

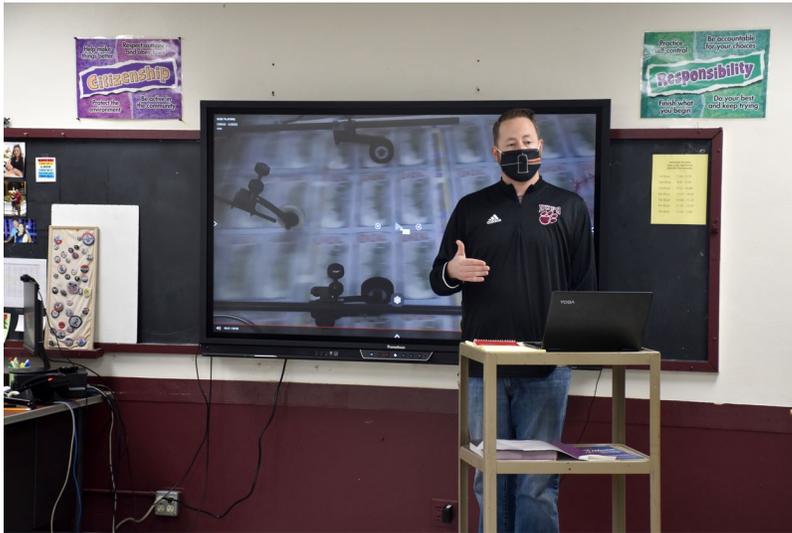
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EDUCATION

Capitol Riot Becomes Civics Lessons in Schools

Teachers face difficult questions from students; others point to the need for better civics curriculum, funding



Logan Ridenour, a teacher at Dupu High School in southern Illinois, said his students participated in a vigorous debate over the Capitol riot.

PHOTO: BRAD WEIER

By [Yoree Koh](#) and [Jennifer Calfas](#)

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At the start of class, Logan Ridenour reminded the high school juniors of the ground rules for discussing the Capitol riot: Everyone is entitled to their own opinion and everyone should be a respectful listener.

Mr. Ridenour, a social sciences and civics teacher at Dupu High School in southern Illinois, one of 40 states that require civics class for graduation, was used to having tough conversations with his civics students whose political views span both sides of the aisle, with more of them leaning to the right. But the conversation in the wake of the storming of

the Capitol was particularly daunting because of its historic nature and the political sensitivities embedded in it, he said.

Some students said President Trump incited the riot; others said he just gave a speech. In a vigorous, civil debate, the teens looked up the definition to incite and discussed the constitutional right to protest and the 25th amendment.

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At the end, Mr. Ridenour tied what happened at the Capitol back to their lesson on civic virtues like honor, respect and responsibility. “Regardless of where you stand on this, if you look at these virtues did you feel like it was on display with what occurred?” he asked. The students held firm to their different opinions, he said.

The Capitol riot and this week’s presidential inauguration have become teachable moments in classes around the nation, pulling civics education to the forefront as teachers say they face new questions from students and others say it all exemplifies the need for a better civics curriculum and funding.

The federal government annually spends about \$3 million on civics education, according to an analysis of federal data by the National Council for the Social Studies.

A bipartisan bill called the Educating for Democracy Act was introduced in September and proposes a \$1 billion investment in civics education.

Only 24% of eighth-graders scored at or above the proficient level in the 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam, largely unchanged since 1998. Proficiency means students should be able to recognize differences between American ideals and reality, understand the separation of powers and be able to explain how citizens influence government.

After the riot, Tiffany Ward, a first-grade teacher at Ralph J. Bunche Preparatory Academy in Detroit, used PowerPoint slides to juxtapose pictures of Black Lives Matter demonstrations and scenes at the Capitol, asking her students about their differences and how it made them feel. One student cast blame on Mr. Trump. Another expressed sadness, Ms. Ward said.

“If we are not doing this work,” said Ms. Ward, “why are we even in education?”

Natasha White, a fifth-grade social-studies teacher at KIPP Lanning Square Middle in Camden, N.J., said she challenged her students to explain if the incident was a protest or domestic terrorism. Ameerah Tiima, one of her students, said learning civics lessons and history is important for society’s future.

“You’ll never be able to move on if you never know your past,” she said. “And it’s going to help us improve—learning about these things in class.”

In Massachusetts, lawmakers bolstered civics education standards in 2018. Educators at Arlington Public Schools northwest of Boston plan to include lessons examining the connection between power, privilege and race, as well as on social media and the limits of freedom, in the coming weeks, said Denny Conklin, director of K-12 history and social studies for the district.

Mr. Conklin spent hours after the riot with colleagues pulling together tips and lesson plans and is preparing academic resources for an unconventional Inauguration Day due to added security and pandemic restrictions. Educators are also preparing to respond in case there is additional violence to ensure students feel comfortable to discuss events if they wish to.

“In history and social studies, we tend to think about wanting to reflect upon both sides and have historical empathy,” Mr. Conklin said. “In this case, this isn’t an opportunity where we want to try to justify the actions of these people.”

Some are at odds about what should be discussed in class.

AFTERMATH OF THE CAPITOL RIOT

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Linda Menk, a school board member for the Coweta County School System outside Atlanta, attended the rally at the Capitol on Jan. 6, prompting a petition to call for her removal with more than 1,000 signatures.

In an emailed statement, Ms. Menk said she has “received an overwhelming amount of strongly supportive responses to my attendance and responses from my constituents who, like I, respect the protection of First Amendment rights. These supportive responses far outweigh the negative.” She said she has no intention to resign from her seat. Ms. Menk said she attended what she described as a peaceful rally and said she was at no time close to the Capitol where the siege took place.

Cristina Lucia Cesari, who has called for Ms. Menk’s removal, said that the riot hadn’t been brought up in any of her sixth-grade son’s classes in the Coweta County School System.

“In a perfect world, yes I wish it had been discussed. But considering a majority of my area’s residents don’t see an issue with these problems, I prefer to have the discussions at home,” said Ms. Cesari, a 38-year-old buyer for movies and TV shows. “Just like the rest of our whitewashed curriculum, I don’t believe that the discussions would be honest and factual.”

Coweta educators weren’t told to avoid discussing the riot, according to the district.

“In all fairness I don’t believe that’s true,” said Dean Jackson, spokesman for the Coweta County School System, in response to Ms. Cesari’s description of the curriculum.

“Coweta teachers are encouraged to teach to issues and events of historic or civic importance,” said Mr. Jackson. “I’m sure there are a variety of approaches to talking or teaching about the events at the Capitol last week, particularly at the middle or high school level, and I can’t speak to each person’s experience.”

—*Lee Hawkins contributed to this article.*

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