

Digital Soapbox- Students Give Voice to Their Citizen Concerns

Reacting and reaching out beyond the 21st Century School using the 20th century soapbox artifact as a vehicle

In these troubled and challenging times, students in the middle school and beyond can tap on a 20th century American tradition for voicing and sharing their concerns with their peers. That tradition is the soapbox used as an impromptu podium in the early 1900s when local community speakers would stand on a wooden crate (often originally soap) from a store. Prior to truly integrating the capacities of technology in the classroom, many teachers actually collected still existing crates from some stores and had students stand on them to speak. Some teachers included decoration of the crates with free speech images as part of the student owned citizenship project.

Flash forward to the second decade of the 21st century and use of digital apps such as flipgrid, which allow students to sit at their devices and record a speech about a local or global concern. Unlike the impromptu live speeches that happened as the speaker spoke from the actual soapbox podium, students using flipgrid can prewrite their speeches and then edit out any pauses or errors or delays until they are satisfied with the resulting statement of their “soapbox” concern. The soapbox speech delivered clearly and cogently to student and teacher satisfaction is then ready to

be posted on the school website, screened for peers or even shared with invited adults and students other districts.

Another excellent aspect of the soapbox project with flipgrid use, is that it is a relatively short- no more than 2-3 class session project with a palpable visual and written product as well as a built in audience who can access it anytime, anyplace. The student has a sense of agency and of accountability plus has in writing and delivering the speech also immediately participated as a proactive community member, using words to push a specific civic or global concern.

The project is easy to implement:

- 1. Ask students to list what they care about in their school or community and what concerns them. Have them then make sentences at least three detailing their concerns. Finally give them a template for a speech (they can shift it if desired: My name is _____. I want to talk about _____ because _____. Did you know or think about _____. As a community we need to _____ in response or reaction to this concern) with a word limit or recording time limit appropriate for the group.**
- 2. During the first session, give students 10 minutes to just spill out their ideas. Allow one or two or more volunteers to flipgrid record themselves so they get a sense of how they sound and look and how well they are getting their message across.**
- 3. The second session can include student research on the topic to add another layer to the speech. Students**

can also final edit their recordings on flip grid and at the end screen the aggregate of class recordings.

- 4. The writings or scripts from the soapbox issues can be published in at least the school newsletter, if not sent also to local government officials or as letters to editors or posted to blogs prescreened by the teachers. Here are a sampling of the surprisingly broad and deep range of topics that the students in a sampling of 130 plus 7th and 8th graders at Ditmas IS 62- a Title 1 middle school in Brooklyn developed: global warming, student mental health, gun control, endangered turtles, shifting friendships in high school, fear of taking off masks because face would be revealed, anti-Asian hate crimes, students shootings, and worries about passing Regents tests.**

Here are the preliminary powerful student voices for recording to share on the Digital Soapbox- courtesy of Flipgrid:

7th grade

I care

Anna Bloch

I care about gun safety. This issue has resulted in many student and adult shootings. When legal guns are not stored safely away by owners, children can easily harm themselves or others. For me personally, safety is suddenly an issue. For example, I actually was not sure if I would be safe going to my friend's bas mitzvah party this past March.

I care about LGBTQ rights because recently certain states have come up with “Do not say gay bills.” Who knows if the Supreme Court will continue to support case results that helped the LGBTQ movement?

**My own safety and future
Vanessa Perez**

What I care about in this world is my future and general safety.

I want to achieve good things in my life by doing well in school and at home. If I do so, I will get to live the life as an adult that I want. Even if I do not achieve all I want to achieve, I at least want to try.

It seems that each day people are more and more concerned about their safety. So many do not feel safe in the streets. It seems as though the police are not succeeding in addressing these safety concerns. I think that this has to go to another level and the President or the national government have to address this issue.

8th grade

Mental Health

Nurzahan Chowdhury

I care about the mental health of this current generation. The wellbeing of teenagers living in today’s society is not talked about enough. Many times it is actually being ignored. We the children of 2022 grew up under the care of our parents being told that our lives

would be filled with love. We were told that we would be powerful enough to effect changes. We felt very mighty hearing those words.

Yet now we stand, walking on our own feet, and becoming independent. But unlike the world of love and strength to effect change we were led to believe that we would find, we have had to stride through the Covid pandemic, isolation and conflict. As part of this brave journey, many of us have indeed emerged. But in the process of emerging, we have come forward with personal dilemmas including anxiety and depression.

Whatever happened to Equal Pay for All- Immigrants Included?

Tyler M.

I care about equal pay for all. Everyone should get equal pay for the jobs that each one is doing. Many immigrants came to the United States in search of the immigrant dream. Yet, instead of finding it, they get taken advantage of by being forced to work long hours for pay which is below the minimum. Despite so-called legal equal pay regulations for all, there are so many immigrants still being underpaid today.

**Traumatized Students – How can they be helped?
Anonna Mehjiban**

The school system often loudly voices their concern for students, including for the students emotional well being. Yet when a child confides about the child's trauma something which is so hard to do to a teacher, sometimes the teacher "hands off" the child to a counselor. Should the trauma be deemed serious they are then referred to ACS or CPS. This fragile child then goes through the "system."

I personally feel that guidance counselors need to do more than just offer stress balls and coloring books. True they are busy. But their crucial jobs need to be done right. Sometimes the way a child is handed off through the guidance system can cause the child more trauma, than the original trauma which led to his or her referral. Sadly this means that if children over-share what even a little bit, they are in danger of being taken from their parents. That factor works against children seeking actual needed help. On the other hand, when families caution children that what happens in the family needs to stay there, that secrecy can be toxic as well.

While the school system abstractly voices the goal of inculcating and immersing students in citizenship and in community, often other than a few deliberate community service projects or outreach or awareness of global issues (Ukraine War fundraising), busy educators do not seamlessly integrate real authentic citizenship living into curricula. Yet the actual soapbox crate and the now accessible online flipgrid speech

recording option, offer all teachers and definitely ELA, SS and Science a chance to immediately get students “soapboxing” curricula and real life issues. Plus with flipgrid, even the shy or self-conscious can “voice” and “edit” that student’s position or concern. Often the most natural and most accessible tool for learning is hiding in plain classroom sight. Students can now step up to “soapbox” their concerns as citizens, one flipgrid recording ready to post for comment, at a time. Go back to the past “soapbox” to engage today’s flipgrid voiced citizens.