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In Service of Citizenship

YES Prep Public Schools and Civic Education

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This policy brief is the fourth 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.

The “YES” in the name of YES Prep Public Schools stands for Youth Engaged in Service. From its start as a program at Rusk Elementary School in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) in 1995 to its opening as a single independent charter school in 1998 to its current network of 10 grade 6–12 campuses with some 600 teachers serving 6,400 students, YES Prep has emphasized citizenship through service to the community.

YES Prep is often compared to another “no-excuses” network of charter schools: the much touted Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). Like KIPP, YES Prep began in the 1990s in Houston before chartering with the support of then-HISD Superintendent Rod Paige. Both networks were founded by and are still largely staffed by Teach for America (TFA) corps members.¹ (In a survey of YES Prep social studies teachers I conducted, 61 percent reported being trained by an alternative program such as TFA, compared to 17 percent of traditional public school social studies teachers.²) Both charter networks are highly successful academically; YES Prep boasts a 100 percent college placement rate and high college completion rates for low-income students. Seventy-two percent of YES Prep alumni have completed college or are making progress toward that goal, compared to around 10 percent of disadvantaged students generally.³ Like KIPP, YES Prep serves a predominantly minority student population (86 percent Hispanic), 78 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged.⁴

The most systematic comparison of charter school student achievement to date ranks YES Prep among the top charter organizations nationally. In short, YES Prep can be counted as one of the premier high-poverty/high-achievement charter schools.⁵

Both KIPP and YES Prep are known for character education, as captured by slogans like KIPP’s “Work hard. Be nice.” At YES Prep, such exhortations, many originally collected in 1999 by students, adorn the halls and are called “Thinks and Acts.” Both KIPP and YES Prep stress hard work and personal responsibility. Students must *earn* their class shirts, trips, and other perks of school citizenship.

Similarly, staff members in each network are not tenured and are known for doing “whatever it takes,” as another common slogan puts it, to prepare students for college success. As one YES Prep student told me, compared to his old school, “Here all of the teachers are working hard, and all of the students are working hard. Here it is a shared effort from everybody.”⁶ Similarly, a teacher who had previously worked in a wealthier school district said, “Everyone is working hard here, students, teachers, parents, staff, everyone. Before I felt the teachers were working, but they were not necessarily getting support from others. . . . Here it is more of a team effort.” Like KIPP, YES Prep conducts home visits to build relationships with its overwhelmingly low-income and minority parents, who have often had less-than-positive experiences with schooling.

Finally, both KIPP and YES Prep stress college readiness and test regularly to ensure students are on track. At YES Prep, this takes the form of common assessments three times annually, which are aligned with AP exams. At both KIPP and YES Prep, student scores on standardized tests are often posted on classroom walls, with students encouraged to improve their own scores rather than competing against peers; everyone is expected to succeed.

YES Prep provides extensive college counseling, college tours, and assistance with college and scholarship applications, along with school traditions that are woven into the fabric of the school. For example, seniors ring a loud brass bell each time one is accepted to a four-year college, winning the applause of their classmates—a tradition started at one campus that quickly spread to the others. I watched at the YES Prep Southeast campus as a student rang the bell between class sessions and everyone within hearing distance applauded. A student asked, “Who is it?” and another said loudly, “Mario just got into Texas State.” Shortly thereafter, the bell rang two more times.

Outside the school “College Corner,” where counseling, testing, and a few classes take place, was a large thermometer showing that as of December 2012, 95 of 97 seniors had submitted all their college applications. By mid-February well over 90 percent of YES Prep Southeast seniors had gained admission to a college. Hanging in the school cafeteria (called “the Union,” like a college student union) are more than 70 college posters, each listing the YES Prep Southeast graduates who are currently attending or have matriculated from that college. Other campuses have similar posters, and peers expect one another to join the lists.

Students praised YES Prep college counselors as vital. As one put it, “they are always on you and make the process easy.”⁷ Most dramatically, YES Prep has an annual college “Signing Day” to mirror the attention given college athletic signees. The 2012 Signing Day was held at the Toyota Center, the stadium where the Houston Rockets play. One by one, seniors announced where they will attend college, declaring, “In four years, I will graduate from . . .” before cheering teachers, peers, and family members.

Despite their many similarities, KIPP and YES Prep have significant differences. While KIPP started with middle schools and now has a variety of grade configurations, YES Prep serves grades 6–12. While KIPP has 125 campuses in 20 states and the District of Columbia, YES Prep has stayed and grown in Houston, making it a more tightly controlled and more uniform organization, with teachers apt to use common assessments and data to drive student improvement. Teachers refer to YES Prep as a whole as “the district,” reflecting the commonalities across the 10 campuses. (In addition, YES Prep runs a school in partnership with the Spring Branch Independent School District near Houston.)

Teacher surveys show evidence of these commonalities across YES Prep campuses. In a 2010 national survey of high school social studies teachers, the AEI Program on American Citizenship found that nearly half of public

school teachers (and 86 percent of private school teachers) reported having “a great deal of control” over topics covered in class and the pace of instruction.⁸ Only 14 percent of YES Prep teachers agree, though another 66 percent report having some control.

On the other hand, while many studies find that teachers have poor relations with their administrators,⁹ many YES Prep teachers praise their administrators, particularly their academic deans, who teach part-time but also visit classrooms each week to observe and offer teachers feedback. Deans assess teachers using a common rubric that determines merit pay awards. Each dean has about 13 teachers to mentor.

From the school’s start, YES Prep founder Chris Barbic wanted it to produce “great people as well as great scholars.”

Many teachers commented that unlike other schools where they had taught, deans at YES Prep helped rather than hindered their teaching. One rookie reported that her TFA mentor advised her to go to YES Prep since as a new teacher she would “get more support there.” Ninety-three percent of YES Prep social studies teachers surveyed agreed with the statement, “My principal or dean has helped improve my teaching,” and 57 percent strongly agreed. Similarly, 75 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “Leadership consults with teachers regarding matters that affect the school,” and none disagreed.¹⁰ These figures compare very favorably with surveys of traditional public school teachers, and even charter teachers, in which only about half report that leaders improved their teaching.¹¹

Civic Education at YES Prep

While both KIPP and YES Prep emphasize character education, YES Prep has a stronger focus on community service and citizenship. Originally, YES Prep required community service every Saturday, but over time this practice faded. Few organizations knew just what to do with dozens or even hundreds of students descending on a site at one time. As one teacher recalled, “What we discovered was that not many people want 11-year-olds to do

service, so it was really challenging to find meaningful opportunities.” A longtime administrator detailed some of the practical challenges to doing service on a weekly basis:

When you work with nonprofits, a lot of times things fall flat. They say they have all this work and then you show up with 25 kids and it is, like, 20 minutes of work. Food banks are great because they’ll take 400 of us, but it’s not like there’s a big takeaway, just that people need food. . . . People don’t want middle school students, even though our middle school students are really well behaved, and once we get our foot in the door, we get great responses, but unfortunately when they hear about middle schools they say, “We’ll pass; give us kids who are 15 or older.”

YES Prep then experimented with doing eight service days a year, although renting buses alone cost \$10,000 each Saturday, and planning and implementing service projects taxed the resources of already hardworking teachers.¹² Academics also consumed teacher and student attention—to the dismay of some YES Prep veterans. One administrator lamented, “I don’t think we are doing as much [service] as we used to. A lot of that is about having to raise the bar academically.” Another agreed that “with all the [academic] pressure, teachers do not want to give up much instructional time. . . . A lot of things were stripped away, such as service and after-school clubs. Now we are at the point where we can add back things that are important, such as service.”

Practical considerations led YES Prep to rethink its approach to service. As one longtime YES Prep leader put it, the best way to develop adults engaged in their communities is to teach young people the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to attend and succeed at tier-one colleges and universities. Given that roughly 90 percent of YES Prep students will be first-generation college students and almost a third of seniors are working to help their families or to save for college, it is difficult to both prepare students for college *and* push them to consider tier-one schools far from Houston. Yet YES Prep does this, with considerable success.

For many YES Prep teachers and administrators, one of the primary benefits of service is getting students to look beyond Houston and broaden their horizons. One teacher observed, “kids . . . have a tendency to not see anything outside their own school or their own little neighborhood, so a lot of the value of service was getting them outside that narrow world to the broader world.” Summer internships, often with a service component, are also key to this process. Lynda Daniel, the YES Prep

districtwide student opportunities manager, finds students paid summer opportunities “that their peers at elite institutions would have. . . . They work hard 12 hours a day all year long, so they need to get to do something that jazzes them in the summer.”¹³ Among the most popular summer opportunities are college-related programs like the AFS study abroad programs and the Leadership and Ethics Institute at the University of Texas, and public service programs such as the St. Albans School of Public Service, the National Hispanic Institute, and the National Security Language Initiative. Thus far, students have shown little interest in partisan political opportunities.

This does not mean that YES Prep has abandoned its efforts to produce young people who succeed as citizens as well as academically. Rather, those efforts have evolved, with YES Prep schools experimenting with different models. As one teacher explains, from the school’s start, YES Prep founder Chris Barbic wanted it to produce “great people as well as great scholars.” In recent years, service at YES Prep has changed in ways that have more impact, develop student leadership skills, and do not overtax teachers. In short, like other successful public organizations, YES Prep has remained true to its founding mission by being pragmatic about its tactics.¹⁴

In recent years, YES Prep has developed a fivefold approach to service. First, students do summer enrichment, which frequently has a service component. Second, students do substantial service within the school, with student “families” or “societies,” enabling older students to mentor their younger peers. Third, through the societies, seniors plan service trips for younger students, taking leadership roles and ownership of the service program. Fourth, seniors are required to do 50 hours of service to graduate, something they are well equipped to do by their prior service work. Finally, through their senior-level ethics courses, YES Prep students connect their service work to broader civic questions.

Service to the School

YES Prep tries to produce great citizens in part by teaching students the values of good citizenship *within* the school, as exemplified by the network’s Thinks and Acts. Teachers and students alike remark on the positive school atmosphere and the lack of behavioral issues. As one high school teacher proudly notes, “When I get them in 10th grade, they are already like that. The middle school teachers do that, so in high school the structure is there. There are no behavior issues.” Another teacher observes, “I tell my middle schoolers that we have the same rules as any

other school, but here we enforce them.” Teachers also said they had strong parental support; as one put it, “Parents send them here because this school says they will get you to college, and they believe us. There is a lot of trust the parents have in the school.”

As a result of the orderly school environment, perhaps, the YES Prep teachers were less likely to agree that it was “absolutely important” to “follow the rules and be respectful of authority.” Just 35 percent of YES Prep teachers concurred—compared to roughly 60 percent at both public and private high schools nationally.

Just as psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed that individuals must satisfy basic needs such as security and physical well-being before seeking to fill more abstract needs such as self-actualization,¹⁵ so too must schools meet basic needs like physical safety before teachers and students can tackle academics.¹⁶ Because YES Prep schools are safe, teachers and students can focus on learning. Though nearly all YES Prep students are low-income and minority, by an 86 to 7 percent margin social studies teachers disagreed that “most of the children at this school are simply not capable of learning the material”—and 61 percent strongly disagreed. As social studies teacher Michael Dies put it, “YES promotes a very tolerant, safe attitude, so overall the kids are more open to being introspective and offering their opinions because they know this is a safe place for open, intellectual discourse.”

Many students take seriously school traditions like ringing the bell when college acceptances arrive. One student gushed about how she and her peers looked forward to taking a literature class from teacher Leigh Anne Rayburn because Rayburn had “been at YES Prep since the beginning of the school and knows everything about the school.” Some YES Prep campuses are experimenting with student honor councils that, with faculty supervision, judge and sentence student violators. I sat in on one meeting in which the committee took testimony and made initial deliberations over two academic integrity cases. The student committee members followed the rules and carefully studied the evidence, seeking to find a just outcome in a calm, reasoned manner and requiring little help from their faculty adviser.

The “Societies” or “Families”

YES Prep campuses are divided into “families” or “societies” (with the name depending on the campus) crossing ages and grade levels. For example, the YES Prep Southeast campus is divided into 18 families with about 40 “moms” and “dads.” Historically, all seniors were considered

“parents” to younger students. Today, although all seniors are supposed to mentor younger students in their families, the official moms and dads are those who volunteer for the role and who can fit the required leadership class into their schedules. This class meets daily for 15 minutes and is taught by the principal. With teacher oversight, moms and dads help run daily homeroom. Families wear distinctive shirts, play intramural games together, and often perform service together.

Seniors are required to undertake 50 or more hours of service during their senior year to graduate.

The families mean that, as one dad put it, “sometimes I’m hanging out with people who aren’t my age, which is not like most schools.” Another explained that “back in a regular school you hang out with kids in your own grade, but here it is nice that we hang out or talk in the hall with kids in our family of all different grades.”

This eases the transition for sixth graders to the highly structured and demanding YES Prep environment. It also encourages the moms and dads to model good behavior for middle schoolers and, as one senior says, “Try to keep them from making mistakes you made. . . . The biggest mistake, or at least the one they do most, is thinking that you can get all your assignments done a day or two before they are due. We keep telling them to start early, but some of the younger students take a while to learn that.”

Moms and dads believe their key goal is to show middle schoolers how everything at YES Prep (in the words of one mom) “is related to getting into and succeeding in college later.” She added, “Taking care of little things now helps that.” In short, the societies and families teach students about responsibility to the YES Prep community and to themselves.

Part of being a responsible community member is having a strong work ethic. As table 1 shows, YES Prep teachers, like teachers nationally, prioritize teaching students “good work habits such as being timely, persistent, and hardworking.” Yet the YES Prep teachers are more confident than their public school counterparts that their students learn these lessons. As table 2 shows, YES Prep teachers are also more likely to prioritize “instilling good work habits, because that’s what students will need to be successful, productive adults.” This fits with the broader literature on “no-excuses” schools that lift students from

TABLE 1
SELECTED COMPARISONS WITH AEI NATIONAL SURVEY

Percentages of teachers surveyed agreeing it is “absolutely essential” to learn a topic, marking 5 on a 1–5 scale; followed by the percentages “somewhat confident” and “very confident” that their students have learned this by graduation.

YES Prep teachers (n=31) are from the author’s survey, compared with an AEI Program on American Citizenship survey that polled 866 public school teachers and 245 private school teachers.

	— <i>Absolutely Essential</i> (%)—			— <i>Confident Learned</i> (%)—		
	YES Prep	Public	Private	YES Prep	Public	Private
To identify the protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights	41	83	81	67	79	84
To have good work habits such as being timely, persistent, and hardworking	72	80	80	85	50	83
To embrace the responsibilities of citizenship such as voting and jury duty	52	78	74	52	65	81
To be tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves	76	76	82	89	74	86
To understand concepts such as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances	72	64	74	78	69	84
To be knowledgeable about periods such as the American Founding, the Civil War, and the Cold War	51	63	75	82	72	88
To follow rules and be respectful of authority	35	60	59	97	61	87
To see themselves as global citizens living in an interconnected world	52	57	67	70	52	74
To understand economic principles such as supply and demand and the role of market incentives	14	50	48	78	51	71
To develop habits of community service such as volunteering and raising money for causes	48	43	67	96	57	91
To be activists who challenge the status quo of our political system and seek to remedy injustices	41	37	35	59	37	60
To know facts (e.g., the location of the fifty states) and dates (e.g., Pearl Harbor)	24	36	35	67	56	72

Sources: Author’s survey and AEI Program on American Citizenship, *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2010), www.aei.org/papers/society-and-culture/citizenship/high-schools-civics-and-citizenship/.

poverty to college success in one generation. Such schools emphasize good behavior, grit, earned rewards, academic growth, supporting rather than undermining peers, and focusing on the long term.¹⁷

Interestingly, YES Prep campuses tend to have weak student governments, which one teacher described as in their “infancy.” Only 53 percent of YES Prep social

studies teachers, compared with 73 percent of other public school teachers and 91 percent of private school teachers, strongly agreed that their school encourages “student involvement in student government, debates, and issues-oriented clubs and organizations.”

As Michael Buck, the YES Prep social studies content specialist, explains, “Activities really depend on the

TABLE 2
COMPARING PRIORITIES

Respondents were asked to rank these five priorities that high schools might have around the meaning of citizenship in order from highest (1) to lowest (5).

YES Prep teachers ($n=31$) are from the author's survey, compared with AEI's survey of 866 public school teachers and 245 private school teachers.

	<i>Percentage Ranking Each Priority Either First or Second</i>		
	YES	Prep Public	Private
Teaching key facts, dates, and major events—because school is the only place students will ever learn these things	17	20	19
Instilling good work habits—because that's what students will really need to be successful, productive adults	67	46	41
Understanding the key principles of American government—because that's what it takes to really understand our political system	23	38	43
Internalizing core values like tolerance and equality—because these values lie at the heart of who we are as a nation	63	49	54
Promoting civic behaviors such as voting and community service—because citizens must take active responsibility for their community and nation	30	49	44

Sources: Author's survey and AEI Program on American Citizenship, *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship*.

teachers at that campus.” YES Prep teachers and students have much to fill their time, and the strong societies and families already provide mentorship for younger students and leadership opportunities for older students. In short, YES Prep schools do not have strong student governments because they do not need them.

Service to the Community

Increasingly, the families or societies are the structure through which students do community service, with seniors playing the lead roles in arranging community service for their societies twice a semester. Though service plays a lesser role than it did in the school's first years, seniors are still required to undertake 50 or more hours of service during their senior year to graduate. In sharp contrast, only 37 percent of public and 82 percent of private school social studies teachers nationally say that their schools have service requirements of any kind.

Common service projects include working in food banks, visiting nursing homes and homeless shelters, and cleaning churches and parks. Many students spoke eloquently about their service experiences, which they said had showed that service meant more than just completing

a graduation requirement. Through service, students understood that they could learn from others and could also make a tangible difference for their community as a whole.

Many found service emotionally rewarding. One senior had never supported required service but changed her mind after working with AIDS patients: “I saw what a difference just us visiting made in their lives. . . . It's not *just* something you are required to do. It's important.” Likewise, several students recalled their service trips visiting Alzheimer's patients, who, in the words of one student, “told great stories about the Depression and World War II.” YES Prep students also perform service during their summers. Senior Jorge Guerero recalled his pride and excitement about raising money for and organizing a youth soccer league in a poor Costa Rican village. League members later emailed when they held their first tournament, thanking Jorge for making it possible.

Service is a key part of the YES Prep “implicit curriculum,” sometimes taken for granted by insiders but obvious to outsiders. As one teacher who had previously taught in HISD put it, “When I came here, I did not realize what an important role service plays. . . . Not every kid is a higher performer as it turns out, and it is nice to see them excel in a different area.” Another teacher

TABLE 3
SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM AT YES PREP

6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
World Cultures	Texas History	US History through Reconstruction	World Geography	World History or AP World History	US History or AP US History	Economics and Ethics

Source: YES Prep curriculum.

recalled how local residents honked their horns in gratitude while YES Prep students cleaned up a park near their campus. A third teacher said service “has really affected a lot of our kids. . . . They talk about giving back. People in the community actually say ‘thank you’ to them, and you do not always get that with service.” Service can also help students in other ways. As the first teacher quoted in this paragraph said, “Last week I had a student interview with Yale, and she said all they wanted to talk about was her service work.”

By having older students take key leadership roles, YES Prep has continued its service mission without unduly burdening teachers, depleting budgets, or detracting from their other core mission of preparing low-income students for college success. Indeed, service requirements have helped rather than detracted from student preparation. “Service has actually gotten better over the past three years here,” remarks one academic dean. “It’s actually gotten more organized and with more of an investment from kids.” A student “mom” agrees that “being a leader really makes you appreciate what the teachers and principals have to go through as leaders. It looks different when you have to make the phone calls to arrange a [service] trip, and you know that if it succeeds or fails, that was all, or at least maybe partly, up to you.”

The importance of service at YES Prep is reflected in the teacher survey. As table 1 shows, although YES Prep social studies teachers are only slightly more likely than their national public school peers to rate as a high priority for schools “develop[ing] habits of community service such as volunteering and raising money for causes,” nearly all YES Prep teachers are confident their students have learned this—compared to slightly more than half of their national public school counterparts.

Unlike other charters with a strong civic mission, such as New York City’s Democracy Prep Public Schools, YES Prep does not involve its students much in the political process.¹⁸ Indeed, YES Prep teachers are actually slightly less likely than teachers nationally to want school to prioritize teaching the “responsibilities of citizenship

such as voting and jury duty.” Young Republicans and Young Democrats clubs are not active at YES Prep. With the noted exceptions of Houston Mayor Annise Parker and State Representative Rick Noriega, teachers and administrators could not recall political visitors. YES Prep campuses do hold mock presidential elections, with President Barack Obama overwhelmingly winning the students’ vote in 2012.

The Facts of Civic Life: Teachers’ Views

As many have demonstrated, Americans in general and young people in particular do not know much about their nation’s history and system of government.¹⁹ For the children of recent immigrants, like many YES Prep students, this poses particular challenges.²⁰

Here, YES Prep seems to do well, and increasingly well over time. In YES Prep’s early years, teachers were by and large on their own in developing their courses. In the past four years, however, under the guidance of systemwide content specialists with teaching experience at YES Prep, teachers in common subject areas from all the campuses meet about every six weeks to develop common assessments (led by course leaders) and work on curricular alignment across grade levels to ensure that students graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to do well in college.

For social studies (as indicated in table 3), lower-level history and geography courses culminate in the senior-level, two-semester Economics course and the two-semester Ethics course. (While Ethics technically is not a social studies requirement, it is aligned to the area’s content and skills.) Some campuses also offer AP Psychology and AP Human Geography as electives. Notably, like most YES Prep administrators, social studies content specialist Michael Buck still teaches courses and does so enthusiastically, giving him credibility among his teacher peers.

YES Prep certainly teaches the basic facts of American government. Student scores on the social studies portion

of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills tests are solid, with 99 percent passing on the 11th grade assessment and 64 percent commended (high pass) for the combined 10th and 11th grades, compared to 98 percent and 51 percent for the state, and 96 percent and 47 percent for HISD.²¹

Perhaps because YES Prep succeeds in teaching basic facts, at least as measured by Texas assessments, YES Prep teachers were somewhat less likely than national samples to agree that teaching facts should be a priority but somewhat more likely than other public school teachers (though not private school teachers) to agree that students at their school are knowledgeable about “periods such as the American Founding, the Civil War, and the Cold War.” YES Prep teachers also show somewhat more confidence that their students know facts and dates such as the location of the 50 states and the date of Pearl Harbor and “understand concepts such as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances.” Similarly, YES Prep teachers are less likely than social studies teachers nationally to prioritize teaching “economic principles such as supply and demand and the role of market incentives,” but far more likely to see their students learning those concepts. (See table 1.)

Knowing basic facts is a prerequisite for deeper learning. As teacher Michael Dies comments, “We have a tendency to promote facts not as an endpoint but as part of the journey, so learning facts is important, but so is doing something with them. We want students to understand the American Revolution, the facts, but also what it means today.” Dies adds that a factual grounding is essential to more analytic senior-level courses in ethics and economics, which sometimes feed into student service projects.

This was evident in an AP American History class session on the causes of the Civil War. Teacher Alexander Anderson started out by giving students a quiz, and after the students finished, announced, “I’m concerned your understanding of the Civil War is compartmentalized. You need to see all of the events together leading to the Civil War.” He then led a lively class discussion of direct and indirect causality, using obesity as an example. Anderson had students list nearly 30 causes of the Civil War, helping them separate the remaining proximate causes from underlying causes, many of the latter related to differences in soil and climate which led to different economic systems (plantation agriculture in the South versus trade, industry, and family farms in the North). The class discussion would not have been out of place in a college history class. Nearly every student took part.

Similarly, in Michael Buck’s senior-level Ethics class, students grappled with the economics and ethics of surrogate motherhood, applied to the famous Baby M case. In

an engaging class-long discussion, Buck led the students to consider competing moral and legal approaches to the case, particularly regarding the nature of informed consent, property rights, contract theory, and whether some transactions should be beyond market rules. Students offered a range of views, some backed up by political theory going back to John Locke and how America’s founders might have viewed this modern legal dispute. Again, nearly every student took part, all points of view were welcomed, and the discussion continued well after class.

YES Prep teachers also work hard to inculcate the dispositions of good citizenship.

Many teachers might be wary of broaching an issue as controversial as surrogate motherhood. But YES Prep teachers seem confident that they can moderate such discussions without politicizing the classroom. Though more than a third of social studies teachers nationwide agree that “too many social studies teachers use their classes as a ‘soap box’ for their personal point of view,”²² none of the YES Prep social studies teachers who answered this question agreed that this happened at their school. Even on hot-button issues like immigration, teachers try, as one put it, “to make sure they [students] are civically well rounded and can understand a multitude of perspectives on these issues.”

Perhaps accounting for the high level of class discussions, many social studies teachers (including Dies and Anderson) left social science PhD programs to teach at YES Prep. A few others trained as attorneys. Like most charter schools, YES Prep has the flexibility to hire teachers from outside the usual education school pipelines. YES Prep uses this flexibility to hire smart, hardworking teachers with great subject-matter knowledge and then mentor them in pedagogy. As Dies put it, “We are looking for social studies teachers with real-world experience or who have extensive knowledge.” Several teachers commented that for someone who loves their subject area and loves teaching but has less enthusiasm for research, teaching at YES Prep is more attractive than law or academia. Over the years, YES Prep has built a strong relationship with TFA but also attracts experienced applicants from traditional public schools and from other charter schools, who are drawn by its reputation. The school also has close links with area universities, recently hiring Libby Vann, a Rice University

TABLE 4
QUESTIONS ABOUT PATRIOTISM

	YES Prep	Public	Private
Which of the following comes closer to your view about the U.S.?			
The U.S. is a unique country that stands for something special in the world.	66	83	82
The U.S. is just another country whose system is no better or worse than other countries.	28	11	8
Not Sure	7	6	9
Which of the following do you think is MORE important for high schools to do?			
To get students to understand the common history, ideas, rights, and responsibilities that tie Americans together, regardless of their differences	48	52	50
To get students to celebrate the unique identities and experiences of the different ethnic, religious, and immigrant groups that have contributed to the making of America	45	41	41
Not Sure	7	8	9
Which of these four things do you think is MOST important to pass on to your students about the U.S.? Is it a sense that they should . . .			
Love their country	0	11	9
Respect and appreciate their country but know its shortcomings	90	82	85
Think of the U.S. analytically, without sentiment	3	6	6
Know that the U.S. is a fundamentally flawed country	7	1	0
Not Sure	0	1	1

Source: Author's survey and AEI Program on American Citizenship, *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship*.

anthropology professor, to teach for a year and design its sophomore research seminar.²³

YES Prep teachers also work hard to inculcate the dispositions of good citizenship. As table 4 shows, YES Prep teachers, like social studies teachers nationally, think it important to teach students to “respect and appreciate their country but know its shortcomings” and to see the United States “as a unique country,” though by somewhat lesser margins than their national peers. YES Prep teachers split roughly evenly between those who want “students to understand the common history, ideas, rights, and responsibilities that tie Americans together, regardless of their differences,” and those who want “students to celebrate the unique identities and experiences of the different ethnic, religious, and immigrant groups that have contributed to the making of America.”

YES Prep teachers were slightly more likely than other public school teachers (55 percent to 44 percent) to strongly endorse the view that “respect for military service is something high schools should impart to students.” Notably, by a three to one margin, YES Prep teachers

agree foreign-born students must “value the U.S. and understand the meaning of citizenship.” As YES Prep dean Erin Palkot says, “Traditional civics we do well: the patriotism and loving our country and why we vote.”

Strong coursework goes hand in hand with senior-level service. For example, teacher Natalie Hernandez’s senior-level Ethics course dealt with moral philosophy and ethical dilemmas (using Stuart Rachels’s *Elements of Moral Philosophy* as the course text) in the first semester, followed by individual-level service projects of at least 40 hours (most of the senior graduation requirement) in the second semester involving service, research papers, and developing websites addressing community problems including child abuse, elder care issues, sexual trafficking, and homelessness. Similarly, Michael Buck’s version of the same course began with a similarly sophisticated introduction to moral philosophy, as preparation for the second (spring) semester service project. Buck requires service project journals in which students relate their service work to the moral frameworks developed by Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, John Locke,

Emmanuel Kant, and John Rawls, culminating in the “big question”:

To what extent does this experience reflect a larger, macro ethical issue that exists within American society? How might we consider framing society (politically, economically, socially, etc.), so that this issue/problem doesn’t exist to the same extent? Consider the current governing framework and economic framework within the United States to answer this question.²⁴

Clearly, this is excellent preparation for the kind of work students will face in selective colleges and far beyond the sort of education typical in American high schools.

College and Civic Success

YES Prep does much to prepare future citizens, most of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants, through service within the school, community service within low-income Houston, and most importantly, by giving students the knowledge, skills, and experiences to succeed in college and play a role in the world outside Houston. How does YES Prep do it?

YES Prep has a culture of hard work and respect and a safe environment enabling students to focus on learning.

First, although it has become a cliché, it really does start with great teachers. YES Prep excels at recruiting; selecting; and, perhaps most important, mentoring knowledgeable and energetic teachers. Indeed, YES Prep may be unique in its system of mentoring teachers through instructional deans. In this area more than any other, YES Prep may offer models for other charter and district schools. In social studies, many YES Prep teachers have substantial graduate training in the social sciences, drawing on rich content knowledge that informs their approach in the classroom and makes it easier for teachers to work together. Teacher talent enables YES Prep students to get a good grounding in the facts of politics, history, and geography—a basic prerequisite for good citizenship and one too often lacking in American schools.

Second, like other high-poverty/high-achievement schools, YES Prep has a culture of hard work and respect and a safe environment enabling students to focus on learning. The college-bound culture, including traditions like Signing Day, college bell-ringing, and college posters with alumni names, means that for YES Prep students, it is cool to be smart.

Third, like other successful schools, YES Prep shows flexibility and relative seamlessness in implementation. This flexibility enabled the school to adapt its service mission in ways that make sense given limited resources and the need to prepare students for college success. As one longtime administrator put it, the best assurance that a student will undertake service to society over the long term is entering and succeeding in a good college, so college preparation has to be job one.

In short, YES Prep has changed its tactics over time to assure college success while also practicing fidelity to its founding mission. Youth Engaged in Service still lives up to its name.

Author Biography

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Notes

I wish to thank Michael Buck, Alexandra Boyd, Tony Maranto, April Maranto, and Jennifer Ash for their assistance. The usual caveats apply.

1. Robert Maranto, “These Charter Schools Thrive on Competition,” *Houston Chronicle*, February 20, 2011, www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/editorial/outlook/7437274.html.

2. The author surveyed YES Prep middle and high school social studies teachers using the online SurveyMonkey program from January 13 to 24, 2013. Thirty-one of 57 (54 percent) teachers responded. The national comparisons are taken from a 2010 survey by the AEI Program on American Citizenship, *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2010), www.aei.org/papers/society-and-culture/citizenship/high-schools-civics-and-citizenship/.

3. KIPP Foundation, “Student Attainment,” www.kipp.org/about-kipp/students?gclid=CJXfubys3LUCFQwFnQodA38ANQ (accessed March 1, 2013).

4. These figures resemble those for Houston’s KIPP charter schools (99 percent minority and 91 percent disadvantaged) and for the HISD (89 percent and 80 percent).

5. Of the seven YES Prep schools old enough to be rated by the Texas Education Agency in 2010, six were rated “exemplary” (the highest status), and the seventh earned the second highest status (“recognized”). See Texas Education Agency, Lone Star Report Summary, January 2011, [http://loving1.tea.state.tx.us/lonestar/Reports/Summary2010/District/AA G1-DIST-SchoolDist-PDF-en-us-101845.pdf](http://loving1.tea.state.tx.us/lonestar/Reports/Summary2010/District/AA%20G1-DIST-SchoolDist-PDF-en-us-101845.pdf). See also Robert Maranto, “Boot Camps versus Triads: A Comparison of the KIPP and Harmony Charter School Networks,” American Political Science Association 2011 Annual Meeting Paper, August 1, 2011, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1902252; and Janet L. Woodworth and Margaret E. Raymond, *Charter School Growth and Replication* (Stanford, CA: CREDO, January 30, 2012), 57, 63, <http://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/CGAR%20Growth%20Volume%20II.pdf>.

6. The author conducted phone interviews with YES Prep administrators in fall 2012, followed by fieldwork at three YES Prep campuses on December 12–14, 2012, interviewing 37 teachers, leaders, students, and parents and observing nine classes. All quotes are taken from these interviews, unless otherwise noted.

7. College counseling is particularly important for disadvantaged college students who typically know little about what it takes to gain admission to and succeed in college. See Andrea Venezia, Michael W. Kirst, and Anthony L. Antonio, *Betraying the College Dream* (Stanford, CA: The Bridge Project, 2012).

8. AEI Program on American Citizenship, *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship*.

9. See, for example, John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1990); and Richard M. Ingersoll, *Who Controls Teachers' Work?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

10. In contrast, among the YES Prep teachers who had taught elsewhere, five of nine disagreed that leaders at their prior schools consult with teachers and only one of nine agreed that principals or deans at those schools had improved their teaching. One teacher who had taught in a different charter school outside Houston complained that administrators there “offered no feedback, and treated questions as disloyalty.” The teacher added, “They held meetings all the time that wasted our time just because they were mandatory, which is a morale killer for any organization.”

11. Robert Maranto and April Gresham, “The Wild West of Education Reform: Arizona Charter Schools,” in *School Choice in the Real World: Lessons from Arizona Charter Schools*, ed. Robert Maranto et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 112.

12. Like many high-poverty/high-achievement schools, YES Prep struggles with teacher burnout but has gradually improved teacher retention.

13. Daniel, who had a successful career in business before working for YES Prep, began volunteering leads for student internships after hearing YES Prep founder Chris Barbic address her professional women's group

in 1999 and thinking, “It sounds like he is doing what he is saying he is doing, and lot of people aren't.” Eventually she came to work for YES Prep full time.

14. Charles T. Goodsell, *Mission Mystique: Belief Systems in Public Agencies* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011).

15. Abraham H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (Fall 1943): 370–96.

16. See, for example, H. K. Wong and R. T. Wong, *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher* (San Francisco, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications, 1997); David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008); and Robert Maranto and James V. Shuls, “Lessons from KIPP Delta,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 93 (November 2011): 52–56.

17. See, for example, Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003); Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff*; and Maranto and Shuls, “Lessons from KIPP Delta.”

18. Daniel Lautzenheiser and Andrew P. Kelly, *Charter Schools as Nation Builders: Democracy Prep and Civic Education*, AEI Program on American Citizenship Policy Brief no. 4 (January 2013), www.citizenship-aei.org/2013/01/aei-report-charter-schools-as-nation-builders-democracy-prep-and-civic-education/. See also Seth Andrew, “Fighting Civic Malpractice: How a Harlem Charter School Closes the Civic Achievement Gap,” in *Teaching America: The Case for Civic Education*, ed. David Feith (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2011), 99–110.

19. See Robert Maranto, “Just the Facts Ma'am, and a Few Stories: What We Need in Civic Education,” *Midsouth Political Science Review* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 37–51; J. Martin Rochester, “The Training of Idiots: Civic Education in America's Schools,” in *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?*, ed. James Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Kathleen Porter (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003), 6–39; Bruce Cole, “Revolutionary Ignorance: What Do Americans Know of the Original Tea Party,” in *Teaching America*, 8–88; Andrew J. Rothham, “Core Curriculum: How to Tackle General Illiteracy and Civic Illiteracy at the Same Times,” in *Teaching America*, 89–96; and Mark Bauerlein, “Don't Believe the Hype: Young Voters Are Still Disengaged, and Universities Have Few Incentives to Fix It,” in *Teaching America*, 161–70.

20. E. D. Hirsch, *The Making of Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

21. “Academic Excellence Indicator System,” Texas Education Agency, <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis>.

22. AEI Program on American Citizenship, *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship*.

23. Vann is now associate director of civic research and design at Rice University but continues her relationship with YES Prep.

24. YES Prep social studies instructional materials, provided to author.

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