THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

BACK TO SCHOOL IN AN ELECTION YEAR

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 06, 2024

UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

PANEL DISCUSSION

MODERATOR: JON VALANT, Senior Fellow and Director, Brown Center on Education Policy, Brookings

SIAN BEILOCK, President, Dartmouth College

IRADUKUNDA ESPERANCE, UNITES Dignity Ambassador, University of Utah Class of 2024

KEI KAWASHIMA-GINSBERG, Newhouse Director of CIRCLE, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University

REBECCA WINTHROP, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Universal Education, Brookings

*****

VALANT: Good morning and thank you all for joining us. We're delighted to have you for today's panel discussion, which we've titled “Back to School in an Election Year. How America's Schools and Colleges Can Help to Develop Engaged and Responsible Citizens.” I'm Jon Valant. I'm a senior fellow here at the Brookings Institution in our Government Studies program. And I'm the director of our Brown Center on Education Policy. And to motivate this conversation a bit, I think most of us on this call would agree that this has been a tumultuous stretch for American politics and civic life. And that's unlikely to change soon, especially as we go barreling toward this election this November. But it is the case that there's a whole lot in our politics, in our in our social interactions that really is under our control and our schools and our colleges played key roles in that. That's true in the short term, and it's also true in the long term. And I think it's important that we remember that public schools are the primary institutions that we have for equipping Americans for what they need to be contributing members of society. And that's contributing its workers, but it's also contributing as citizens. So today we're going to be talking about both our K-12 and our higher education citizens systems with respect to preparing citizens. And that's by design, because while both K-12 and higher ed play distinct roles, they're also deeply interconnected in the roles they play here. And while developing, engaged and responsible citizens is always a core function of our education system, we're going to anchor this discussion in a couple of ongoing events that make this a sort of particularly unusual school year. One of those is this fall's election. The other is the ongoing campus clashes over conflicts in the Middle East. So. All right. So we have we have an hour. And in just a moment here, I'm going to introduce our panelists and then we'll have about 40 minutes of panel discussion before I turn to audience questions. And we'd love to include your questions if you have them. Thanks to those who submitted some very good questions as you registered for the event, we'd welcome additional questions as we go here. So you can you can send those to. You can send them via email to events@brookings.edu or on Xm using the hashtag #EngagedCitizens in tag at Brookings Global. So that was email events@brookings.edu or hashtag engaged citizens and tag at Brookings Global. All right. So we have a wonderful panel with us who I will introduce now. Sian Beilock is the 19th president of Dartmouth. Sian the first woman to have been elected president of Dartmouth in the institution's 255-year history. President Beilock is a cognitive scientist who specializes in topics such as performance, anxiety and the always unpleasant phenomenon of choking under pressure. Since arriving at Dartmouth, President Beilock has focused on helping students to learn from and engage with one another constructively, even where they might disagree. Iradukunda Esperance is a recent graduate of the University of Utah where she studied political science and gender studies while in college Ira worked on fostering a culture of dialogue, empathy and mutual respect on campus. Ira is an ambassador for the Dignity Index, which is a scale for assessing dignity and contempt in speech. Ira is an aspiring civil rights

attorney who comes to the US by way of Tanzania, where she was born. Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg is the new house director of CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. CIRCLE is a nonpartisan research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. Kei is among the country's leading experts on civic learning and engagement and does a great deal of applied, partner-based research aimed at improving the opportunities for young people to participate in civic life. And last but not least, Rebecca Winthrop is my colleague and my friend here at the Brookings Institution. Rebecca is a senior fellow in our Global Economy and Development Program, where she's the director of the Center for Universal Education. Rebecca's expertise spans a lot of areas in education policy and practice, including civic said across a lot of parts of the world. And Rebecca has a new book on student engagement coming out titled "The Disengaged Teen: Helping Kids Learn Better, Feel Better and Live Better." Which I think is available for preorder now. Okay. So, Kei, I'm going to start with you, if that's okay, and ask you to set the stage for us a little bit here. So you've done a lot of work to help us understand you. Civic engagement from conducting polls of young Americans to studying how schools handle civics ed. And as we're approaching this election season, I'm curious how you see the state of its civic education. Excuse me? The state of civic engagement among young people in the US. How engaged and prepared would you say they are for this election season?

KAWASHIMA-GINSBERG: Thank you. Thank you, Jon. And thanks, everyone, for having me. It's my pleasure to be here. So currently we are watching an incredible cohort of young people who have been really precocious and also really diverse in their ways of engaging in civic life and politics. We have seen three federal elections in a row where young people's participation has been record breaking or nearly record breaking high, establishing a bit of a pattern. At the same time, young people not only participate through voting, but has really expanded the repertoire of how they engage in their community and with our policies. And was the government more directly than, I would say the previous generations have been? The voter turnout itself is almost equivalent, if not exceeding that of boomer generation when they were younger. So it's a really actively engaged population that you can say is perhaps more ready than other types of young people have been. Of course, we're not out of the woods in that we still see an incredible amount of disparities in where and how and who are engaged in civic life, including elections. But of course, other things like running for office, for example, is really driven by what sort of economic and financial access young people have. Other forms of civic engagement, including even talking about politics on social media, is very divided by educational and technological divide as well. So we as a nation are really benefiting from

young people's own power to engage each other in many ways while we still lag behind and how equitably we're preparing everyone to be able to participate in civic life meaningfully.

VALANT: Thanks very much, Kei and Rebecca, I'll turn to you. So you've written in the past about what I think you see as an imbalance in how US schools prioritize civics education relative to other core academic subjects. Could you tell us a bit about how you see that imbalance and its consequences?

WINTHROP: Yeah, sure. And I do want to before I talk about the imbulance, I do want to say that Kei has really positive news for us. But the level of engagement doesn't necessarily talk about how they are engaging. And in my in my dream world, if US schools were doing what they should do. You wouldn't need what Ira is an ambassador for a dignity index. You wouldn't need the initiatives that President Beilock has on campus around, you know, teaching young people once they leave home how to have a civil dialogue. So I am very worried about the emphasis that we have in public education. We spend about $0.50 federal government does per year on civic education. Last I saw it was about $50 per year for STEM. And I would say this is good news for the civic education community. It used to be $0.05 and it just recently came up to about $0.50 very recently. So the the problem, I think, is one of emphasis and focus. And I do find it in some ways ironic because the US public education system was born out of a need to educate citizens. That was the driving motive. If you go back in time mid 1800s. You know, 40% of young people were in school. There wasn't really a public education system. People were learning all sorts of different things and different, you know, versions of community schools or schools, this or that. And the real motivation for a movement for a public education system was to educate future citizens, because we were a new America was a new nation. We were in an experiment. We were a democratic republic. And if you couldn't educate young people to be live and be citizens in a democratic republic, the thought was you would pretty much not have a democracy anymore. And so fast forward, I think what has happened is we have overtaken sort of the core purpose of education, which is to be around really around US competitiveness and skills for employment and skills for work. Those are important. I'm not saying they're not, but I think we are a little bit imbalanced in how we see sort of the the structure and I mean the emphasis on really the purpose of education. And that's not just in sort of funding and supply. I also think that, you know, there's not a huge demand for it from parents and families. We do a lot of research with my colleagues, Emily Morris on family school community engagement. We have surveyed families and teachers and students across 17 districts, and these are in sort of pink districts like Eastern Pennsylvania and Indiana, etc., Southern California and, you know, families and parents and the public often say that civic education is is not their main priority when looking at other priorities for

school. Now, teachers, on the other hand, are interested in doing more around it. So we have a bit of a sort of we're lacking a bit of a demand about sort of the fundamental purpose of education. And I really liked your, your framing around, you know, public schools are sort of the only really the main institution we have to help young people be contributing members of society. Case work has shown that there are a lot of civic deserts out there. 60% of rural youth live in civic deserts where they don't actually have opportunities to come together and practice their civic engagement skills. Schools are really the only ones there in every community. So. So we should be leaning into the civic purpose of school.

VALANT: Rebecca, can I ask so one critique that you sometimes hear of schools and of education policy in this era is that we've taken on too much of a kind of consumerist view of what it is that schools are for, that that really schools are there to serve students and those students and their families private interests rather than some kind of more public interest. Would you am I hearing you write that you would agree with with that critique?

WINTHROP: I, I do agree with that. I look at and I don't think it's intentional. I don't think it's an, a sort of I don't think there's like a nefarious conspiracy theory out there about it. What I think is that we have sort of, ah, the nature of the norms of our culture and, and sort of us what makes us rugged individuals. And, you know, every person out for themselves does translate into every parent trying to ensure that their kids get the best out of the out of the school system for themselves and upward mobility. And I see really different norms around education in other countries of the world. So, for example, when I travel in Scandinavia, Finland, for example, is always on the top of the charts in terms of sort of top education outcomes for their kids across a range of domains. And you know, if you talk to the the Finnish educators and policymakers, they say the one thing that they find really different versus US education is not necessarily the there's a range of things that are different, including sort of the prestige of teachers and how much they pay teachers. But the main thing they talk about often is that every everybody in a community sees the benefit of a public school because it not only helps their kid, it helps their neighbors kid. It helps the kid far away whose parents don't necessarily speak English. And that benefits everybody. So people see education as really educating every kid in the community as benefiting themselves to.

VALANT: Great. Thank you. And President Beilock, I like I'd love to turn to you. So and as we talk now about higher education, I mean, it is the case for most students who are arriving on college campuses in the US that they're coming there. They're sort of arriving at that doorstep from our K-12 education system. So

there really is a connection here. And President Beilock, this, of course, has been a tumultuous time on a lot of college campuses. And this fall semester could be especially tumultuous with the presidential election along with conflicts over what's been going on in Gaza. And I'm curious if you could talk a bit about what these several these last several months have been like at Dartmouth and then how you're thinking about and preparing for the months ahead.

BEILOCK: Well, thank you. And I'll first say that I second Rebecca's wish about wanting more civics education in the K through 12 space, because I think that is what helps prepare the students that land on our doorstep. And it's no secret that the last year in higher education was one of the most difficult, I think, in recent history. And really where we focused at Dartmouth from the beginning was on our mission, our purpose. What are we here for? And we are here very clearly with the North Star, which is to find students from the broadest swath of society who are excelling in their environment, bring them to Dartmouth, teach them how to think, not what to think, which is a really important distinction. How to engage in difficult conversations with others so that they can go and be the leaders of our democracy. That is our outcome that we're looking we're training the next generation of leaders. It's a real privilege to do that at a place like Dartmouth, an Ivy League institution, and we have to give our students the tools. And so to do that, we turn to our faculty. And immediately after the terrorist attacks on October 7th, we turn to our faculty and Jewish and Middle Eastern studies, who actually for many years have been team teaching together classes like the Politics of Israel and Palestine, really modeling how to have those dialogues. And what those faculty were bravely willing to do was to have a dialogue about what was happening in the Middle East in public, live streamed to tens of thousands of people and to model the how, how to have really nuanced conversations rather than just shouting at each other or taking one political point of view. And we were really thankful to it for our faculty to do that and have tried to model that in everything we do. We launched a program across the institution called Dartmouth Dialogues, and now our first year's who are just on campus. I welcome them on Wednesday as part of orientation, are all going through programing and training about how to find the common humanity in each other, how to listen, how to learn, to have dialogue. This is a skill we believe that you train like anything else, just like learning math, just like learning economics. This is a muscle that is honed through practice. And so given that we bring the best and brightest to this campus, our goal is really to help them build that muscle so that when they go out to be leaders, they are be able to bring in nuanced perspectives. They are able to talk across difference. They don't have to find consensus always. But the goal is to be in a situation where you're benefiting from the opinions of others, even if you don't agree.

VALANT: That said, that's interesting. And so is Dartmouth Dialogues on an entirely new program. Is that is that new to Dartmouth then?

BEILOCK: Yeah. So we launched it in January. It was great. We had the Secretary of Education on campus to launch it. And it's, you know, part of our history of really pushing our students to think about problems of the time and actually in several decades ago that we had a force that did some of the same thing for our students. And so we are reviving some of that and pushing it out as a university wide initiative. And so we were able to launch it last winter and really exciting to be able to use that also as a basis for the election. That's coming up. We have another team task force that's bringing in speakers around the election, folks who are in government, everyone from Mike Pence to Anita Hill will be on campus. And the goal is to really help engage our students in thoughtful dialogue around different points of view.

VALANT: Ira I'd love to get you in this conversation here and get some of your perspective as someone who just recently graduated from college and was was navigating these kinds of complex conversations and relationships yourself. Can you tell us a bit about your experience on campus with navigating those those difficult topics or those conversations with people who might see the world differently from you? And can you talk a bit about your experiences or your peers experiences?

ESPERANCE: So before I begin, one of my favorite principles of the Dignity Index is our third principle, which is known as the merits. This principle emphasizes the importance of reflecting on our own behavior, ensuring that our approach to conversation maintains dignity both for ourselves and for others. That principle has helped home who I am today, especially as a recent graduate from the University of Utah. So one of the biggest experiences that I face is that I'm very in tune with posting on the media with my political views, social views. And a year ago or two years ago, I don't remember exactly when I made a post on the media. And one of my friends was like, Ira, why would you post that? And initially I didn't think the backlash of that post. I was like, there's nothing wrong with this post. It's just stating my point of view. It's showing what I feel. And then I took a moment back and I looked at like the dignity index and I was like, Ira, No, that's a level four. Like, why would you say that? Why are you saying that? We're trying to promote dignity. And my friend really helped me realize, like sometimes we don't initially, like, intend to hurt like even our friends or our neighbors or even random people on the media. But it's important to recognize as an individual to reflect on yourself and one's actions in order to improve, like what we post on the media. And that leads me to like one of the most powerful lessons that I learned from my boss, Tim Shriver, is that conviction and passion are

essential. But the true strength of those beliefs is in how they are expressed with dignity. There's a profound difference between speaking with conviction and speaking with contempt. Conviction holds both your own beliefs and perspectives of others. Fostering productive and meaningful dialogue. Contempt, on the other hand, closes doors to understanding and erodes communication. Genuine Converse conviction isn't just about standing firm in what you believe in. It's about inviting others into the conversation with respect, empathy, and willingness to truly listen. This approach transforms disagreements into an opportunity for growth and connection. And this really helped me connect with my friend on a deeper level, especially as a person who's trying to, like, teach dignity over contempt. It was really a learning moment. Like sometimes you really need to sit there and reflect on what we post. So that was one of the biggest things for me because now moving forward, before I make a post, I think it's funny because I pull up the index and I'm like, Okay, Ira, is this a level six? Is this a level five? And it's something that's really helped me improve. Like especially being a policy major and a gender studies major, kind of like. Be an advocate for people on all different realms. I think it has been a huge experience for me.

VALANT: Great. Thank you. And the dignity index can. I think there might be a link already on the event page for this event, but if not, we can get we can get a link up on there. And so Ira, you mentioned you mentioned social media and the sort of it it brought me to some comments from Kaye about what's changing about this election and some comments from Rebecca about kind of where we've gone. It's very striking to me how different the environment is in which we are communicating with one another. We are sort of learning about one another. We're consuming information about politics, about media and about everything else. And in President Beilock, if I if I can come back to you. So. I'm curious sort of in that context about how much how much it is that colleges and universities can do to prepare students for these disagreements and potential conflicts with their peers. And if you have I mean, you told us a bit about this a minute ago, but if you have specific approaches that that have worked well, whether it's at Dartmouth or elsewhere, I'd be curious to hear that. But about also just sort of what what can colleges do and what can they do?

BEILOCK: Yeah. I mean, it's no secret that social media plays a huge role in our lives and not just in the information we consume, but in young people's mental health. We're finding a lot about that out right now. And I think one of the things that we can do at our institutions is really help our students understand the sources of the information they're getting. It's one of the things that I know our faculty in Jewish and Middle Eastern studies spend a lot of time talking about. Where are you getting your information? How are you thinking about this? How how do we think about the nuances of a situation and how do we ensure that we're

not seeing information that's only being presented from one particular point of view? And so that is about teaching students how to think, how to find out what are what are facts. We do have facts. What are facts? What free expression means for expression doesn't mean saying whatever you want, whenever you want. It is really about the ability to interact and have dialogue and voice opinions and to be able to to bring and back that up with facts so that we can move forward. And that's what happens on a college campus. And so I think what we can do is teach our students how to find that information, how to understand that information and how to form their own opinions. And that's really what we are working to do. We can also give students skills to find the common humanity in others. And it's similar to what Ira talked about, I think. And in the Dignity Index, we have a great partnership with StoryCorps, which. Puts students of different political views together for guided conversations. And the whole goal is to learn how to find where you agree rather than where you disagree and to learn to see the common humanity in one another. And it is giving students those skills that I think will set them up for the rest of their life.

VALANT: Thank you. And in case you're not taking that step back into our our K-12 system here and sort of what it is that K-12 schools can do to prepare students for those conversations. So I've seen you argue before that we sometimes make a mistake in civics education in thinking that it's really just the domain of like high school social studies teachers. Could you could you say a bit more about that and about how and when that school should have civics learning is just sort of part of the school there.

KAWASHIMA-GINSBERG: Yeah, thanks for that. I'm really inspired by both Rebecca's and President Beilock's comments about how the institutions can stand as a place to build citizenship and benefit the community on a large scale. K-12 schools really do and should play that role in that. If we walk kind of a civic learning in that kind of disciplinary lens alone, then only limit to where it shows up in scopes and sequence, which is often 10th grade in 11th grade, we find in research over and over, it's just really too late. There's a lot of disparities that gets built up up to that point, and it's deeply have to do with how cultural norms are set up earlier in young people's lives. Sometimes you live in a family where your opinions are really valued. You have conversations that include disagreement all the time. Those children are really fortunate. They can show up to any setting and become a really awesome citizen. All you need is a content and foundation of knowledge, which is really important. There are students and young people whose lives are not filled with those opportunities right then, as you said, John, school is the last standing place to really practice constitutional citizenship together. So we civics people often ask the question of how should we live together, which is a really important question that's foundational to civic life and how we sustain democracy as a self-

government. And what other panelists have said really reminded me of how there's a relational component to that in order for us to sort of withstand difference in opinions and still stay curious and inquisitive about other people's thoughts at the deeper level and find out more information beyond what you hear and see in social media. You need to build that habit. I think of both being curious because you care and cherish the community that you want to steward forward, but also building that habit of deep inquiry that includes things like media literacy, but also understanding that asking a question is just the start of knowing more about the community, the people that are around you and about the topic. And I think we have to build a school environment where that's valued across different disciplines, not just in civics. So you can do that in ELA, you can do that in economics, you can do it in math and science. Those are basic to many standards of practice in education, but also making sure there's a culture and relational norms related to those asking questions. So it's not just about learning the content, but it's actually about understanding the topic and the community context more deeply so that every student has a skill to bring a nuance as well as their expertise from their identities. Most experiences and prior learning to the discussion. And it ends up being a really rich environment where students can learn so much more about each other and pushing the community forward to improve. That means we have to start that much earlier on. I often recommend really trying to get those basic concepts like collective decision making, basic rights and responsibility of people that are living in this community as early as kindergarten. It does not mean you're going to talk about politics. You might talk about what should we do for the next theme day? What are people's opinions about that? What are some strategies to make a decision and how do we not get upset so much when you don't have your way? Right. If we can do that, starting with, you know, kindergarten first graders, by the time they step into your university's colleges or high schools, even students should have the readiness to be able to engage deeply in conversations. I mean, that's what I want.

BEILOCK: I love what he is saying. And I would just say that something we talk a lot about at Dartmouth is creating brave spaces rather than safe spaces where students are used to being uncomfortable in the classroom. And that that's okay. And I think getting used to being comfortable, being uncomfortable is something that has to start much earlier. I'm not getting exactly what you want for a group decision, understanding it's okay for people to challenge you because we if we are only looking for spaces where we're comfortable, we're really missing out on developing our ideas. And I would also say that a second part of that is, is being really clear and I've pushed this a lot at the university level is that it's not the institution's position to take a political stance because that essentially equals dialogue on either side of a debate. And so thinking about how we push that down not just at universities but through our public education, I think is so

important because we want the students to be able to be the critics, not the institution itself, which is borrowing a line from the University of Chicago, Calvin Report.

VALANT: And Kei I'm curious to get your reaction to that. So are there are there ways for K-12 schools to do something like that? Brave spaces where even at that really young ages, I mean, maybe it's even early elementary ages, students are getting used to the idea that it's okay to have your ideas challenged and you might have someone who disagrees with you and that you should sort of think about what they're saying and take that seriously and not take that as an attack.

KAWASHIMA-GINSBERG: Yeah. So there are many evidence based pedagogies where students can start to practice those ideas and skills in a scaffolded way. So as I said earlier, there are always going to be differences in opinions, but you can start with something that's less high stakes and that's often what we recommend and make sure that we're focusing on perspective, taking deeply understanding what people are actually saying, backing out your argument. So basics of inquiry, right? But starting with things the students can kind of let go. That's often a great way to start to understand the value of sometimes disagreement. Like you said, sometimes you understand your opponent better when you can actually listen deeply and without holding contempt. And I think those are things that students have to actually experience, not just hear about it in theory, like this is how policymakers disagree and that's how they're making and whatever historical events that might have demonstrated that. But it's almost a visceral experience of understanding what it means to be really hard and be included and be understand it as more than your opinion or your institution. Tomorrow, the President final term. I think that's one of the things that you can do. But I think the other thing is that we can really think about not just doing that as a learning and academic context, but also as a community practice within things like extracurricular activities or student government, or how the adults in the building model democracy. So it could be how the school leadership really approach school decision making through community. So parents and caregivers are really heard and are invited to come to the schools to talk about what they should do or that faculty and even staff have inputs in how the hiring happens or what kind of times that they spend together with students or how they relate to them. So the librarian, the school nurses, the coaches, facilities, folks, they all have roles in upholding this norm of understanding each other deeply. So some of the practices like that are in the work that we help in Illinois called Illinois Democracy Schools, where students, school administrators, faculty and staff are part of the working group to try to understand what's going really well. When we think about our school as a whole through this democracy lens and what can we improve, especially when we think about inclusion and equity. And that has really gone

really well because Duke schools really need to have a systemic understanding of how they're doing and not, again, sort of silo it out to say whose job is it to take care of citizenship, education. It should be everybody's job. And once they can get out of that, really schools have really awesome ideas on how to do that.

VALANT: And for those who are interested in some tangible ideas for what to do, I would encourage you to take a look at the CIRCLE website and its Kei's group at Tufts has some really nice resources on that website for what schools can do and what options might be there. So I'm curious to get into this question. As I mentioned at the top of the conversation that you have and you book now on student engagement or disengagement and have really been sort of digging deeply into that question of of when why are students engaged? And I'm curious about connections that you might see between student engagement and civic learning and engagement. And are there ways that schools could use civic learning to improve student engagement, or maybe vice versa?

WINTHROP: All right. There we go. Yes, the short answer is absolutely. I think they're actually pretty and they can they are really complementary and can fuel each other. So just briefly on sort of engagement, disengagement, what the 101 I've been doing a research project the last three years and various things will be coming out this fall, Brookings reports, etc. but the main thing with my wonderful coauthor, Jenny Anderson, it's the book that you referenced and the sort of high level on student engagement in the U.S. is that it starts sort of starts off well as kids are really motivated and engaged in third grade. And I would say the numbers aren't even that great, but 75%. And it just goes downhill from there. Like just a straight down, down, down depressing line. And the flips, you know, sort of 25% of kids say they're really motivated, engaged by school in school by the time they're in 12th grade. And this is a this is a big problem that a few of the things that we've learned is that engagement can be hard to disengagement can be hard to spot. Parents and teachers are really good at spotting behavioral disengagement, which is acting out of class, in class, not doing homework, those types of things where you you know, kids are actually showing up doing the work. But there's other dimensions of disengagement which include cognitive engagement. Are kids really, you know, linking in with the content? Are they relating it to their their life? Are they making meaning of it? One thing is to learn about the three branches of government. Another is to really think about what that means in real current event contexts, etc. And another dimension is emotional engagement. Do they feel they belong? Do they? A lot of what Kate talked about when you talk about school climate and setting up sort of sense of belonging and sort of relationships in the school building are really key drivers to whether kids feel like they can learn and walk in and be excited to learn in school. And those two dimensions are much harder for

adults to see. And the other thing that we we really, you know, learned is you really you really have to have engaged kids if you for for anything like if a kid is disengaged, it doesn't matter in the hope what the parent says in the home environment. The teacher in the classroom a coach in the sports field. If they're disengaged, they are not going to get the skill, the knowledge, the outcome on the other side. They have to be engaged. The a great example, at least from the civic education spit space is, you know, there's this factoid that plagues me and many others which, you know, 1 in 4 Americans cannot name the three branches of government, which is terrible, But it's not because they they didn't have a civics class that taught them. There are not 25% of the entire public schools in America who just refused to teach the basics of of US constitutional democracy and that there's three branches of government. It's not that they didn't get the content, it's that they learned at a surface level. They were not cognitively or probably emotionally engaged in out past the test left. And so to me, engagement and sort of the civic not just the civic knowledge, but the civic values and the civic behaviors go hand in hand. And I actually think that investing in civic learning can really boost student engagement and motivation. We interviewed 100 kids across the country, all different walks of life, all different demographics. And so many of them talked about how deeply disengaged they were because they just didn't see how what they were learning for their exams was of any real world import to them in their daily lives or their family's daily lives. And you know what they are hungry for, especially as you get into middle school and high school, are to use that knowledge that they learn to try to work together to solve problems. They want to feel relevant. They want to, you know, their adolescent development. They are ready. They are hungry to start, you know, experimenting in the world and testing boundaries. So the more we can give them civic learning, that is exactly what Kei talked about, active you know student government, student voice in schools, projects around improving your neighborhood. It does not have to be actually related to politics whatsoever. A lot of these skills are around how can you apply what you're learning in school and build collaborative problem solving skills and practice that in, you know, through school projects, etc. So that's how I actually think an investment in civic learning could really do wonders to boost engagement.

VALANT: Yeah. Thanks. So I want to ask kind of all of you about the question of really that that K-12 transition into higher education and like specifically so President Beilock, like, I'm gonna come back to you in a second and ask for your sort of wishlist for what is it in K-12 that, that you would especially like us to instill in students before they do arrive at your doorstep? Before I do, though, I want a quick reminder on the questions. So, so we're getting some good questions in which we appreciate. And just just in case you want to send a question in about ten minutes here, we'll switch over to some questions. You can email those to

events@Brookings.edu or on X, use the #EngageCitizens with the tag at Brookings. And so Ira something else. I'll start with you on this. So you you were in K-12 schools a little more recently than the rest of us, I think. And I'm curious about kind of how you see that that K-12 to higher education transition and how students K-12 experiences might affect how ready they are on college campuses to navigate those new complex environments they might find themselves in, where they are around people with whom they they might disagree.

ESPERANCE: I think for me, especially because I went to a public school, it definitely affects the transition. And I think like K through 12 experiences like do greatly shapes students readiness for complex environments after high school and higher education students, regardless of backgrounds like learning together in shared spaces, often for the first time. And this shift highlights the importance of accommodations within without creating division and with the, you know, with the high school that I went through. Like one of the biggest things that I want to emphasize, like individuals with special education were separated from general education. There was a separation. And I know, like, although this may be challenging to prepare students better, K through 12 schools must prioritize inclusive environments where all students learn together, especially with college. We all learn in the same space. We all learn in the same environment with accommodations. This promotes understanding and reduces the stigma around disabilities. Collaborative learning environments can bridge the gap between special and general education. Additionally, schools should focus on developing critical thinking and communication skills to help students gauge with diverse perspective. Teaching students to embrace the differences unite on both the differences of similarities. These approaches are essential for students to thrive and integrate a complex world beyond K through 12. Because I know for so many people we tend to focus on the similarities and and how those are beautiful. But the differences are what makes us whole and a unity. And I think the importance of like the differences that we share are crucial. And like help us become stronger together and creates the lack, move the divisiveness and turns it into a more unified nation.

VALANT: Yeah I think that's that's well said Ira and President Beilock so similar similar questions. So kind of coming back to that that that checklist that you would have for K-12 like are there are there certain skills or values or dispositions or types of knowledge that you think are especially valuable for students to have as they start college and do try to navigate those complex subjects and interactions?

BEILOCK: Yeah. I mean, first I'd like them to already have practice and having difficult discussions and in. Encountering and dealing with points of view that are different from their own and from what Ira said. That comes from having a diversity of ideologies, of lived experiences. This is this is how you get to better outcomes when you people feel like they can question each other. And one of the ways you feel like you can push at each other is by having practiced doing it before. The second, in addition to practice, I'd like to see if they're getting experience with that model for them. I think it's safe to say that we don't always do that well at the government level in our country and across the world. And so it brings, I think, the emphasis even more so to K through 12 education and seeing that modeled and I love these suggestions around seeing it modeled through how parents interact with each other. We've seen such divisive school board meetings this year. That's not modeling the kind of difference across opinion and dialogue that we want our students to have. The parent these kids are smart kids, pick up what's around. And the third, in addition to practice and modeling and something that I think is so important is that we're paying attention holistically to students mental health early on, my research as a psychologist, the data are very clear. When people are anxious about things, they stay away from that. So I do a lot of work studying students who are anxious about math. And it turns out that when highly skilled students who are anxious about math or studying for math tests, they don't study the hard problems. They don't want to do anything that makes them more anxious. And so we really have to make sure that students are equipped with the tools to think about their own mental health so that when they are ready to go into uncomfortable situations. And that's something that I think starts really early. So I would say practice modeling and really focusing on holistic mental health and wellness from the earliest points in school.

VALANT: And Rebecca, that sounds that sounds similar to some of what you were talking about with student engagement. So I'm curious if you have reactions to that or maybe like an assessment of kind of how well we are doing with that in K-12 right now and what we might do better.

WINTHROP: Right. I mean, I think it's 100% right. I mean, we certainly found again in our research that increased engagement goes hand-in-hand with increased student mental health and well-being. And it is exactly what President Beilock said. Like, you know, if you are in a school where you're worried about being beat up, where you're you're on edge because you're you're being bullied or maybe you're being shamed or you just don't or you just don't feel you fit like there is maybe nobody's trying to do. This is just the entire culture of the school. Like Ira said, you feel sort of less than or separate or not or not good enough. It is hard to really let you know yourself dive into the deeply into the sort of learning objectives of the day. And. And so,

I mean, one of the things that we've been thinking about in our research is, you know, wouldn't it be great to really sort of help give parents and teachers a tool for thinking about alongside academic learning outcomes? You have sort of get a sense of where kids are on their level of engagement, because it really does unlock so many things. I think after these three years I drank the Kool-Aid. I really do think it's foundational motivation and engagement. But we sort of highlighted four different modes and kids go in and out. You could be in resistor mode and kids can you can can be self aware, like when they're really in resistor mode, which is they're like, This isn't working for me. I'm going to do whatever I can. And it often comes out inappropriately. Class disruptions. So skipping school. Refusing to do the work, but maybe helping them think through, as Ira said so much about this work is around self-reflection and self-awareness. First, you know, what are they feeling? Why do they feel like they want to resist? The second is really some often kids are in passenger mode, which is they're just coasting. They've dropped out of learning. Basically. They're they're physically behaviorally, but they're they're not engaged emotionally or cognitively. You also have kids who are in achiever mode and parents, teachers love this. These are the kids who want to do exactly everything right and get the top grade work. And that is good in many ways. But it does bring with it. We've seen a fragility and a real risk of mental health problems. In our research, we found those were the kids who had the worst mental health outcomes. And really what you want is kids who are in and I love this idea of brave spaces are have an opportunity to be an explorer mode. And I think that's what president dialogues brain spaces are doing. I also think it's what the Dignity Index is hoping era self-reflective on is to be in explorer mode. Think about yourself. It doesn't mean you're not mastering content and doing well, but you're you're not so worried about being perfect. You're locked in and that those all those things that come with explorer mode are this are the skills that young people need in work and in college.

VALANT: Yeah. So Kei I have a question for you in a second. So much of much of what I'm hearing here from Rebecca and Kei from you, they're really sort of they're things that schools should always be doing, right. They're not they're not tied to any one moment or the fact that we have an election in November. But they're just part of that sort of eternal obligation that schools have to prepare citizens and not just workers. But then there's also the reality here that we do have this election in a few months, and we do have kind of a lot going on. And I'm imagining myself, if I were a teacher right now, that I would be trying I would be grappling with the question of, okay, so what do I do? Well, over these next few months, how do I think about whether in what ways I want to integrate this into my classrooms? Do you have any advice to teachers who are thinking about kind of how to bring current events into their classrooms over these these next few months?

KAWASHIMA-GINSBERG: Yes. And I would acknowledge this is coming from a number of experts, not just us, especially Paul McEvoy, who does write extensively about classroom discussion through books like "Political Classroom," where he talks extensively about that. But first and foremost, what I'd like to say is that the students often bring up these issues like election. Who they're voting for. What does a teacher think? So it's a real issue that I think many teachers are kind of between a rock and a hard place in many ways, where community members, especially families, do not want any signs of political conversation that can lean partisan in the school. That's a right. They have a right to believe that should not happen in the school. I do too, where students have their own opinions and they have natural needs to be heard and included. So it's often like a conflict of interest within the school. That said, I think there are ways to do this sort of right. One is to really think about the clear purpose of the discussion if you're having one, and be clear about communicating that ahead of time with the community members, especially families, so that there's no surprises when a student comes home and say, I talked about this candidate or that candidate, and I've changed my mind without kind of having any idea what happened in the classroom. As a parent myself, I can see why that can be nerve wracking. So educators really understanding, hey, there are many places talking about an election, political participation, citizen decision making. People's rights, like voting rights, are everywhere in the standards and social studies in sometimes even in ELA if you're talking about, AI, disinformation, misinformation, there are many ways that these topics can fit into the standards they're supposed to cover. So kind of finding out where these conversations might fit ahead of time could really help teachers who can then communicate. We're going to be talking about these issues, and this is how they align with the social studies standards in our state or ELA or technology standards, whatever. How you. The second thing is really resonates with what everybody else has been saying. It's really important to uphold the norms around brave space, but also never understanding the school as a campaign location where students can stand on their soapbox and shout at each other. Really upholding that guardrail as an educational institution and engage in academic discourse, not a shout out about opinions or the other. I think it's really important to embed in students minds that this is a place to learn. It's not a place to persuade anybody. The institution doesn't have an opinion about a topic. It's not a job to tell you what to think. As President Beilock said, it's its job is to teach you how to think and how to find information. Again, being really communicative about that I think is really important. And the third is kind of related, again, to the mental health and the relationships that we're talking about. I think teachers do have an obligation to be responsive to what students want to talk about to a certain extent. So it is important, I think, that teachers do acknowledge that there are times when we have to switch directions within the classroom period and talk about this topic.

These are the norms that we're observing. But I want you to know sometime this will happen, will communicate as early as possible. So those are some of the really concrete ways I think, the educators can kind of prepare for this season to make sure they are able to teach about all action in a way that's correct. And nonpartisan and standards align and the families and communities understand there's nothing nefarious going on within their classroom. And that's regardless of what teachers believe personally in a long term. I like a place where Rebecca talked about where community really cherish its school and trust the school to do the right thing for the students, their families and the community's present and future. But until we can get there as a nation, I think these are some of the mechanism strategies that teachers can take. And of course, students can be part of the strategies to by communicating these things to parents themselves.

VALANT: Thank you. And it's a nice segway to some of the audience questions that we're getting. So we got a bunch of questions that in one way or another are asking about the politics of the moment and just kind of like the reality that we that it may it is certainly the case that there are some kind of nonpartisan skills and knowledge that would be really helpful. But but it is also the case that it's a fraught environment. And there are like we we are just in a we're sort of in a moment where politics can be tense. So I'm going to read a few questions here, and any of you can answer these specific questions or just sort of talk on the politics point more generally. So we have a question about how can teachers navigate approaching the subject of voting and political engagement in a way that best navigates the fraught and polarizing nature of most political topics? In our current environment? We have a question about about liberal agendas inside of our education system. We have another one about how, even if educators understand how to help students become thoughtful adults, they also have political pressures from governors and from state legislators. And so they need to are operating within this kind of political space. So how how do we think about that? I mean, how do we think about where I think what a lot of you are outlining are sort of fundamentally. Apolitical skills and initiatives, but they are happening in a very political context.

ESPERANCE: I can answer one of the last questions. I think, especially like as an educated community, like especially our readiness for the election season and the challenges of me se like present is vital. And I think in the realms of like how like with like educators being pressured by like different governments, I think it's crucial to emphasize the importance of having your voice heard during an election season, especially for a lot of college students are voting for the first time or even high schoolers. I know my little brother just recently graduated from high school and he's 18 and he will be voting for the first time. And I think it's crucial, crucial to emphasize the importance of having your voices heard without a persuasive level of content that our

political discourse is particularly like. That's concerning, especially when telling individuals you have your voices heard. I think like to like to center the positivity of dignity and allowing your students or even away from the classrooms know like it's important to have your voices heard without taking a stance, even if you're a red state or a blue state, or if you're nonpartizan like taking a stance of like allowing your students to have their voices heard without putting in your own biases. I think that's crucial right now.

BEILOCK: I would I would also just say that at an institutional level, going back to your or your mission, what our northstar is? You know, our northstar is to educate students to lead our democracy. Our Northstar is to teach them how to think, not what to think. We are an educational institution and our focus and outcome is academic excellence. And so from the top of leadership all the way down, I think focusing on what our mission is, is, is one of the ways that we try and not fall into a trap in terms of taking a particular side or supporting one particular viewpoint or another.

WINTHROP: But I would also just underscore what Kei just said in her last comment, which we do a lot of work on sort of building social capital in the community through the school community. So relational trust with students, family and caregivers, educators, school leaders, community members, employers, etc.. And I think in this election season over, communicating is really important and bringing back three things over, communicating. Absolutely a lot of communication about just like case that we're having this discussion, this is what it's going to be. If you have a problem, come in and talk to me and you're going to have to, you know, bring back the lost art of listening and model it. We're we do a lot on communicating out, but listening is the other flip side of communicating. The people, I think, forgotten about writ large in our country broad statement. And we are finding that in places that have that relational trust built between these constituencies, the they can weather stormy seas much better. And and the the big storm that I see coming up that should deserve in this election in particular that should deserve additional discussion which we haven't talked about, is generative AI and media manipulation and the real need to lean in when we're talking about over communicating and bringing back the lost art of listening, like really talking about what is and isn't fake news and how to tell.

VALANT: Yeah. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

KAWASHIMA-GINSBERG: And I had one more thing. So President Beilock has been modeling this for our research. And others find over and over the the value of leadership in leading over. So educators should

never be alone in the classroom and thinking about these issues. But when we have administrators, especially the presidents and principals support in talking about this as a this is a mission aligned thing in our building, at our institution, it really moves the educators to have that agency to be able to have those brave conversation with families and community stakeholders. So I want to just double click on that.

VALANT: Yeah. Thank you, President Beilock. Like we just got a question that I really like that I think gets to where this can get hard and sort of inescapably hard. So so the question is, I really appreciate this conversation and the emphasis on seeing the dignity in others where I struggle in scenarios when the ideas or policies or attitudes being displayed result in significant harm to vulnerable individuals. Atrocities can and do happen, and this person listens to atrocities and then wants to know, you know, what do we do when an individual or a group are advocating for what are just harmful policies? So we're there's that sort of neutrality that an institution might take on issues. Is there is there not a line where something something is just across that line?

BEILOCK: Yeah. I mean, I think the line for institutions is about our mission, right? So where I would take a stance or have a particular position is about what impacts our mission. And an example that that we took at Dartmouth and led on was reinstating standardized testing as part of a holistic admissions. And there's debate about that. But the data were very clear that actually by not having it as part of our admissions, we missing low income students who are excelling in their environment. Because the way we look at tests is we look at how students do as a function of their environment, not just overall. And we were missing students who are doing really great in their environment who could excel at Dartmouth. And so you might say, well, that's an institutional stand, but it's based on our mission and the data moving forward in our mission. And so I think when it is mission based, there is a room to to put out and to think as an institution. But I do think like we it is very it's it's hard to define. What is a bad policy or a good policy. You know, we all live by common principles and community standards, and we have rules in place to govern that. But it gets really hard when institutions are deciding right and wrong of a particular issue unless it's just directly related to their mission.

VALANT: Okay. Thank you. So. So this is a conversation that could easily go another hour, but unfortunately, it can't because we have one minute left. So I let me just close by saying thank you, first of all, to to all of our panelists for a really nice and rich discussion. Thank you all, too, for watching from home. And if you are interested in following up with some of the resources, so we'll put some of those on the events

page and I'd encourage you to to go and take a look at the work of all of our panelists. So thanks to our panelists, thanks to the Brookings team for putting this together. And thanks to all of you.