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# Sex Education at the Statehouse

Madeline Caruso

Content warning: mentions of sexual assault

Leaving the Massachusetts State House and emerging into the warmth of early June, I hoped Margaret Sanger would be proud of me. Sanger, known as the unofficial founder of Planned Parenthood, was integral to the early reproductive rights movement. I, on the other hand, had just finished testifying before the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education to push for a bill called the Healthy Youth Act (HYA). This act would mandate that schools that choose to teach sex education do so in a way that was medically accurate, age appropriate, and comprehensive. Before hearing what others had to say about the bill, I had believed government-regulated sex education in schools to be a fairly inoffensive idea. That day, not only did I learn that there were valid reasons someone could disagree with the HYA, but I also got to see civic discourse in action. I learned valuable lessons about civic discourse within state government and about how and why people disagree. Although it is not, and

Artwork: Julianna McCaffrey

has never been, easy to influence the government, civic discourse and involvement in politics are just as important today in the U.S. as they were when the framers wrote the Constitution.

To fully understand the context of my testimony, it is first necessary to understand what civic discourse is. The idea is hard to pin down—it comes in a number of forms, and it is somewhat easier to identify than to define. Most people who have heard the term “civic discourse” used in context know intuitively that while arguing over which of two football teams is better is not generally considered civic discourse, arguing over whether football players should be allowed to kneel during the national anthem (think Colin Kaepernick) is. Not every instance is so clear, however. Would two politicians from different parties putting aside their differences and having dinner together count as civic discourse? What about everyone at the dinner table nodding in agreement after your cousin makes a joke about the latest controversial law to be highlighted by the

meaning it happens when people are invested in what the government does; and “counsel,” or an attempt to expose oneself and others to new ideas to come to a stronger conclusion.

Cooper further asserts that “modes of civic discourse enable citizens to answer the timeless and urgent call of democracy: ‘We have a problem. We need to talk about it’” (158). Civic discourse, as such, is any attempt, especially by members of a democracy, to solve a significant problem among themselves. Such attempts are significant because the solution directly or indirectly affects the life, liberty, or pursuit of happiness of people engaging in, or who are subjects of, civic discourse. Our politicians are engaging in civic discourse only if their conversation involves an important issue. The dinner table joke might be civic discourse, but this would be cemented if a larger conversation were to stem from it.

No mode of civic discourse is easy, and each comes with pros and cons. A major con of my chosen mode was uncertainty. People

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## “Intuition, it seems, is not sufficient to fully understand the breadth of civic discourse.”

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national news? Intuition, it seems, is not sufficient to fully understand the breadth of civic discourse.

David Cooper suggests in his essay “Is Civic Discourse Still Alive?” that the term can be defined simply as “collective democratic counsel.” “Collective,” meaning there are multiple people involved; “democratic,”

from Planned Parenthood had met with me a few times and had helped me write my testimony, but I was mostly in the dark about what the day would actually be like. This fact didn’t fully hit me until I was on the subway, in my power pants (gray plaid slacks), oversized purse in hand. Hoping it would quell my nervousness, I pulled out my testimony.

I had written and rewritten the page-and-a-half-long document more times than I could count; my heart, my soul, and the accrued knowledge from six years of writing classes were on this paper.

Finally, after a bus ride, a train ride, and a walk to 24 Beacon Street, I arrived at the State House. I would prefer not to mention the three separate times I got lost trying to find room A-1, but I somehow ended up there. As I walked into the room, I was confronted with ten long benches sitting opposite a sprawling desk-like structure where the members of the committee and their staffers peered out at everyone else. Despite my difficulties finding the room, I managed to snag a seat on a bench. Most of the general public in attendance ended up sitting on the floor or standing, a sad way to watch people talk for seven hours.

Seven hours of watching people talk to themselves was indeed what it felt like, and it didn’t help that all I’d eaten that day was cereal and a granola bar. I think at some point during hour four or five I shifted to a different plane of existence. I was fascinated because it was all new to me, but I was not sure I’d want to do it day in and day out like the members of the committee did. There wasn’t much back-and-forth, either—Chairman Lewis or Chairwoman Peisch would call a few people from a list to come testify; then they would sit at the desk, speak for a few minutes, and go back to their original seats. Occasionally, one of the politicians would ask a question, usually about the language or logistics of a bill, but that was the extent of the conversations. The HYA was the last bill to be addressed, and I was one of the first people called to testify.

Hoping no one would take my seat on the bench, I made my way to the table with the microphones alongside three or four girls around my age who were also in support of the HYA.

After the girl to the left of me spoke, it was my turn. My testimony poured out of my mouth as if on autopilot—thankfully, without a hitch. The committee declined the opportunity to ask questions, so I listened to the remaining testimonies in my group. Then it was over. I felt like a drop in the ocean, now certain that my story wasn’t important enough to sway their opinions. People much older and more experienced than I testified, and that amplified the feeling. It was only when the opposition started to chime in that I realized why I was there. The HYA was the only act of the entire day that had opponents. I had been warned about one of them, the Massachusetts Family Institute (MFI). It’s a powerful organization, notorious for shutting down sex education legislation on the grounds that it will poison children’s minds—the kind of fearmongering that should give you a good idea of how little ground they actually have to stand on. Most people support having sex education taught in schools (Kaiser), but those who make up the MFI are a vocal minority. Called to testify were a middle-aged man, an older woman, and a teenage girl. I’ll always remember what this girl said. She was afraid of sex education because she believed, or had been told, that it led people to rape. This was the world she would have to live in for the rest of her life, and she didn’t want to have to constantly be afraid that she would be sexually assaulted. Immediately I felt bad for her. Sex education does not cause rape; in fact, it de-

lays sexual activity in most young people and helps them form a better understanding of consensual relationships (Santelli). I wanted to scream at her that one in five women in the United States is raped and that the future she was so afraid of was what many women experienced today (Black 18). I couldn't engage her, though, and for the moment that was probably a good thing. The hearing was coming to a close, finally, and I was ready to eat some actual food.

Not everyone who testified against the HYA was as misinformed as that girl. A lot of people were concerned about the government getting to decide what was taught

most memorable part of the day, my showing up and adding to the number of people who came in support of the HYA was in part why the bill recently ended up getting passed. Sometimes politicians just need to see that enough people will support them if they stick their necks out in support of a controversial issue.

Fundamentally, I appreciate the system that props up this form of civic discourse. On the surface, everyone gets heard, anyone can attend, the discourse is respectful, and everyone gets the same opportunity to speak. Without hearings, there would be little direct input from the population at large with

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## “The value of civic discourse is not in getting satisfaction, but in seeking the truth through formulating and reformulating ideas.”

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about sex education in schools. Some didn't like the language in the curriculum because they felt that it romanticized sex. More felt it should be the parents' role to teach their children about sexuality. I disagree to varying degrees with those ideas, but they're valuable to me now because through them I've been confronted with views that are different from mine. If I were more moderate, those testimonies might have changed my mind. This also gave me some clarity about the importance of my testimony. It's not usually possible to change someone's mind on such a polarizing topic, but the value of civic discourse sometimes lies not in how it can reverse ideas, but in how it can deepen them. Also, although my testimony and what I said exactly might not have been the

regard to legislation. In those seven hours, almost every bill had informed, passionate people speaking on its behalf. In those ways, it is ethical, especially when considering the direct conversations between politicians and people testifying. Committee members were always attentive and never attacked anyone's testimony. They never pushed back, either, though. When that girl said that sex education led to rape, no committee member disagreed with her, though that statement was untrue. No committee member ever disagreed with anyone unless it involved something they could point to in the text of the legislation. I don't believe it to be ethical to let someone go on with their life without at least trying to correct misinformation, to let that person spread misinformation to other people.

This system simply doesn't allow for push-back of any kind except through a reference to the language of the bill. Even superficial elements, such as the fact that the committee members were far away from the individuals testifying and the fact that some people who testified had been standing for hours prior, made it impossible to have an actual discussion between two people. The other issue is lack of efficiency. I had to be there the whole day, because no one knew at exactly what time we would get to the HYA. This creates a concentration of testimony from people who advocate for a living and people like me who don't have regular jobs. Some might say that means the people who show up are those who care the most, but I know that isn't true. Plenty of my friends have much more of a personal stake in this issue than I do but couldn't attend the hearing for various reasons.

The memory of June 3, 2019 brings up mixed emotions for me. I remember leaving feeling grateful to be able to get up and walk around. I knew I was lucky to live under a government that allowed me to speak directly to my legislators, but I felt weighed down with new knowledge of which parts of the system should be improved. Testifying at the State House was definitely the longest and most tiring form of civic discourse I'd ever participated in, but it was an experience I'll never forget. Civic discourse isn't always satisfying. It's not always like the debates on TV where two non-experts yell at each other for a digestible amount of time. This experience encouraged me to seek a deeper understanding of important issues, regardless of whether people's minds are changed or not. The value of civic discourse is not

in getting satisfaction, but in seeking the truth through formulating and reformulating ideas. Whether that comes in the form of having debates about kneeling during the national anthem or in the form of testifying at an establishment of local government is up to you—all that matters is what you and the people around you get from it.

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