



State Violence & Civics Education in a Democracy

The recent killings in Minneapolis by federal law enforcement have renewed urgent conversations about power, accountability, and protecting human life. While these events have drawn attention to the Twin Cities, they are not isolated. Since September 2025, federal agents have shot and killed five people: Silverio Villegas González in Franklin Park, Illinois; Isaias Sanchez Barboza in Rio Grande City, Texas; Keith Porter in Los Angeles, California; Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, Minnesota. These are among at least 20 incidents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents firing their weapons and 36 instances of holding bystanders, protesters, or other people at gunpoint. In 2025, 32 people died while in ICE custody.

As social studies educators, we live through these tragedies with our students and bear responsibility for an honest civics education that speaks to the present moment and engages young people with the unfolding world around them. Alongside our students, we must inquire into the root causes of events, analyze their effects, grapple with truths, and act on our new knowledge. It is in the spirit of care and professional duty that we offer this statement on state violence and civics education in a democracy.

The violent use of state power poses fundamental challenges to the promise of democracy. We are witnessing militarized federal law enforcement activities focused in cities that are historically renowned for democratic organizing and political opposition. People are being denied hard-won constitutional protections without sufficient oversight, due process, or accountability. The examples being set are terrifying citizens and non-citizens alike. When the state perpetrates violence, whether through law enforcement or agencies, the consequences ripple outward; the immediate physical and psychological devastation precipitates a humanitarian crisis that erodes public trust and democratic legitimacy. Youth can feel overwhelmed and skeptical about their place and participation in the world. They can lose faith in human kindness, locations for connecting, and the basic human empathy central to living in a shared society.

Violence by law enforcement raises serious civic questions that cannot be ignored in classrooms. As social studies educators and civic leaders, we teach that democracy, no matter how fraught and difficult, must be rooted in equal protection under the law and the responsibility of government institutions to serve the public rather than operate above it. In civics courses, we support students' inquiries into the nature and mobilization of power and authority. In history classes, we teach about communities who held each other and their governments accountable, who insisted on equality and justice and thereby expanded democracy. We study hard histories of genocide, settler colonialism, slavery, homophobia, and more so that

we can understand how people organize, resist, and face the challenges in front of them. We draw inspiration from the intellectual traditions, such as Black critical patriotism, and educational practices developed in pursuit of liberty and thrivance: freedom schools, land-based education programs, and ball culture, to name a few. These examples provide rich resources to reimagine civics education in our schools.

Contrary to beliefs that young people are uninformed and civically-disengaged, our students hold strong beliefs and are taking to the streets, starting petitions, making their voices heard. They are organizing mutual aid. They are keeping their communities safe. What are the many ways that young people are showing up in this moment? The organized protests across the U.S. are symbolic of the civic roots that we must build upon. How do these spaces encourage inquiry-to-action in real time? Social studies educators and researchers have a profound opportunity to learn from and with our youth in this moment.

Civics education in a democracy bends towards liberty and justice, not of its own accord, but through the efforts of educators and students. We teach students their rights and responsibilities as well as the roles of governmental institutions. We nurture the understanding that democracy is sustained by participation, accountability, and collective responsibility. We foster persistence and critical optimism. We equip students with tools to understand power, question authority responsibly, and engage critically with the systems that shape their lives. We cultivate youths' capacity for civic action as an expression of their values.

As events unfold and our understandings evolve, we will continue this conversation about state violence and civics education in a democracy. Today, we call on all social studies educators to launch new inquiries with their students to better understand our world, clarify our values, and take informed action towards a more just society.

Our own conversations direct us to stand in solidarity with impacted communities and reaffirm our commitments to:

- **Center Wellbeing:** Advocate for the safety and well-being of our students and their families.
- **Critical Inquiry:** Protect spaces for open dialogue around questions of power and state accountability.
- **Honest Teaching:** Support educators to teach democratic principles with integrity and inclusion.
- **Human Dignity:** Center human dignity, constitutional rights, and community care in civics.
- **Professional Expertise:** Respect teachers' judgement in leading controversial conversations and studying hard histories.

- **Safe Schools:** Oppose federal law enforcement interference to the right to education.

Finally, we recommend the following resources to social studies educators as they teach through this moment:

- [The Day After: Discourse Guide for a Timely Response to Difficult or Controversial Topics](#) from Chicago Public Schools
- [Values in Teaching: Resources for Educators in Contentious Times](#) from EdEthics
- [Change Analysis Overview, Integrated Action Civics Project](#) from the University of California Berkeley History Social Science Project
- [Teaching for Justice Illinois](#) curriculum and media from the Social Studies Network

The Big City Social Studies Group is an educator collective organizing to transform social studies education.

