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Ronald Reagan Institute Hosts “State of Civics: Utah” Virtual Event

WASHINGTON, DC -- The Ronald Reagan Institute’s Center for Civics, Education, and Opportunity (CCEO) virtually convened a diverse panel of education leaders on Tuesday to showcase the exemplary individuals advancing civics education in Utah. “State of Civics: Utah” featured Utah State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Sydnee Dickson, William Shields, a social studies educator at West Jordan Middle School, and Dhati Oommen, a senior at West High School in Salt Lake City.

The conversation, moderated by CCEO Director Dr. Janet Tran, highlighted the current state policy environment for civic learning and engagement across the country. Dr. Tran, formerly a teacher herself, opened the conversation by congratulating the participants on their excellent work at the state level and cautioned that deprioritizing civics education harms our national discourse. “The original civic mission of our schools has long been sidelined and is in danger of being further sidelined at a time when we actually think it is most imperative.”

Superintendent Dickson stressed the importance of strong partnerships in civics education and a robust school curriculum. Through these avenues, she said, we can ensure the cultivation of informed responsible participation in political life by competent citizens. Her sentiment was reinforced by Shields who voiced his support for an array of diverse activities that go beyond assessments such as mock congressional hearings, which teach students the process on how a bill becomes law, and through involvement in programs such as “We the People,” that promote civic competence and responsibility among the nation’s upper elementary and secondary students.

The discussion also included Dhati Oommen, a senior at West High School, who was selected because of her outstanding achievements and devotion to advancing civics. Dhati, in answering what led her to be engaged in civics, recounted an experience early in high school when she witnessed her teachers walk out to protest at the Utah state legislature for increased funding to better support students like herself.

“I would not be here today without the support of my teachers,” she said. Dhati also currently serves as a student representative in Salt Lake City’s district school board and emphasized the importance of diversity of experience in the decision-making process, especially when the decisions affect students.

Among the policies discussed were the Local Innovations in Civics Education Pilot Program and Portrait of a Graduate competencies. The pilot program, enacted in 2020 after the Utah legislature passed HB 334, is a three-year civic engagement initiative that provides state-level funding to support local innovation and project-based civics. Superintendent Dickson said the pilot program will allow teachers like Shields to receive funding and continue providing students with opportunities to expand their civics education.

Dickson and Shields agreed that collaboration between parents, teachers, and the community is essential to the fabric of our democracy. Importantly, civics initiatives prepare students for completing education. “Civics education is a connective tissue that can broaden our perspectives,” said Dickson.

A recording of the event is posted on the Reagan Institute’s [YouTube Channel](#).

CCEO will host its next in-person event, “Reducing Recidivism Through Postsecondary Opportunities,” on May 5 at its Washington, D.C., office and auditorium. The event will feature national and state leaders at the intersection of higher education and reform who will discuss barriers faced by incarcerated Americans seeking access to postsecondary education.

About the Ronald Reagan Institute: The Ronald Reagan Institute (RRI), the Washington, DC office of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, promotes our 40th President’s ideals, vision, and leadership example through substantive, issue-driven forums, academic and young professional programming, and scholarly work. RRI builds on the legacy and ideas of President Reagan through our three policy centers: the Center for Civics, Education, and Opportunity, the Center for Peace Through Strength, and the Center for Freedom and Democracy. Each of these centers ensure President Reagan’s legacy is advanced in our nation’s capital. The Ronald Reagan Institute’s Center for Civics, Education, and Opportunity (CCEO) works at the nexus of civics and education policy, answering President Reagan’s call for an “informed patriotism” to ensure a prosperous future for America. American civic life poses many challenges to our institutions and to our faith in democratic practice to improve them. These challenges require a multifaceted approach. As such, the CCEO looks to create a collective impact on American society through partnerships that help support the three levers of change. Together, the CCEO will look to these levers to better prepare America to answer the challenges of the 21st century and “renew the American spirit and sense of purpose.”

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