curriculum were not welcomed by all teachers. Some left, and others participated only reluctantly. It also caused Chávez to change its staffing and hiring practices. In the past, TFA supplied many of its teachers. More recently, the system has hired people who have more teaching experience and a passion for public policy and social change. Current teachers at the Capitol Hill campus, for example, include a Swarthmore graduate who majored in political science, an economics major who also has a Master's in Education degree from Harvard, a economics major from Vanderbilt, a veteran of two presidential campaigns, and a former broadcast journalist who earned a master's from American University in human rights. Magwood, whose master's degree is in economic policy, spent four years helping farmers in rural Mexico gain power over economic development in their region. Meredith Morelle, an English teacher, wrote in her biography on the school's website that she is "thrilled to be a part of a school whose mission is to improve our society by empowering students to be agents of change."

One of the biggest instructional challenges at Chávez is that many students are still far behind in mathematics and reading and writing when they enroll. All one has to do to appreciate the academic challenges teachers and administrators at Chávez schools face is step into Wright's office. Her desk faces a corkboard filled with row upon row of red, green, blue, and white pushpins, which represent the students who have been identified as needing

special education services. Wright believes most of them fall into that category only because they have been previously mistaught. Only a few pins are green, representing the students who are passing all of their classes. Most of the pins are red. They represent ninth grade students who are failing at least four of their classes. On another wall is a chart representing students who do not receive special education but who are nonetheless far behind and failing classes.

"Chávez has allowed me to see how to change things, instead of just being ignorant."

The schools are now better equipped to help those students than they were in 1997, when Salcido founded them. All 9th, 10th, and 11th graders take two periods of mathematics and two periods of English to accelerate their improvement. The school also has purchased an intensive reading program for those experiencing the most difficulty and offers tutoring after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer.

The new curriculum, and new performance assessments designed to go with it, have given the school and its teachers "far more clarity around our expectations about what they should know and be able to do with what they know by the time they leave here," Wright said. Only a few years ago, she said, "I heard excuses that these children are behind so they can't do this. I heard that all of the time. We are not at that place any more. We have shifted into this 'no-excuses' place, where we recognize the kids are behind, but there are many schools that have figured out how to [help students achieve] and we're going to be one of those schools. Whenever you have lofty goals like ours and you work in high-needs areas where kids come to you with all kinds of skill deficits, you have to hold tight to the mission and provide those big-thinking opportunities for kids and then figure out how to scaffold their learning experiences and your support because that's honoring kids and not depriving them of that higher goal."

Academically, three out of the four Chávez schools are designated as Tier 2 by the District of Columbia Charter School Board. That puts them in a broadly defined middle group. Of the students at the Capitol Hill, and Parkside High School and Middle School campuses, 40 to 45 percent are proficient or advanced in English. About 60 percent are proficient or advanced in

mathematics. The Chávez Prep campus, where about half of the students are proficient or advanced in English and nearly 80 percent meet that standard in mathematics, is considered a Tier 1 school. Nearly 90 percent of the students graduate from high school, and most of them matriculate into college.

Salcido knows that the schools cannot be judged successful unless students do not just go to college but also stay there until graduation, and anecdotally, it seems that most of them do.¹⁸ But she also judges the schools by whether students become active, engaged citizens who work to improve American democracy.

“As a country, we have to look at how we can keep pushing ourselves to get better,” she said. Her schools’ contribution to that cause is to make sure their graduates can use their knowledge of the Constitution to participate fully in that process. “We can all complain and expect equality and freedom and peace. But the country is not preventing us from doing that. We honor our country by doing something about the things we think are not right.”

Many students have heard that message loudly and clearly and feel prepared to rise to the challenge. Marcus Edwards, a senior, studied the problem of homelessness for his capstone project. He visited shelters and nonprofits that focus on the problem. “It helped me understand better how laws affect people and how certain people need help and made me want to help them more,” he said.

Angelo Daniels, another senior, said Chávez teaches students about much more than just math and reading. He always knew he wanted to major in communications. But, as he expressed it, he did not know what he wanted “to communicate about.” At Chávez, he studied the high incarceration rates of minority males. He said, “That gave me a passion about what I want to do in college,” which is to learn to spread the word about that problem.

Kevin Jamison, a senior, recalled that his ninth grade capstone focused on illegal drug use and its effects. He researched the topic and learned more by visiting an organization that distributes clean needles and condoms and provides rehabilitation services for addicts. He, like students in all three of Magwood’s government classes, has helped register voters. “At first, I was like, if you want to vote, it’s up to you. People were saying ignorant things, saying the vote doesn’t count. But, if people don’t vote they’re not going to change that. Chávez has allowed me to see how to change things, instead of just being ignorant,” he said.

Another student said Chávez “makes you really open to stuff. Most of us were closed-minded. But they introduce you to things, teach you about the world, and you become really open to what’s going on and make you aware of things you wouldn’t know.”

Kemari Alston was a member of the winning We the People team that will go to the national competition this summer. She said she was excited about winning. “But I’m more proud that I was answering all those questions and the hard work we did to get up to that point,” she said.

Her thesis explores the root causes of poverty. Efforts to solve poverty, she said, “probably aren’t looking at the most important issues. Where does poverty start? It starts with education and family issues. You can hand out clothes and stuff, but that’s not going to change anything. You have to go to the root of it.”

“This school has prepared me to think more critically,” she added. “I started out thinking things were black and white, but there are gray issues to all of this stuff. The school has really achieved its mission.”

Author Biography

Richard Lee Colvin is a longtime education journalist and a visiting fellow at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. He writes a monthly column on Washington education policies and politics for *Kappan* magazine, the publication of the Phi Delta Kappa society. He also is the author of *Tilting the Windmills: School Reform, San Diego, and America’s Race to Reform Public Education* (Harvard Education Press, April 2013).

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Chávez faculty and students come from author interviews or observations between August 2012 and January 2013.
2. National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Civics 2010, Grades 4, 8, and 12, http://nationsreportcard.gov/civics_2010.
3. Richard J. Coley and Andrew Sum, “Fault Lines in Our Democracy: Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior, and Civic Engagement in the United States,” ETS, 2012, 17, www.ets.org/s/research/19386/rsc/pdf/18719_fault_lines_report.pdf.
4. *Ibid.*, 30.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 13.
7. Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy, “Vision Statement,” www.chavezschools.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=124179&type=d&pREC_ID=246049&hideMenu=1.
8. Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy, “Fact Sheet 2012–2013,” provided to author.

9. Ibid.
10. Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy, “Demographics,” www.chavezschools.org/about/demographics.jsp.
11. Pamela Jane Gordon, *Building Voice, Taking Action: Experiences of Youth from a Civic Focused School*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011.
12. Chávez Schools document describing the desired outcomes of the Chávez Public Policy Fellowship, provided to author.
13. Advocacy Project Assignment Sheet from Chávez Schools.
14. Ayo Magwood, forthcoming in *Social Education*, the journal of the National Council of Social Studies, in spring 2013.
15. Chávez Schools, “Fact Sheet 2012–2013,” provided to author.
16. Ibid.
17. Chávez Schools document describing the desired outcomes of the Chávez Public Policy Fellowship, provided to author.
18. Email exchange with Susan Flora, Chávez Schools.

Previous Briefs in This Series

- **Charter Schools as Nation Builders: Democracy Prep and Civic Education**, *Daniel Lautzenheiser and Andrew P. Kelly*
- **Counting on Character: National Heritage Academies and Civic Education**, *Joanne Jacobs*
- **Making Americans: UNO Charter Schools and Civic Education**, *David Feith*
- **In Service of Citizenship: YES Prep Public Schools and Civic Education**, *Robert Maranto*