

Youth
Civic
Challenge



OUR APPROACH

Civics, defined broadly, is about people working together to common ends.

We propose a fundamentally new approach to Civics education and engagement. Youth Civic Challenge (YC²) is simple – but it is adaptable and can be realized in different ways depending on community interest.

It is built on 4 fundamental principles:

- Projects that have lasting, real-world impact
- Team participation in the creation process
- Supported by Strategic thinking tools
- Connecting to like groups across the country

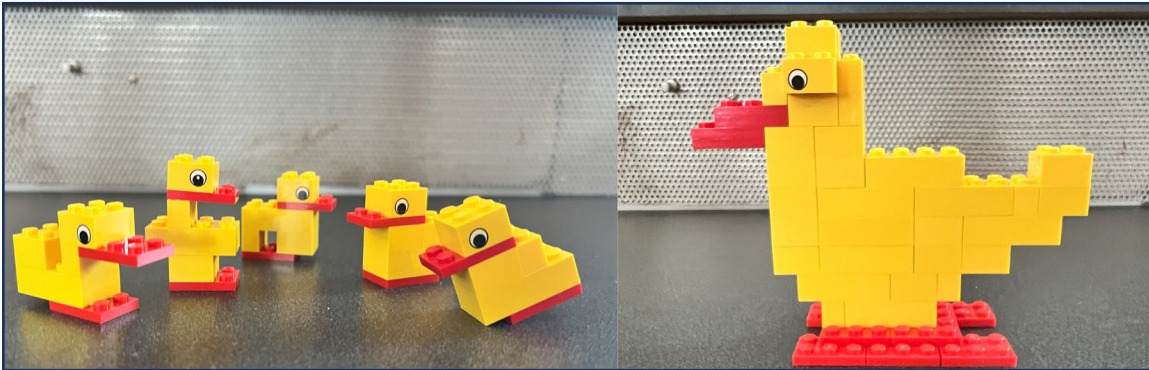
YC² seeks to provide access to modelling frameworks that augment Generation Z and Alpha's ability to find their Civic voice and create their world by questioning preconceptions, understanding agency, and realizing how decisions affect outcomes.

This summer, we launched a 4-week prototype program at the American Museum of Tort Law in Winsted, CT. We were fortunate to have 7 engaged students aged 12-17 led by 3 enthusiastic college-age coaches. We are impressed and highly encouraged by what they all accomplished.



ROADMAP

To begin their course, coaches led students through an overall navigation to help them see how and when the parts of their journey would fit together.



TEAMBUILDING

A simple exercise using LEGO blocks to first, build individual ducks, and then, to collectively build a duck. Different skillsets and working styles emerged, that will later manifest as management, coordination, articulation, design, and presentation.



TEAMBUILDING

A major focus of this program is a group project of their own design to impact positive, meaningful change of their community. In this case, they decided to address the deteriorating condition of the Still River that runs through the town, by creating awareness and pledging bankside residents & businesses to stop introducing pollutants into the stream.



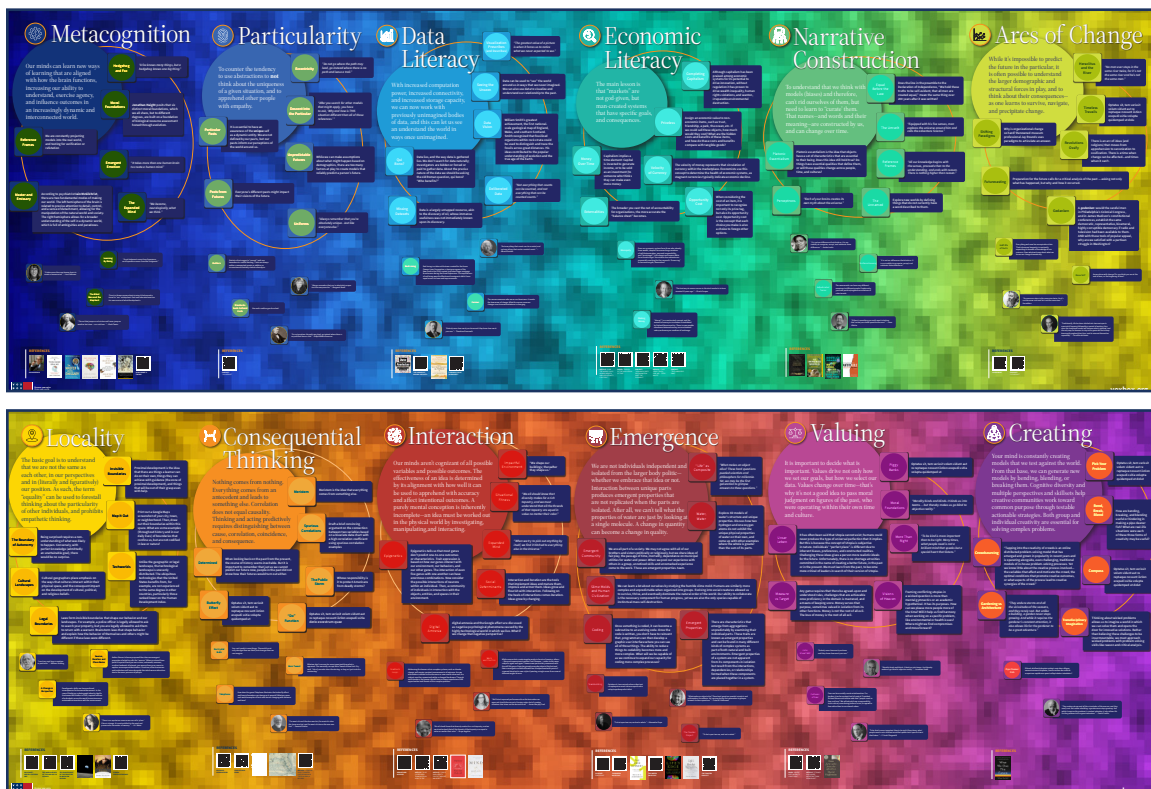
CIVICS

Fundamental to tangible outcomes is understanding of our civic landscape in context, a discussion of the Constitution—and precursor legal systems—as adjudicated argument.



HISTORY

Students engaged in lively lessons and discussion regarding historical perspectives in service of the future-models of change-making from history, noting that the lived experience of each new generation affords little in the way of historic perspective.



STRATEGIC THINKING TOOLS

The program is rooted and bolstered by a set of 12 ‘thinking tools’ (Lenses) that together, provide an understanding of the world as dynamic and interconnected—a necessary precursor, if they are to take informed action.



CONCEPTUAL MODELLING

Using LEGO Serious Play to draw out the value of the individual perspectives and skillsets of the group, coaches led the students through an exercise producing a prototype of the community Challenge that they decide to address.



ROLE MODELS

Guest speakers are invited to provide personal experiences about handling challenges in the pursuit of ambitious goals. Two potential speakers are shown above: Douglass Miller and Ann Hayden.



LOCAL PROJECT WORK

As a team, the students went into the community to gather data, document initial conditions set benchmarks, and interview affected residents. They successfully articulated their mission, and recruited support from residents, businesses, and local leaders.



ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Completing their Challenge project, the students used their new “Thinking Tools” to Analyze their data, articulate their arguments as well as their design and implementation for a public presentation and celebration.

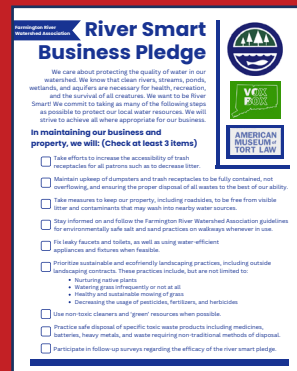
OUTCOMES

Besides the tangible outcomes pertaining to Still River environmental impacts, and the intangible benefits of pride-of-accomplishments,

- The student participants are anxious to pursue more ambitious challenges next year.
- Two nearby school districts will implement the program.
- One of the students will take this program to his neighboring township.
- 21 additional business have revised their official policies to reflect greater concern for keeping Still River clean.
- A transformed communal perspective.

Learn more about the AMTL group by clicking here:

[The Hechinger Report](#)
[The Register Citizen](#)



After a successful pilot program with the American Museum of Tort Law in 2024, the group began their second year with YC2 in June 2025. Consisting of 11 students, the group built on their community engagement initiative by interviewing and documenting, through film, essay, and website, members of the community on “what it means to be an American”, and also created an interactive dialogue activity that reflected on all of the speakers and site visits through the program’s 12 lenses. The latter exercise was an interesting and unexpected development, and demonstrates the value of letting youth have their say, but a welcome change that connected students with community members,. In these four weeks the students began to lay the groundwork for next year’s program, both in terms of project work, and in community engagement. You can learn more below about AMTL’s group work during the Summer of 2025.



The Voices of Our Youth

By: Dylan Bird (Mentor)

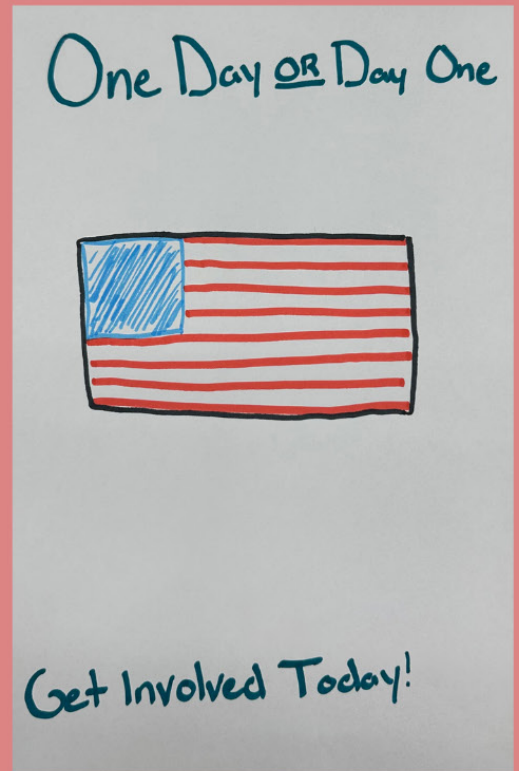
One defining question, an infinite number of responses. What does it mean to be an American? This summer, the Youth Civic Challenge initiative held at the American Museum of Tort Law sought to think deeply about this question while providing their own perspective as civically-minded young people. The Youth Civic Challenge, developed by a group of museum designers, is a new civics education program built for teenagers wanting to make change and spread awareness on real issues. While educational and fun, the program emphasizes making a tangible impact on your local community. Youth-driven as well as youth-led, the students are guided by college-aged mentors with a passion for spreading civic awareness and changing lives. The timely question above marks this year's theme in which the students broadened their perspectives through a variety of local field trips within our small town of Winsted, lessons from history, and a multitude of inspirational guest speakers. The following newsletter contains artwork, poetry, and testimonials from the students themselves which delve into their view of what it means to be an American as well as the civic issues they care about. Welcome the voices of America's youth as they strive to create a better world!



What Does it Mean to be an American?

By: Robert Gilbert

To be an American means, for me, to carry on the legacy of liberty and freedom into the modern day and to hold these ideals as the highest good. It means to protect and uphold the Constitution of the United States. It means helping those around you while also upholding the rule-based order we currently enjoy the privilege of living in. It means to resist the forces of chaos, terror, and instability throughout the world. It means to truly believe in these things above and to help respect your fellow neighbors.



What is America?

By: Roman Tardiff-Franco

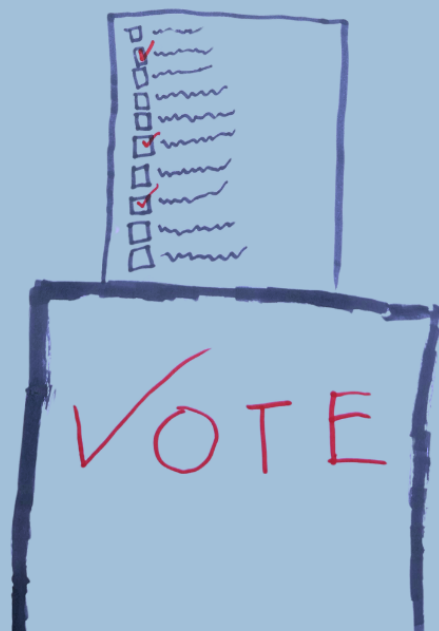
What is America? We, the American people, are a people of many different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, but we all share a common set of values and beliefs which transcend our political affiliations. That's what makes us Americans: our willingness to fight for justice and our ability to change and adapt to the future. But also, we never forget our core principles of freedom and life. We cannot let politics break us down and destroy our great nation. We must be united. So, no matter what side of the political spectrum you are on, remember who we are, remember the struggles of our ancestors, and think of the future of our nation.

How to Register to Vote in CT

By: Robert Gilbert

If you are 18 years of age and a citizen of the United States, you can go to <https://voterregistration.ct.gov/OLVR/welcome.do>. You can register to vote completely online with a driver's license or other federal ID, otherwise no ID is necessary when using a printed registration. It is always a great idea to register to vote so that your voice can be heard in your local, state, and federal governments.

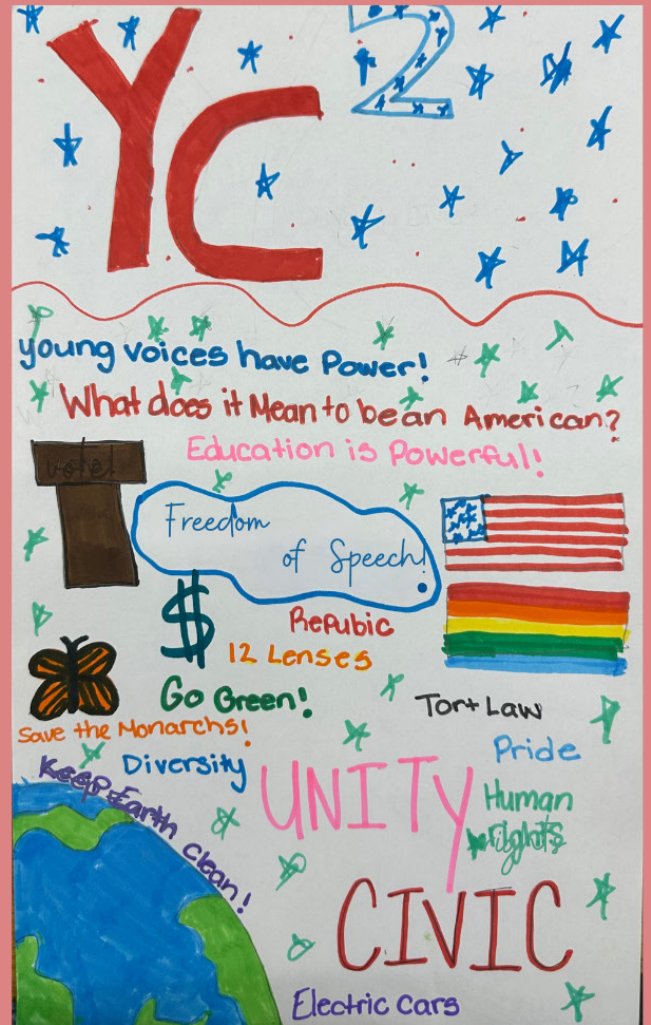
DON'T
LET SOMEONE
ELSE DECIDE FOR
YOU...



What it Means to be an American

By: Cole Scacca

To be an American is to have the ability to enjoy freedoms. Every American holds their own answer to this question, partly because they are allowed to decide. Having opportunities to be an original person, true to yourself, embodies being an American well. Not being held at the mercy of a crazed ruler, living in a country of diversity and beauty, and knowing the outside world is far crueler to the aspiring individual, makes America highly appealing. This land of the free is vast enough to be home of the brave, and these brave Americans earn their name with the possession of inalienable rights and freedoms. Having a country welcoming enough to support its people is a source of pride associated with being an American.



What Does it Mean to be an American?

By: Frances Oakes-Sand

In my opinion, I like what it means to be an American. Equal human rights for all is a big part of being an American. One issue, is that the LGBTQ+ community does not get a lot of respect. LGBTQ+, or Pride, is not allowed in some places and people within the community are not fully respected. Human rights help get people proper respect and allow for people to speak their minds and opinions without consequences. Another issue is equality. Equality is important because without it, people will be separated. Equality means working together and being kind to anyone no matter what race or sexuality, because everyone is a person. Another huge part about being an American is community. Community helps everyone. Without community, people are separated and nothing will evolve, grow, or get better. To help each other means being an American because if you help someone, they will feel better and you will too. That is what it means to be an American to me. Thank you!

Power.

By: Cassandra Ash

My mind takes me places,
Feeling throat aches,
All the energy it takes,
I need to count my graces,
Just look at our little faces,
Watching the world brake,
Trying to face a harsh back ache,
Please outline our traces.

Opportunistic possibilities pull me under,
I am sinking,
Water fills my lungs,
Getting a taste of wonder,
Pushing through the surface without sinking,
I am free now there is no wonder.

Our opinions are not misplaces,
The differences we shall make,
A feeling you can't take,
Just look at our embraces,
Can you feel our blazes?
All together we're bigger than the Great Lake,
See us at day break,
Watch us as we go our paces.

Feel our rattling thunder,
Allowed free thinking,
We will out number,
Listen to our wishful thinking,
You will not be pulled under,
As you watch the words roll of our tongues.

AMERICAN

By: Cole Scacca

A desire for change, held within
Many opportunities to be explored, a land of liberty
Every person, equal under the law
RED WHITE & BLUE
Innovation and inspiration
Coves to caves, nature broad and diverse
Accessibility to media and entertainment, a center like no other
No limit to the ceiling of ambition

Change Begins
with

YOU

BE THE
CHANGE



Current Civic Issues with Education

By: Cassandra Ash

In America, education is required for all, but our system of education has some flaws. When reading this piece you'll learn the civic issues of education in America and how you can help make a difference. Some of the more broad issues are access and inequality. In America, to get a safe education and be taught by experienced teachers, you need to have a certain economic status and sometimes your race matters as well. Many schools and school districts are low funded which impacts students' education and withholds opportunity. The second issue is teacher-related. Our teachers work so hard to educate us and are underpaid. Their job is stressful causing them to possibly have "burn-out", meaning they're sick and tired of trying to pursue their career they feel almost hopeless. This crisis affects lots of Americans. There is now a shortage in teachers, which impacts a student's education. As you can imagine, mental health is a big and current civic issue. For crying out loud, we are literally in the mental health crisis right now. So many teachers and students are affected by mental health each year. High stress levels are forced on both students and teachers. Today, it is very common for students to get bullied and fight. A lot of that can result in many mental health issues such as: anxiety, depression, and more. According to the CDC, teens and young adults ages 10-24 are about 15% of all suicides. That statistic proves mental health is a big issue in American education. Now that you've learned the civic issues in American education, here is how to help. You can donate to organizations like: Teach for America, The NEA Foundation, Donors Choose, The Kids In Need Foundation, UNICEF USA, The Jed Foundation, The Trevor Project, and Active Minds. There are many other places you can make donations to as well. Another way of making a difference is making posters showcasing your powerful opinion. Thank you for reading, please remember you have the power to make a difference no matter where you're from and who you are!



6 Simple Ways YOU Can Save the Environment

By: Cole Scacca

6 Simple Ways YOU Can Save the Environment

Switch to Reusable Products

Over a billion single use water bottles are used and disposed of each day, buying a metal bottle combats that.

Use Plant-Based Sunscreen

Most sunscreens contain artificial chemicals that harm marine life and coral reefs after washing off your body. Next time at the lake or ocean, be aware of your sunscreen.

Spread the Word

Whether it be word of mouth or through social outlets, putting out goals and concerns will make more people conscious of the cause.

Quit Idling

If you drive a car, prolonged idling of it is a poor idea, as it sends unnecessary emissions into our atmosphere.

Limit Food Waste

When food decomposes, methane is released. This gas is harmful to our environment. Additionally, money and resources spent on that food are wasted.

Avoid Fast Fashion

Fast Fashion brands cheaply mass produce low quality products that quickly get worn down. This constant cycle of buying and disposing cheap clothes means overflowing landfills.



Places to Donate:

- The World Wildlife Fund
- The Environmental Defense Fund
- Green Peace
- The Clean Air Task Force
- The Nature Conservancy

What it Means to be an American

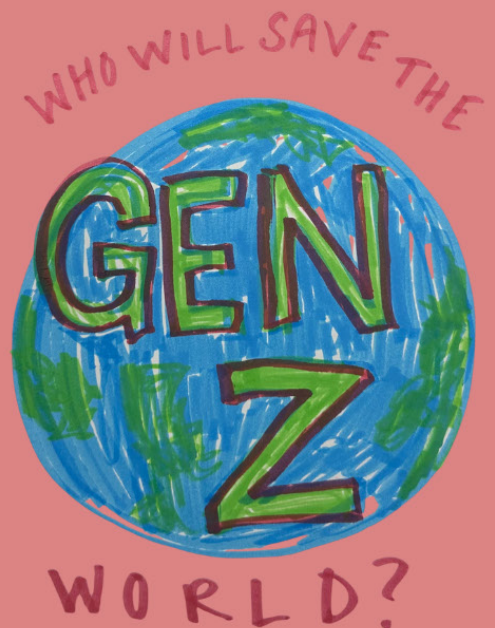
By: Cassandra Ash

Hi, my name is Cassandra Ash, and I am a 15 year old in tenth grade at The Gilbert School. I like to spend my time reading, bike riding, and running. I am civically-minded and have a newfound powerful voice. Youth voices can and will change the world. Younger generations can affect America and even the world for the better; its important to speak the truth and make change. Now that I have rambled enough, let's get to the main theme of this piece and of the whole program: "What does it mean to be an American to you?" For me, being an American means to speak out for what is right, no matter how old or young you are. It also means to be diverse. America was built from many diverse people. To me, it also means to have communication and be unified which you can see all across the country. If you can put all of these components together, you can envision America in theory. This is how the country should be, and it is a working goal we move towards everyday. I see it. I see it as we all come together and stand up for our rights and beliefs. My name is Cassandra Ash, and I believe that makes us American!

What it Means to be an American

By: Grace Oakes-Sand

Being American means freedom. America was built on the idea of freedom. We won freedom from the British. Women won the freedom to vote. Queer people won the freedom to be who they want and to transition to be whoever they want to be. That's why being an American means freedom.



Looking Into Our Future

By: Kirsten Ward (Mentor)

Over the last four weeks, I had the privilege of being a mentor for the Youth Civic Challenge. When I learned that the theme was “What it Means to be an American”, I was a little worried. Our country’s defining traits are nothing short of contested right now. My own definition has been filled with a lot of disappointment. How was I supposed to provide these students with answers when I hardly knew any myself?

That’s where I was wrong. I quickly discovered in the first weeks of the program that *providing* answers was not why I was there. I was there in conjunction with these extremely caring and passionate students to *find* answers as a team. In a short amount of time, my hope for America has increased tenfold. Together, we have collaborated, listened, explored big questions thoughtfully, and put everything into action for our community. We created the type of America we wish to see as our generation steps into leadership. An America that works hand-in-hand and, to quote Winsted Town Manager and program guest Paul Harrington, invites everyone to the table. I believe that while what it means to be an American remains a dispute for many, for us, it means making the country one we are proud to call home. We have empowered each other to transform visions into reality: a place built on inclusivity, sustainability, and love. I can say with certainty that I learned as much, if not more, from these students than they did from me, and for that, I have extreme confidence in the future of our nation.

YC2 GUEST SPEAKERS



Candy Perez

Selectman and Former
Winsted Mayor



Paul Harrington

Winsted Town Manager



Bill Ward

Trial Lawyer



Warren Toland

Sergeant First Class



Lydia Bird

Communications Specialist



Janet Applefield

Holocaust Survivor &
Author



Christopher Ciuci

Winsted Police Chief



John B. Field

Winsted Fire Chief

*"Never give up be proactive
that's my best advice, never
loose hope know that you
have a voice and never stay
silent"*

-Janet Applefield



Created by the YC2 Students:

Noah Alvey* (14 yrs)
Cassandra Ash*~ (15 yrs)
Robert Gilbert*~ (15 yrs)
Warren Hinman* (18 yrs)
Micah Kearney* (14 yrs)
Grace Oakes-Sand*~ (15 yrs)
Franny Oakes-Sand*~ (13 yrs)
Cole Scacca*~ (15 yrs)
Drake Szewczyk* (13 yrs)
Roman Tardiff-Franco*~ (17 yrs)

*** Contributed Artwork**
~ Contributed Writing

The YC2 Team:

