

Scene on Radio

Schooled for Democracy (Season 4, Episode 10) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e10-schooled-for-democracy/>

[Sound: The Pledge of Allegiance recited by 8th graders in Lowell, Mass.]

John Biewen: Cheneraij, I'm not the first person to say this, by any means, but the Pledge of Allegiance is weird.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh, yeah. It has a crazy history, too, that involves a socialist preacher and advertising, I mean we could do a whole episode just about that. But just the Pledge itself, right, I pledge allegiance? Is allegiance what we really want to be pledging in a democracy? I never got the ethics of that, you know what I mean? Maybe we should have our children pledge to make the world a better place even if that means challenging the country they live in. Like, that seems like something I can get down with.

John Biewen: There you go again. Subversive messages. But, yes, right? Imagine that. This episode is not about the Pledge of Allegiance, but Ben James, who reported the episode, sent us that recording. And that question -- should we teach our children to revere the nation, or to get involved and make it better? -- does seem related to the story that Ben is about to tell, I think.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I think it is.

John Biewen: For a lot of us, school may be the first place we hear much about

the idea of citizenship. When you were growing up, Chenj, what kind of messages did you hear about school and what it was about, why it was important?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, you know, education was very important in my family, multiple generations of educated people. But at least before high school, my teachers were almost operating in like a civil rights tradition, right? I had these really powerful women, Ms. Lee and Ms. Davis, and they just used to teach us Black history and had us reading Langston Hughes poems, and had us singing (sings) to be young gifted and Black, and they'd be playing a piano. They at least made us feel like we were part of the struggle. But, you know. And things changed after that. But you know here in Philadelphia I work with a lot of teachers and parents and other community members in something called the Our City Our Schools coalition, and what they're up against is really a very different understanding of what education is. Just to give you an example, in January there was this protest that involved like mental health advocates, and some high school students, at the Board of Education. And one of the things I remember was the students were holding these signs that said "We are managed, not developed." They were critiquing the priorities that arise from that business-centered approach to education. And it kinda reminds me of what we talked about in episode 8, this whole idea that school is like a business. You don't need a music program, right, it's really just job training. It's an investment.

John Biewen: Yes, an investment in each student, to make each of us an attractive commodity out there in the labor marketplace, and ultimately to make each of us so we can go out there and shine as a consumer.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Which really is just freedom. It's the same thing, right?

John Biewen: Personally, I feel pretty lucky in this regard. Well, at least half lucky. So I'm old enough that I came of age really just before the hardcore neoliberal vision of education really took hold. I graduated from high school in 1979,

during the Carter administration, so when I was a kid that sort of hyper-practical, 'what kind of job is this gonna get me' sort of focus was not as dominant in education as it is today. And my experience was really outside the mainstream. My parents sent my siblings and me to an experimental, open public school, it was a lab school run by the state university in my town. There were no grades, no required courses for graduation, despite that believe it or not, some education did take place. Then I went to a liberal arts college, where I wound up a philosophy major, having no idea what I was gonna do with that degree. It was just what I wanted to study at the time and I figured I'd work out the job thing when the time came.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It sounds like you weren't the CEO of self. (Laughs) You were a complete failure as a neo-liberal.

John Biewen: Exactly. Total failure. So the thing that I can say is that I feel like my education got me in the habit of thinking for myself, and I am grateful for that to this day. But, you know, there's something else I didn't get, when I look back on it, and that is any real training in how to be an engaged citizen. Basically, I learned you should vote.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, and I mean, I guess what you learn about that, a lot of it seems like it depends on the individual teachers that any of us might have happened to have. And by the way, big respect for public school teachers. We recognize there are a lot of great ones out there who are engaging their students in all kinda ways, and there's a lot of teachers who are working hard to do more than state curriculums that local school boards want them to do. So, in that vein, just shout out to the Zinn Education Project, Black Lives Matter in schools, here in Philly the Caucus of Working Educators. Shout out to all the teachers' unions.

John Biewen: And there are a whole bunch of teachers and other educators who listen to this show and use it in their classrooms and tweet about it and whatnot, and all of y'all out there, we adore you, I hope you know that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But I think even those awesome teachers would agree that overall it's very challenging to build informed, active citizens in this environment, right? One thing is, there's been an attack on public education, but when it comes to like, talking deeply about civic engagement, I mean a lot of teachers are operating in a crisis kind of state, right, they don't even have enough resources, there's crowded classrooms. Right before the COVID crisis, Philadelphia was dealing with this asbestos poisoning thing. So. It's hard to do deep civic engagement when you're just dealing with that.

John Biewen: Yeah, and besides that, you know, it's been a recurring theme in this season and on this show over several seasons that the standardized history and social studies curriculums don't really lend themselves to inspiring kids perhaps to, you know, to go out and change the world, because they avoid a lot of hard truths about the way the country was built and about the deep injustices in our society right now. There are a lot of teachers who try to push against that, but some don't have a lot of leeway, and also may themselves have only learned a glossed-over version of the country's history.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And you know, when I think about other things that are working against really building those active citizens, there's also all these messages that students are getting from advertisements, television, elsewhere, that are saying really, your main job is just to take care of yourself and get a good gig, you know, and just kind of be comfortable. And so, when you're trying to learn under those conditions, I just feel like over time, it kinda takes something out of you. I mean, I look at my daughter right now, you know, she's eleven months, grabbing everything, crawling all over the place, and you can tell that already she feels like she could change the world, you know what I'm saying?

John Biewen: And I fully expect that she will, actually.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I think most little kids are like that. They have the energy. But by the time we graduate high school, what happens? There's far too many of us that come out either thinking that we don't have any real power and can't change the things that matter, or maybe we think like the only power you could have is to be a rich celebrity or just like, exploit people or something like that because that's what we see from a lot of our leaders. I've said in the past that every right I have as a Black man in this country is because all kinds of folks who are engaged in like a radical kind of civic engagement, you know? They were engaging, studying, unjust laws and then eventually breaking them sometimes.

John Biewen: Yeah. But this is getting into how this episode fits into the larger picture that we're drawing with this season, I think. How can we have a vibrant, functioning democracy, that's actually getting better with time, when the places that are supposed to teach you and inspire you to participate really don't have the time or resources or even the freedom to do that?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Bottom line is, how can we expect our children to participate and safeguard democracy when we don't immerse them in practicing democracy? And what would it look like if we did?

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, it's Scene on Radio Season 4, Episode 10 in our series exploring democracy in the U.S. We call the series, "The Land That Never Has Been Yet." I'm John Biewen, producer and host of the show. That was Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika, who teaches journalism and communications at Rutgers. He's an organizer, podcaster, and artist. He and I'll meet up again at the end of the episode to talk more. This time: Schooling, and its role in our, um, democratic ... society. What has shifted, for better and for worse, about the way that most of us as Americans think about the mission of public education? How could we re-energize civics education in our

schools? Ben James, a writer and radio producer based in Massachusetts, reported this story for us. Some of you will remember Ben; he made a piece for our Season 3, MEN series – the memorable “Juggernaut” episode. One more note: Some of the music in Ben’s story is from the Summer Street Brass Band, a band made up entirely of middle and high school students – it’s based in Boston. Ben recorded them in rehearsal and live on the street. Here’s Ben James.

[Background noise]

Mike Neagle: Alright, so a lot of excitement here. Hold on a second. Let me just explain what you’ve got and what’s happening next, OK?

Ben James: Mike Neagle, Massachusetts history teacher of the year, preps his students for a debate that will lead to the biggest project of their school careers. During the next ten weeks, students will call city counselors and state senators. They’ll write op-eds and produce public service announcements. Then they’ll take their project to Civics Day at the Mass State House to compete against sixty other classes and THEIR civics projects. But first they need to agree on a topic.

Mike Neagle: They have to be able to identify issues in the community and care about it enough to do something about it.

[Music]

Ben James: It’s eighth grade at the Pyne Arts Magnet School in Lowell, Mass. Last week, Mr. Neagle helped his students go from fifty potential issues, to a dozen, to five.

Mike Neagle: So mental health is one of them. Homelessness. You see them all? Medical financial support. And then child abuse and drug abuse.
Ben James: Now they’re down to two: mental health and what they’re calling

medical financial support. Their interest in these topics is associative, a gut feeling. They've seen neighbors become homeless, or their parents stress about doctor visits and medical bills.

ANGELICA: Many people when they go to the hospital, or the emergency room, it costs a lot, because not many people have insurance.

Ben James: That's Angelica. Small kid. Fierce. Superbly-dressed. Her parents are Colombian. She wants the class to tackle medical debt. And here's Jacob. White kid. Blond buzz, braces. Red tracksuit top to bottom. He says he has family members with mental health issues. That's HIS choice for the class project.

JACOB: I feel like mental health leads to drug abuse, and then drug abuse could lead to homelessness, so I feel like we need to catch it at the root cause of mental health.

Ben James: Up til now, the kids have narrowed their topics by voting, but this final decision involves a process they're trying out for the first time today.

KIDS: Co-co-co, concens—consensus

[Music]

Ben James: Twenty-eight students. Full consensus. If a single kid disagrees, the group needs to negotiate, maybe even start over. First, they see if they can come to consensus on medical financial support.

Mike Neagle: So If you're on the far right side of the room, you're all about this issue.

[SOUND: chairs scraping floor]

Ben James: Kids who like the topic go to the right. If you're lukewarm you're in the middle of the room. But Jacob and others move to the left. They're not sure medical debt is important enough. Jacob says he thought everyone in the state got health care for free.

ANGELICA/JACOB/BELLA: No no. That's wrong. That's very wrong. Sorry but that's wrong. // I do // OK you do. There's people that actually don't get that. // We live in Lowell. Not everyone is upper class. // Exactly // Look at Belvedere compared to...

Ben James: If you've spent any time in a public middle school lately, you know this scene is NOT typical. For one thing, civics classes have been on the decline for decades, replaced by high-stakes testing and a model of education in which students are treated more as consumers than burgeoning citizens. But even where civics IS being taught, it doesn't look anything like this. Arielle Jennings is Massachusetts director of the national nonprofit, Generation Citizen, the folks responsible for this curriculum.

Arielle Jennings: We're really having students learn civics by doing it, rather than passively ingesting a set of facts and knowledge.

[Music]

Ben James: Here's an analogy. Say you want to learn to play basketball. You sign yourself up for a class, and on the first night, outside the gym, an admin assistant hands you a 200-page booklet. It's got the rules, a diagram of the court, maybe some bios of famous players. You go home, read the whole thing, show up the following week. Awesome! says the admin assistant. Come back in five years, we'll let you hold the ball. That's the basic M.O. of conventional civics education. Being a citizen is something kids learn ABOUT, it's not something they DO. What Angelica and Jacob are getting started on here is ACTION Civics.

It's deliberative, collaborative, messy, and often contentious.

JACOB/JELICITY/BELLA: What I'm about to say, I don't want anyone to take offense, because everyone has opinions on this // Jacob, watch what you're gonna say // Or just don't say it //

Ben James: The debate about medical financial support continues.

JACOB/JELICITY: It actually has to do with this, that some people don't make any money coming to this country, and now they're getting free health care, and then there's people who work every single day, and are struggling to pay // Did he just say that? // So, um, I don't know // No // You should have kept that as your thought // remember, it's the opinion, it's not the person saying it.

Ben James: Argue ideas, not people. That's one of Mr. Neagle's favorite lines, and it's especially important in a city as racially and economically diverse as Lowell. There are thousands of immigrants here, and almost seventy languages spoken by families in the school district. Stephen, a white kid, curly hair and braces, tries to mediate. He says some people DO abuse government services, but not everyone. Angelica gets even more upset.

ANGELICA: That shouldn't just affect all of them, because a lot of people have a rough time. Just because they have family back there. Trying to pay to them. Helping them out. And then also trying to pay here. Some people do abuse it, but there's some people that really need the help.

JACOB: And that's understandable, I can see that...

NEAGLE: So let me stop us here. I know some of us are feeling frustrated, and that's OK. But we need to be respectful through this whole process.

We need to build that consensus.

Ben James: Huh. Why? Like, why can't one group work on mental health, the other on medical financial support? Well, I'm gonna punt that question, so I can tell you what happens next. It's the following morning. Mr. Neagle's ready for another contentious debate. Instead, Angelica, Bella, and a couple other kids who've been strongly in the camp of medical financial support deliver some news. They've changed their minds. They want to work on youth mental health. Mr. Neagle's like, What happened?

NEAGLE/STUDENTS: Has anyone discussed it with a classmate since we left here yesterday? // Yeah // Wow // We all did // We all did yeah // In the bathroom // In almost every class we talked about it // Did you really? // Yeah

NEAGLE/ANGELICA: What happened in school yesterday that I didn't get to witness? // Crying // Crying // Yeah, we all had our moment. //

Ben James: Crying, discussion, frustration, and... agreement. Mr. Neagle seems wary. He doesn't want kids backing down out of pressure. But he's also psyched his students cared enough to keep arguing outside of class. He checks for consensus one last time, and it's official. Everyone's on board for mental health.

STEPHEN/ANGELICA: We should probably wrap it up. OK, in solution // That was // Wait, let him. He got the big words over here. // To sum up, we think their topic that was mental health, it's a really good idea, and it gives us a lot of possibilities // And many people can relate to it // A lot of people can relate to it, and I feel it's a topic that kids need to be involved in. // OK. To be continued til next week.

[Music]

Ben James: OK. Here's a question. U.S. public education. That place where ninety percent of American children spend more than a dozen years of their lives. What do you think it's for? Is it math? Literacy? Childcare? Free breakfast? Free lunch? Sex ed taught by gym teachers? What's it for? Is it social uplift? School as the great equalizer? Or is school mainly about keeping your kid safe and getting your kid ahead? America is pretty confused about school, we want it to do almost EVERYTHING, and into that stew of competing and contradictory purposes, we keep tossing a word: DEMOCRACY.

Reverend William J Barber II: Our public schools don't merely serve the public. Our public schools CREATE the public. Public schools are not merely schools for the public, but schools of publicness. Institutions where we learn what it means to be a public, and start down the road toward a common national and civic identity.

Ben James: The Reverend William J Barber the Second, leader of the Poor People's Campaign. He's speaking here to a bunch of educators, and I should clarify that he's quoting the political theorist Benjamin Barber, who calls public schools the foundation of our democratic civic culture. And it's convincing, right? Where ELSE would we teach democratic citizenship, if not in our public schools? My question is: Are we?

[Music]

Ben James: I mean, I went to public school—Detroit, Queens, the Bronx—I ran the gamut, from what are commonly considered the very worst to the very best public schools in the U.S., and nowhere, nowhere was I instructed in how to achieve something like deliberative, democratic agency. Collective action was the LAST thing our teachers wanted from us. But, you know, it's a big country. Democracy education. It's gotta be happening somewhere. Taking Barber's words as a challenge, I decided to find a classroom where an active, engaged citizenry was being created in

real time. Where the word PUBLIC was less noun and more verb. That's how I ended up in Lowell. I'd heard about this thing called Action Civics. The whole Lowell school district has adopted it. I got sent to Pyne Arts and Mike Neagle. Eighth graders. Cool. I know all about eighth graders. They're boneheads. It's not mere speculation. I live with one.

SILAS: My name is Silas. I'm 13. Wait, do you want my name? My name is Silas. I'm 13. And I go to JFK Middle School in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Ben James: Northampton. Halfway across the state, much smaller than Lowell, and MUCH less racially diverse. Still, Northampton public schools represent a collision of class backgrounds, and—as it happens—Silas is studying civics this year in his U.S. history class.

SILAS: We started out with just learning about like, The US government and how it's run. So we learned like the executive branch, legislative branch, judicial branch, all that.

Ben James: Nothing project-based about this unit. It's definitely the we'll-give-you-the-ball- in-five-years approach to civics education.

BEN/SILAS: So what was most interesting to you in the civics study? // Not much. Yeah, I mean, I like my history teacher but like history class is kind of boring as hell.

Ben James: Told you. Bonehead! His class is way more interesting than THAT.

BEN/SILAS: A lot of adults like to say at least that one of the reasons you go to school is to learn how to be a citizen in our society. /// They're like school is your job right now. Your job right now is to be a student. So annoying.

[Music]

Ben James: OK, there's a lot I could complain about in regard to Silas' school, but the fact is, the teachers care, it's decently funded—at least by our abhorrent national standards. Every educator I've met at the school knows my child well and is rooting for him. So I wasn't quite expecting the emotion that hit me every time I stepped into Mike Neagle's classroom in the underfunded school district of Lowell, Mass.: pure envy. I wanted my kid in that room.

KIDS: Ring Ring Ring!

KIDS: Who are we calling? // Dan Witts // So just be like, Hi am I speaking to Dan Witts? // Or, Hi, may I speak to Dan Witts? // So we're calling Dan Witts // Hi, May I speak to Dan Witts? // Just be like, Hi, who am I talking to?

Mike Neagle: We're going to make our phone calls. Our goal is that at 9:30 today we'll all be on the phone.

JELICITY: Hi. My name is Jelicity. I'm an 8th grader at the Pyne Arts Magnet School in Lowell. Am I catching you at a bad time?

[Sound: phone ringing.]

HALEY: Me and my class are trying to get someone to come in and talk to us because we're working on a civics project on youth mental health.

HALEY/NEAGLE/KIDS: Oh my god // That was great. First of all, congratulations. // This was a terrible call. // You did good. // The lady was so rude // Was she? // She was like, you need to state why you're calling. // Yep

Ben James: It's been a couple busy weeks since the kids reached consensus. They've conducted a mental health survey for students and parents at the school. They're also learning how bills become laws, and they're researching pending legislation, looking for a mental health bill they can get excited about. They're educating themselves, searching for a specific policy goal, one that will have a long term systemic impact on mental health. They'll work on that goal all the way up to Civics Day.

ETHAN/NEAGLE/JACOB: So we're working on a state bill, and I just explain what that bill consists of? // It's up to you // Like we're trying to hit it from the local and state level.

JENNINGS: If you go to school every day, and you are in an antidemocratic environment where your voice is not heard, where you are being lectured at, where you are being tested non-stop, then how are you to expect those young people to grow up and to be active citizens?

Ben James: That, again, is Arielle Jennings, Massachusetts director of Generation Citizen. Action Civics can sometimes look unfocused or chaotic—especially compared to conventional instruction—but Jennings says there's a LOT being taught at this stage of the process.

Arielle Jennings: Public speaking, having the confidence to go out and knowing who your public officials are and how to contact them. Critical thinking, persuasive argumentation, and I would argue maybe even more important, developing a sense of civic efficacy.

Ben James: With five or six small groups of students to track and support, just in this class alone, Mr. Neagle often seems more like a circus juggler than your typical front-of-the-room history teacher. And, to extend the metaphor, he's also walking a bit of a tightrope. The kids need him to support them through this

process. They also need him to get totally out of their way.

Arielle Jennings: Teachers really truly have to let go and let the students guide it. So a lot of what our organization does is deep teacher training in that pedagogy, which is ultimately, we call it a democratic classroom culture.

Ben James: Jennings says relinquishing control is a skill that can take some Action Civics teachers a while to develop.

Arielle Jennings: The best thing they can do is to experience it, and frankly, struggle with it in the first year, and really grapple with what it means to turn over power in a classroom.

[Music]

Ben James: Ultimately, it's from a class visitor, a social worker, that several of the kids get an idea for a policy goal. The issue ties directly back to their classroom. It's something I saw the first day I visited Pyne Arts, when a secretary came into the room and asked if there were any students present who spoke Portuguese. Bella raised her hand.

STUDENT: Bella's always getting called down to the little kids. They'll be like, Oh, we got a third grader who only speaks Portuguese.

Bella: There was a day that I got sent out of class to talk about a school shooting, like how it can happen, and she's only in 3rd grade, and I feel like there should be a trusted adult that can talk to her about that.

Ben James: The kids consult Mr. Neagle. They want to convince the district to commit to hiring more bilingual social workers. There's Portuguese, Kmer, Arabic, Swahili, Spanish. Sixty-nine languages. The kids say bullying of newcomers can be a

real issue. There's also stress, depression, and the challenge of doing academics while still learning English. But multilingual counselors are in short supply.

KIDS: We don't even have a SPANISH one // And Spanish is common. Portuguese is common. // There are like six Brazilian kids downstairs

Ben James: Mr. Neagle's all for it. Then, a couple days later, Ethan and Jacob make a discovery. The district superintendent has an explicit goal to fund more translation in Lowell schools. It's meant for things like translation technology, but the kids want the superintendent to use some of the funds to bring in more bilingual staff.

Jacob: He says he wants to increase the budget allocation from \$5,000 to \$200,000 for translation services, and that's exactly what we were working on in our project is for social workers to be able to talk to kids who come from war-torn countries and need services.

[Sound: Phone ringing.]

JACOB: Hi Good morning. My name is Jake and I'm a 8th grader at Pyne Arts Magnet School in Lowell. Does Mr. Boyd have a minute? Um, Mr. Boyd. Superintendent Boyd. (ring) Transferring me to his secretary. She's not available to take my call. /// Leave a voicemail with the number that we put. /// What do I say in the voice mail?

[Music]

Ben James: That question I punted earlier, why consensus? Here's our answer. Two kids of divergent backgrounds, Jacob and Angelica, who only a few weeks ago were passionately opposed to the other's chosen topic. Now they're working in concert on the same goal. The Benjamin Barber quote, the one that got me to Lowell in the first place. Public schools CREATE the public. This is what's happening to the kids in Mr.

Neagle's racially- and economically-diverse class. Through research and deliberation, practice and repetition, they are starting down the road toward a common civic identity. It's the ideal of what American public education can and should be, an ideal that goes all the way back to the nation's first public schools. That ideal, of course, has always been in need of a reality check.

[Break]

Nikole Hannah-Jones: It is the foundational American paradox...

Ben James: Nikole Hannah-Jones, a staff writer the New York Times Magazine, is one of the nation's foremost writers on American school segregation.

Nikole Hannah-Jones:...the idea that public schools should exist for common good, that public schools are, as Horace Mann said, the great equalizer, but also understanding the reality does not match the lofty ideal, which is, you know, what happens when you are a country founded both on slavery and freedom at the same time.

Ben James: Public education is the FOUNDATION of our democracy. This often-repeated phrase messes with my head not because it's inaccurate, but because it's true. Hilary Moss is professor of history and Black studies at Amherst College, and the author of the book *Schooling Citizens*. She says early public schools, or common schools as they were known, were formed during a period of great political anxiety.

Hilary Moss: In the early 19th century, individuals are absolutely consumed and concerned about the fate of the Republic. So the very idea that there is something that is a stable democracy, or a stable American democracy, that is something that will be perpetual and long lasting, is not something that they take for granted.

[Music]

Ben James: The founders of common schools in the 1830s and 40s were explicit. Their job was to take a mishmash of working class Catholic and Protestant children and turn them into Americans. Of course, who was allowed in—and who wasn't—mattered tremendously.

Hilary Moss: And if the central argument then is that these are citizen making institutions, but the only individuals that are allowed in are white. The implication of that, then, is citizenship is something that is predicated on whiteness.

Ben James: Native American children were forced away from their families into government boarding schools, where the explicit intention was to, quote, Kill the Indian to save the man. Under slavery, African-Americans were often prohibited from learning to read and write, and they were excluded from the common schools that first emerged in Boston, Baltimore and other cities. Again, Nikole Hannah-Jones.

Nikole Hannah-Jones: And so of course, scholars at the time, particularly scholars who are looking at the exclusion of Black children, argue that that meant that Black children were not supposed to be part of the body politic, they did not need to be educated for democracy because they were not to take part in democracy. And many people would argue that our schools are continuing to suffer from that legacy today.

BEN/SILAS: So I want to know, how is JFK Middle School preparing you to be a citizen of the United States. // I don't know // How's it preparing you for citizenship?

SILAS: This might sound really dumb, but like suspensions, like, that's like going to jail, like, can't break the law when you're an adult, you go to jail,

and that's part of being a citizen. So I guess in a way they kind of are.

Ben James: Yeah, it's interesting. Do you see patterns of what that looks like? for like, which are the kids that seem to get...

SILAS: Wait? pause, pause, pause.

SILAS/BEN: Do you want me to say, Black and Puerto Rican kids get suspended more? Like, I mean, this is the truth. So do you Is that what you're Is that what you're looking for? // I'm not looking for that. But I'm interested in hearing what you see. So that's what you're seeing?

SILAS: I mean, it's a fact.

Ben James: Silas's observed reality is indeed a fact. Last year, according to state data, Latino kids were suspended almost three times as often as white kids at Silas' school. Silas—I should make clear—is white.

Nikole Hannah-Jones: I think our public schools continue to reflect whom we believe to be full citizens, and who we believe to be the people who should have the most say in our democracy, and who we think are expendable and probably should not be making decisions. I think our schools reflect who we think are capable of self-governance and who we think need to be governed.

[Music]

Ben James: Start with school segregation. Silas' school is eighteen percent Latino. A few miles down the interstate, in Holyoke, Mass., the middle schools are ninety percent Latino. That district is currently operated under receivership, meaning local democratic control has been removed by the state due to chronic low student performance. This pattern of segregation leading to low performance is replicated in every state in the

country. But as the stats make clear, it's not just about school segregation. Black and Latino kids in predominantly-white districts are being underserved and over-disciplined as well. I've pulled out my computer. Silas and I are confirming the suspension stats for his school. But he's confused, maybe because he lives day-to-day inside what Hannah-Jones calls a fundamental paradox.

SILAS: What does kids of color getting suspended more have to do with being prepared to be a citizen. ///

Ben: Really you're asking that question? //

Silas: I don't know I just like

BEN: I'm going to turn the question you asked back around on you. What does this have to do with citizenship? //

Silas: I don't know. I think it shows people, like, who they can trust. I think....

Ben: Be more specific.

Silas: I think like if this many Puerto Rican kids are getting suspended, it makes people feel like the system's against them. And that like they're not meant to succeed and it can just be kind of demoralizing.

BEN: So that's how the Latino kids, the Puerto Rican kids might experience it stepping into this school system that operates in this way. What messages do you think white kids in this kind of school system get about being a citizen in our society?

SILAS: That they don't need to do much like, that like, if you stay under the radar, then you'll be fine. Like, you don't need to be a good citizen. You can just stay out of trouble

and, like, because there's plenty of white kids that are just assholes, but they're under-the-radar-assholes.

Ben James: It's not hard to rail against an education system structured around segregation and other systemic inequities. The challenge is that there is no other institution that continues to bring Americans together across so many divisions as our public schools. Which is why a curriculum like Action Civics can be a game changer. It builds the democratic dispositions of its student participants, even as those students work to fix the very problems that magnify inequity in their schools and communities. Civics Day was coming up. I was still feeling that same envy, wishing my kid could be a part of it. Then I had an idea.

[Music]

SILAS: Wait, is this like a really big thing that you're asking?

Ben James: Ten bucks an hour, plus he'd get a day off school. I needed him to carry a mic and record some of the other student projects at Civics Day. I didn't say I wanted him to get a dose of kids practicing civic advocacy, just that I needed his help. He negotiated like crazy. Finally—

SILAS/BEN: Yeah, I'll do it. // You're on board. Okay.

Mike Neagle: Do we need a drumroll? [drumroll]

Ben James: At Pyne Arts, the class votes for the students who will present their project at Civics Day. So far they've picked Stephen, Bella and Angelica.

Mike Neagle: So, Jelicity [applause]

Ben James: The four students prepare for Civics Day. They're feeling good

about themselves, ready for this responsibility.

JELICITY: Cuz y'all know when we were first starting in 7th grade, we were so stupid and immature to like, the next level.

KIDS: Oh what do you guys think we need to improve on for tomorrow's presentation? // Oh I think we went way too fast // Yeah I noticed that too // I rushed completely cuz I didn't know what I was saying

Ben James: A couple days before they go to the statehouse, the whole class meets with the superintendent.

JACOB/KIDS: We kind of put Superintendent Boyd on the spot, because we mentioned his fourth goal // oh yeah // I don't think he was expecting that // Where he even identified the issue of not enough translation services in Lowell public schools.

Ben James: They ask him for a commitment on hiring more bilingual social workers. Boyd says he's impressed with their proposal. Then, in true public official fashion, he says he'll get back to them. The kids are thrilled.

[Music fades to ambient noise]

OFFICIAL: Hi everyone. Welcome to Civics Day! [cheering] Whoo!

BEN: Hi there. My name is Ben James. I'm a reporter. I'm doing a story on Action Civics. // Oh great! // And I have my son here as my assistant, and we're going to be recording...

Ben James: If you've never been to the Massachusetts Statehouse, it is magnificent. Domed ceilings. White marble. Imposing columns. And an absolute acoustic nightmare, especially when there are hundreds of teenagers on the

scene.

KIDS: [group of kids cheering]

Ben James: Teenagers who THEMSELVES look magnificent. They are decked OUT, like they've all shown up to their favorite aunt's wedding. If I could, I'd make a story not just about the kids at Pyne Arts, but about so many of the students and projects at Civics Day. That story would definitely include Abraham.

ABRAHAM: Wait wait. I'm talking right— Shout out to Fo. Shout out to Mom, I love you. // Where you from? // Uh Lowell High // My name is Abraham Wachira, I come from Kenya // Our topic was early release on Wednesdays for the students. Mid-week stress relief. Pin that, get that out there.

Ben James: The volunteer judges gather in the rotunda. They're professionals and retirees from the greater Boston area. Most of them are white, while the majority of Civics Day participants are kids of color. Silas and I find Angelica and the other Pyne Arts kids frantically setting up their display.

BEN/ANGELICA/JELICITY: How are you feeling? // Um, good. A little scared, but we got this. // Yeah we have to set up our posters.

Bella: We were so stressed about organizing, but looking at everyone else's board, I think we should have not stressed as much as we did.

Ben James: It's framed as a competition, but Civics Day is really a bunch of schools and neighborhoods and towns taking their own temperature, arriving at what matters most to them via consensus, and the results are fascinating. There are classes focused on gang violence and on river pollution cleanup. A high school group wants better education on sexual consent. One middle school class tapped into pending state legislation on domestic violence and immigration.

SILAS: I can do the gang prevention one. I'll do the one about needles, just because it's specific and it's interesting.

OFFICIAL: Start judging rounds now.

[Music]

Ben James: Two women approach the Pyne Arts table, and the kids are off—process, techniques, goals—a blur of talk.

Bella: We built consensus because we felt everyone's voices should be included.

JELICITY: We spend more than half of our lives learning and in school with people, but we don't always have people we can talk to in school.

STEPHEN: So, for our first goal, we want social workers that speak different languages. Lowell is actually the second most diverse city in Massachusetts, and it's not really represented by any of the staff that we actually have.

JELICITY/ANGELICA: So he's American, she's Brazilian, I'm Colombian // And I'm Puerto Rican // And she's Puerto Rican. And it's not even translation services, it's someone that would understand our culture as well.

OFFICIAL: Judges, please step back and submit your feedback form before your next rotation. You have three minutes to do so.

Bella: I honestly thought our first one was gonna be messy, but it really wasn't // It went really well!

Ben James: Round two. Round three. Round four. The kids stumble over their

words, skip parts of their script, but they still convey the energy, the drive, the thought behind their project.

ANGELICA/JUDGES: Do you guys have any questions? // It's very impressive // This is great, it really is. This is amazing // So when you say translators, are you looking for like counselors? // Out of 25 counselors, we only have about three that speak multiple languages.

OFFICIAL: That is the end of round four. Congrats students and judges.

Whoo!

Ben James: Silas walks up with his microphone. He's been listening in on an 8th-grade project about domestic violence.

SILAS: How'd it go // It was good // Great, you got good tape you think? // Yeah

BEN: So get your gear loaded up, bud. Put it on.

Ben James: We head down four flights of stairs to an auditorium for the awards ceremony. On the way down, some girls approach Silas.

GIRLS: Your eyes are really pretty. // She wants your snap!

Ben James: Oh boy. I guess Civics Day isn't only about civics. Silas is cracking up. I'm wondering if I really needed to bring him to this event. Then—I'll only discover this later—my recorder conks out. Silas is the one who captures themceremony. The grassroots change award. The systemic impact award. The collaboration and diversity award. And then—

OFFICIAL: Alright, congratulations. So, next up is our overall middle school award, going to a middle school class that earned the highest total score across all categories. Congratulations to table G-12, the Pyne Arts Magnet. Congratulations. For youth mental health. Congratulations!

Ben James: Holy heck. I was standing right behind Angelica, Bella, Stephen, and Jelicity with my mic and headphones on, and they screamed so loudly I ducked. Maybe that's when my recorder fritzed. Anyway, a couple more speeches, and that was a wrap for Civics Day. We watched all the different classes taking photos on the State House stairs. So awesome they won, I said on the drive home. Silas was like, Of COURSE they won. They go to the magnet school. Their teacher is history teacher of the year. Perceptive, as usual, but I think he was jealous, too—just how fun the whole thing looked. I'd gone in search of a classroom where democracy was being not just taught, but made, and somewhat to my surprise, I found it.

[Music swells then fades.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Man, that's a serious program. I need my daughter to be in something like that. And also, since I can't go back to middle school, I think I need the adult version of that class. Kinda like Ben said.

John Biewen: Well I think you're doing it, better than most of us. Democracy being made in a classroom. If we compare this Action Civics experience with what goes on more typically in public school classrooms ... you know, I like Ben's basketball analogy. 'We'll tell you how the game is played -- and then a few years from now, when you turn eighteen, you can touch the ball (if you still want to at that point).'

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, it's crazy when you think about it like that. But I think it's hard to overstate how antidemocratic our schools themselves are. Students have almost no say in what they study, how they learn, how their time is structured. There are some alternative schools, where students are involved in all kinds of

decisions, even the hiring of staff – and they make decisions about what they'll learn and how to spend their days. But, those exceptions really just highlight the point -- that in most schools, students have things done to them.

John Biewen: Going back to a program like Action Civics and the fact that it's rare, there's a tendency to blame that on teachers. "Teachers just aren't inspired. They're not inspiring." But it's really not that, is it? The fact is, if you're in a typical school system that hasn't explicitly signed on to a program like Action Civics, teachers -- and to be fair, school administrators -- are increasingly faced with mandates that make it hard to justify doing sort of thing with students, the kind of thing that's gonna have more impact on the kids' lives and be more memorable, but is also sort of messy and improvisational and maybe inefficient.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, and this goes back to our episode on neoliberalism. State and federal guidelines have been pushing school systems to show measurable results in student performance. It's based on this idea that everything should operate like the "marketplace," because competition for "customers" is the best way to improve the quality of any product -- even if the "product" is a growing child with their own individual interests and styles of learning. So what does that really mean? It means testing and more testing. And it's frustrating but teachers will tell you, they're required to teach to those standardized tests. The priority is to get kids ready to do as well as possible on these tests.

John Biewen: So there's a one-size-fits-all metric for determining how each child is doing and how each school is doing in comparison to others. For students competing for coveted spots in universities, and for the competition between schools. Now for more elite, mostly-white schools, the competition is about showing that your students excel so you'll attract more of the sorts of students who perform well on tests ... and they in turn will amp up those performance stats even more in future years.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And for poorly-funded schools in Black and brown

communities, that relentless pursuit of higher test scores really is about survival, because they don't want to lose funding or accreditation or local control -- like the mostly-Latino school that Ben mentioned in his piece, that was now being run by the state.

John Biewen: Chenj, I think that you and some other folks in Philadelphia have been working on a struggle like this, right? Over local control of schools.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I mean, Philadelphia actually just got back some control of our local school district. In 2001, the governor Mark Schweiker had declared the city's education system financially distressed, and so he took away the local decision-making powers of the Philadelphia School Board, and instead he installed this five-person state-backed body called the School Reform Commission. Most people call it the SRC. And when you talk about democracy, because of the SRC, we didn't have control of our schools for 17 years. And during that time, this state-controlled body shut down dozens of public schools and let others fall into decline, they expanded charter schools, and of course this didn't work, right? There was still this massive deficit. Ultimately, people in Philly protested and organized, and you know, I was at some of those rallies at the school district and people were like singing, and shouting, I mean, it was definitely what democracy looked like. Forty thousand people signed petitions to put abolishing the SRC on the ballot. And through the activism of community members and the Our City Our Schools coalition, the SRC was abolished and we won back some local control.

John Biewen: And I think all of this relates to another obvious way in which our education system is undemocratic, and perpetuates inequality: and that is the egregious disparity in funding, a disparity that correlates very strongly with race. A study in 2019 by an organization called EdBuild found first of all that three-fourths of all public school students in the country attend "racially concentrated" schools, meaning they're more than 75-percent white or non-white. This is more than half a century after *Brown v. Board of Education*. And schools with mostly Black and brown students from low-

income families receive almost 20-percent less funding on average ... and in some cases up to one-third less funding, than mostly-white schools in the same state. That difference isn't just about different income levels in those districts. Even schools rated as having mostly poor students, but poor white students, are better funded in most of the country than schools with poor brown or Black students.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Damn. But I mean that's why school budgets and their geography have to be understood as a set of racial priorities. School budgets can feel kind of wonky, but they're really extremely important political documents. But this all goes deeper than incentives and unequal funding. In the mainstream education system of this country, there's never been a culture of encouraging active citizenship. And I think there's a reason for that. And it's related to the larger lessons we've been learning in this series. We've seen over and over again that the people with the most power in American life really just want to train a workforce. So in the school context, they are much more open to getting their brands or products into schools or just kinda teaching people to be obedient than developing citizens who feel they have the power to create change.

John Biewen: A quick story. Back in the late 90s I was working for NPR in the West, and I reported on a small town in New Mexico, where two Mexican-American social studies teachers -- they were sisters -- they were fired because of the way they were teaching history. Most of their students were poor and Latino and were struggling in school, so these two teachers wanted to explore things that they thought would feel more relevant and engaging to the kids. They started teaching about Mexican-American activism, including Cesar Chavez and his movement work with farmworkers in California -- and they had the students thinking about how you'd go about organizing a protest. Trouble was, a lot of the more prominent people in their town, including members of the school board, identified as being of Spanish descent. They were Spanish-American, and they didn't like what the sisters were teaching, including the idea that Mexican and

Indigenous people had been exploited or victimized by European settlers, including from Spain. The school board accused the teachers of trying to turn their students into activists, and fired them.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It just makes me think about Apollo Fieri's quote that Educators really have the responsibility to not be neutral on issues of social justice. And the fact is, it's always been a higher priority for Black, brown, and Indigenous people -- what some people call citizenship education. A few episodes ago we talked about another example, the Freedom Schools, which were run during Freedom Summer, and Black people doing civil rights organizing have used similar models ever since. So it's not surprising that citizenship education, especially when it's focused on histories of marginalized groups, and explicitly encourages young people in those groups to get active, that it's considered dangerous and subversive and that people in the mostly-white power structure will often try to shut those kind of efforts down. I mean, this is a country that for centuries tried to make sure Black people didn't even learn to read.

John Biewen: Even among us white people there's a long tradition of anti-education, anti-intellectualism. Remember, in the antebellum South, poor white people were deliberately kept illiterate, as we learned from Keri Lee Merritt earlier in the series. That changed, at least we got universal public education, but we see echoes today, in this kind of 'if you love America, don't let your babies grow up to be Harvard law students' idea. Which is a particular trend in right-wing politics, the idea education itself is some kind of antipatriotic, left-wing conspiracy. Here's just one sample of that ... this is a clip of Tucker Carlson on Fox News, in 2017:

Tucker Carlson: Well, if you've been awake at any point in the last fifty years, you know that American colleges are basically pretty liberal. But in the past five years or so, campuses seem to have been hit by a fever they haven't experienced since the 1960s. Instead of focusing on professional skills or the sweet treats of scholarship, millions of students and professors have made far-left politics their only reason for being at school....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That guy. Another example of this contempt for education and knowledge, right, I mean here we are in the depths of a pandemic, and we're seeing powerful people on Fox News and other places saying not only that science should be ignored, but demonizing scientists as part of some subversive cabal.

John Biewen: Yeah and so, after years of this drumbeat, the view of higher education among Republicans has plummeted, even just in the last decade. A survey by the Pew Research Center found that in 2019, only one-third of Republicans agreed that colleges and universities had a positive impact on society. That's down from 58% just a decade ago. So maybe it's not surprising that state governments led by Republicans have been cutting funding for higher education, and installing corporate leaders on university boards of trustees to make universities more responsive to corporate interests. Considering all this, the open hostility to certain kinds of learning, the failure to fund really good public schools for all children, it's painful to say it, but isn't this just one more way in which the U.S. talks the talk about democracy but doesn't walk the walk.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's real, man. But I think there's also another side. Because despite all of this, some of the most inspiring contemporary examples of collective action in service of democracy come from teachers. In places like Virginia, Los Angeles, Chicago, North Carolina, and elsewhere. Really all around the country education has emerged as a site of resistance. And if you look at some of the teacher's unions, right, in many cases they are using a model called bargaining for the common good and putting the needs of the most vulnerable first, fighting for things far beyond their own salaries, like housing, and healthcare. There are also movements like Black Lives Matter in schools that have focused on decolonizing what's being taught. And they've also focused on getting police out of schools and getting more health counselors in. And they've looked at the way students are being tracked. So I think what this really shows us is that radical struggle, in the past and now, in the classroom and beyond, should be one of the most important parts of the curriculum.

[Music: theme.]

John Biewen: Next time, another episode that explores how well prepared we the people are, as citizens, to make the U.S. a functioning democracy. The media, and our maybe not-so-well informed citizenry.

Thanks to Ben James for reporting and producing this story from Massachusetts. Loretta Williams is our script editor. Music in this episode by the Summer Street Brass Band, middle and high school students in Boston. Other music by John Erik Kaada, Eric Neveux, and Lucas Biewen. Our theme song is The Underside of Power by Algiers. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. We post transcripts and a few other goodies on the show's website, sceneonradio.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter, [@sceneonradio](https://twitter.com/sceneonradio). Chenjerai, on Twitter, is [@catchatweetdown](https://twitter.com/catchatweetdown). Scene on Radio is distributed by our friends at PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.