

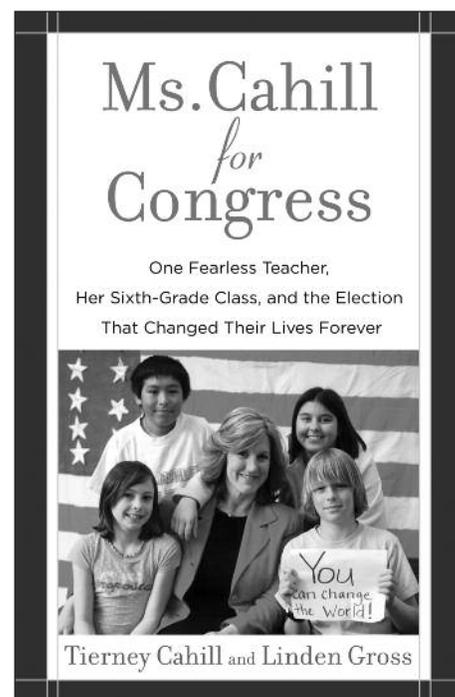


Ms. Cahill for Congress

One Fearless Teacher, Her
Sixth-Grade Class, and the Election
That Changed Their Lives Forever

Written by Tierney Cahill and Linden Gross

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• note to teachers •

In September 1999, Tierney Cahill was a young, energetic, and dedicated sixth grade teacher at Sarah Winnemucca Elementary School in Reno, Nevada. She was also a single mother, struggling to provide for her family of three young children. While teaching her students about the ancient Greeks and the development of democratic institutions, Cahill and her students turned their attention to representative government in the United States. Heather, a young girl in Cahill's class, asserted that "you can't run for office in this country unless you're a millionaire or unless you know a lot of millionaires" (4). When Cahill argued that the democratic process is far more open than that, Heather threw down the gauntlet: "Well, then, why don't you prove it, Ms. Cahill. Why don't you run for office?" (5). Not one to shy away from a challenge, Tierney Cahill responded by running for Congress.

Ms. Cahill for Congress is Tierney Cahill's account of the journey that began one fall day in 1999. With her students as her campaign committee, a bare-bones budget, and very little assistance from local and state party officials, Cahill spent the next year as a candidate for the United States House of Representatives from Nevada's Second Congressional District, a vast area comprising most of the state. Running as a Democrat from a largely Republican district, she had little chance of winning the election. But in many ways, she and her students did emerge victorious. They learned firsthand about American government—and took great pride in garnering far more votes than expected. The organizational, social, and academic skills and confidence they gained provided a strong foundation for their futures. They integrated their campaign efforts into lessons on history, government, geography, and even mathematics. But mostly, they learned much about their community and themselves. While on this great adventure, Cahill, who at the same time held down two other jobs, experienced a range of emotions—from exhilaration to anger to desperation. Neither Cahill nor her students anticipated just how demanding and difficult the campaign would be. But as the November 2000 election came to a conclusion, none regretted taking on the challenge Heather made that September day fourteen months earlier.

• about this guide

This guide is designed to encourage readers of *Ms. Cahill for Congress* to think about the issues raised by the author as she takes us from the decision to run for office, to the initial planning for her campaign, to the September primary, and finally to the election in November. A brief discussion of Cahill's narrative, divided into four sections, is followed by a more detailed discussion of the key issues Cahill addresses.

Chapters 1–3: The Decision to Run

Cahill introduces us to her and her students. She relates her personal story of growing up in Reno, studying at the University of New Mexico, her failed marriage, her three children, and her decision to become a teacher. She also shares with the reader her philosophy of teaching and her dedication to her students. She introduces us to her hometown of Reno. She ponders a run for office, taking into consideration her family and some serious questions raised by her school's administration. At the end of this section, Cahill convinces her supervisors and her students' parents to allow her class to participate in the campaign, and pledges that she will use her run for office to teach mandated standards while avoiding discussion of her personal views—a tough task for a candidate running for a major office.

Chapters 4–13: Laying the Groundwork

Cahill, who initially considers a Senate run, decides to run for the House instead. Her students rally behind the cause and form committees to deal with everything from fund raising to T-shirts. Cahill and her students frequently face challenges as they begin to comprehend just what they have taken on. She has to talk with everyone from union leaders to businessmen who make a living from prostitution—all the while ensuring that her students do not get involved in partisan issues. She realizes her campaign is woefully short on money and the strategies to raise it, and the Democratic establishment is less than thrilled with her candidacy. Throughout all of this, Cahill's personal life moves from “difficult to daunting,” as she endures continued financial difficulties, surgery, an abusive relationship, threatening phone calls, and a home burglary (120).

Chapters 14–16: The Primary Campaign

Two rites of passage mark the beginning of this section. First, with the school year ending in May, Cahill's campaign will soon be managed by a new group of sixth graders (the school is on a year-long schedule, and her new students begin in July). Second, she files paperwork to ensure that her name will be on the ballot for the September primary. The “Cahill for Congress” campaign is now official. She bids a wistful farewell to the students who set her on a path to the election. Despite the fact that the campaign began months earlier, Cahill is unprepared for the media blitz that accompanies her official filing. Her primary opponent proves to be a weak candidate; incidentally, he does not have a class of enthusiastic sixth graders moving his campaign along. So on September 5, 2000, Cahill wins the primary and begins preparing for the general election in November.

Chapters 17–24: The General Election

Cahill has little time to savor her win before the “slight sense of terror about the real battle ahead” sets in (163). From now until November, she will have no time for herself and little for her family—although Cahill often takes her children to campaign events. She sends position papers to many interest groups and appears at dozens of functions across her huge district. Cahill draws national attention as the audacious teacher using a run for Congress as an extension of her classroom. Even though her personal life continues to present difficulties, Cahill is determined to see her campaign through to the very end. To her surprise, despite the questionable treatment she has received from the Democratic Party, she begins to get official party support. Election day arrives and, not unexpectedly, the Republican incumbent defeats Cahill. Although she and her students are disappointed with the result, they realize that they have accomplished what many thought impossible. Moreover, they did it with hard work, enthusiasm, and a strong commitment to each other and to ethical campaigning. Cahill does not make it to Congress, but she and her students are winners in their own eyes, in the eyes of their community, and beyond.

• the themes in *Ms. Cahill for Congress*

Ms. Cahill for Congress provides many opportunities for thoughtful consideration and discussion. Woven throughout the narrative are several themes that serve as a guide for the reader, whether he or she is a member of a book club, an educator, or anyone interested in the important questions brought forth by the book.

Here are several of the themes Cahill emphasizes:

- Democratic values and political campaigns
- The role of political parties and other interest groups
- The characteristics of a successful teacher
- Federal education policy
- The uniqueness of place
- Cahill’s personal and professional struggles

Democratic Values and Political Campaigns

From Cahill’s Perspective

Cahill questions whether the “democratic process” is truly democratic. Her campaign’s lack of resources and support from party leaders made it much more difficult for her and her students to meet the challenge of seeking office. She also addresses the “marketing” of candidates and the problem of emphasizing image over substance. As the campaign progressed, she learned more about being a successful politician as she dealt with her concerns about positive and negative campaigning, understanding one’s constituency, zeroing in on the issues, different approaches for the primary and general elections, and much more.

• the themes in *Ms. Cahill for Congress* (continued)

For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

- Can wealthier Americans more easily run for office? Is there any way to address inequities in the election process?
- Do candidates for public office emphasize style over substance? View a television news report or read accounts in newspapers or magazines, and examine the campaigns of specific candidates to see how they present themselves.
- Cahill spoke with her students about the importance of symbols and the need to place American symbols on her logo and T-shirts. What symbols did she choose and why? Which would you select?
- Cahill found that other candidates for Congress spent on their campaigns one hundred times the amount of money she spent on her own. Examine campaign financing laws. Are they fair? Do they violate the right of Americans to support the candidate of their choice?
- Cahill notes, “The more meetings I went to, the more I realized that I had to understand the concerns of my constituency” (96). What did she do to try to reach that understanding? Does a member of Congress have an obligation to reflect the views of his or her district, or does he or she have a greater responsibility to the nation? Should an elected official vote according to his or her conscience, even if that conflicts with the views of his or her constituents?
- Nevada’s election laws mandate a closed primary. What are the advantages and disadvantages of open and closed primaries? Examine the 2008 presidential primary campaigns. Did it matter if a state had an open or closed primary?
- Cahill put her home phone number on campaign materials. Why did she want to make herself so accessible to her potential constituents? Was this a wise thing to do? Examine how candidates in other elections have dealt with the accessibility issue.
- How did technology such as e-mail affect Cahill’s campaign? What are some additional ways in which candidates use technology? How does mastery of up-to-date technology help shape the image that candidates project to the public?
- Cahill’s campaign obviously brought young people into the political process. Why is it that young Americans do not participate in the electoral process to the degree that older citizens take part? What has been done in recent elections to encourage young people to participate?
- Cahill’s campaign won far more votes than expected. Account for this.

The Role of Political Parties and Other Interest Groups

From Cahill’s Perspective

Cahill and her family have been Democrats for as long as she can remember. She believes in the principles and policies of the Democratic Party, so when she ran for office, she expected that the party establishment would support her with money, manpower, and advice. She was shocked when these did not materialize. Cahill was also a longtime and loyal member of the National Education Association and thought NEA support would come readily; it did not. She found it necessary to deal with many interest groups: gun rights advocates, casino owners, the mining industry, and others. She learned that she had to frame her language in a way that would appeal to the specific group she was addressing.

For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

- Account for the Democratic Party's lack of support for Cahill's candidacy. How much of the tension between the party and Cahill was due to her naiveté in the ways she approached party leaders? Was there bias due to race (as a result of having biracial children), gender, or social status?
- After the primary, interest groups and their lobbyists besieged Cahill. Do special interests have too much influence on American politics? If so, what attempts have been made to limit their influence? What else should be done?
- Cahill was a member of the NEA for many years. What advantages does union membership bring to educators? Do teacher unions wield too much political clout? What was the Nevada NEA's position on Social Security? Why did it hold that position? What other issues concerned the Nevada NEA during Cahill's campaign? Examine the role of education-related interest groups in the 2008 election.

The Successful Teacher

From Cahill's Perspective

Cahill believes that the classroom truly needs to be student centered, where individual student learning styles and other academic and personal needs must be considered. The classroom must be a safe place for students to share their ideas and concerns. Cahill clearly advocates meaningful experiential learning. She believes subjects should not be taught in isolation, but should form an integrated whole, and that lessons must be developed to teach social skills like the importance of teamwork and accepting personal responsibility. Cahill demonstrates that teaching is not always an eight-to-four job; it can be all-consuming—sometimes to the detriment of the teacher and her family.

For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

- Instead of directly answering students' questions, Cahill often responded by asking the students more questions. How did she use this technique in her classroom? Was it effective?
- What strategies did Cahill employ to ensure that students were fully engaged in her class?
- What efforts did Cahill make to tailor her teaching to individual students? What factors complicate this process?
- How effective were Cahill's efforts to integrate disparate subjects together into one lesson?
- Cahill seemed to develop close personal relationships with her students. Is this sound educational practice?
- Cahill taught sixth graders. Are her teaching strategies appropriate for older students, especially those in high school?
- Cahill did not make extensive use of textbooks. What are the best ways to use texts in a classroom? Should students be required to read extensively from their texts?
- Cahill's campaign became "a lesson that never ended" (101). Explain how this happened. What specific lessons did her students learn from their participation in the campaign? What are some additional ways in which teachers can structure "never-ending" lessons?
- What important social skills and character traits did Cahill reinforce in her classroom? Is it the job of our schools to teach these? How effective are programs like Character Counts and D.A.R.E.? What objections might some parents have to character-building programs in schools?

• the themes in *Ms. Cahill for Congress* (continued)

Federal, State, and Local Education Policy

From Cahill's Perspective

Cahill has serious concerns about mandated testing and overemphasis on standards. She believes that teachers should have an active role in planning and implementing curriculum. She defends public schools and argues that teachers are too often blamed for problems that are beyond their control.

For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

- What impact did the No Child Left Behind legislation have on the daily operation of Cahill's classroom? How effective has this legislation been in improving education in the nation's schools? What changes have been proposed to NCLB? What changes should be made?
- According to Cahill, Nevada state policy mandates that sixth grade teachers must teach forty math standards every year, in addition to the standards mandated in other subjects (3e). Is it reasonable to require so many? Does the state run the risk of limiting instruction in courses like art, music, and physical education? How should teachers balance academic subjects with more creative or "elective" subjects?
- Cahill notes the emotional impact of mandated testing on her students and her own daughter. She argues that students should not be denied a diploma because they failed a mandated examination. What purpose does mandated testing serve? Is there too much emphasis on this testing?
- Cahill opposes school vouchers. Do parents have the right to use public funds to educate their children in private schools? Where do the 2008 presidential candidates stand on this issue?
- Cahill's district only allowed a single day each year when teachers could take leave to tend to personal business. What should be a school district's policy on teacher leave? What is the policy in the district where you live? What changes would you recommend?

The Uniqueness of Place

From Cahill's Perspective

Although there are common threads that weave through all political campaigns, a community's features shape the nature of politics in that community. Cahill helps us to know Reno better. On one hand, her hometown is a village where one's private affairs are not very private. However, Reno is also a city bent on expansion, facing the problems that come with growth. Reno is a land of contrasts, not least of which are the geographic features of alpine mountains mixed with desert climate and vegetation. It is a place of small-town, conservative values with an economy largely dependent on the gambling industry. The characteristics of Reno, along with the many outlying counties that comprised Cahill's congressional district, helped to shape her campaign.

For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

- Cahill writes, "Campaigning in Reno gave me a new sense of the city where I've spent most of my life" (150). What factors have shaped Reno's identity? What paradoxes does Cahill see in her town? What factors shape the identity of your community?
- How did Cahill address the peculiar characteristics and needs of her community as she campaigned? What economic and social factors did Cahill attempt to address during her campaign?

- Account for the libertarian bent common of many western states that Cahill sees in Nevada.
- What changes have occurred in Reno in the past several decades? In what ways did government attempt to address these changes?
- What can local governments do to build a sense of community? What does your local government do to foster a shared identity for its residents? Is there truly a role for government in addressing the ways residents view their community?

Teacher, Parent, Candidate: Cahill's Struggle to Do It All

From Cahill's Perspective

Cahill is very forthright in sharing with her readers the professional and personal dilemmas and crises that she faced. Professionally, she had to determine where to draw the line between delivering her positions to the voters in her district, and her pledge to maintain political neutrality in her classroom. She was dealing with eleven- and twelve-year-olds, many of whom came from conservative families that did not share Cahill's liberal positions. This situation intensified after Cahill won the Democratic primary and moved toward the general election. She had to decide whether to take campaign donations from, for instance, a brothel owner. In her classroom, she had to be certain not to devote too much time to the increasingly time-consuming campaign. Personally, Cahill's life was frequently in turmoil. Foremost among her many concerns was money, and the fact that her teaching job did not pay enough to cover her bills; at times, she took on two extra jobs to make ends meet. How was she to balance her time among taking care of her children, working multiple jobs, and conducting a demanding political campaign? Even with her boundless energy and competitive spirit, there were times when Cahill wondered how she could do it all.

For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

- Many issues that Cahill addressed during her campaign reflected her personal struggles. Yet many of the problems Cahill faced were not simply her own but were common, and still are common, to many Americans. Cahill believes that the American middle class is under siege. What does Cahill view as the issues most affecting middle-class American workers and their families? What solutions does she propose?
- Which of the issues Cahill grappled with in 2000 are still being debated today? In what ways has the 2008 election reflected the same economic and social issues that troubled Cahill?
- Cahill questions whether the "American dream" promoted by the nineteenth-century Horatio Alger stories still can be achieved in the twenty-first century. Read one of these stories. What characteristics does Alger view as necessary to personal and financial success? Are these still relevant today?
- Cahill is a woman of Irish Catholic descent who was married to an African American man with whom she had three children. How does her story reflect issues of gender, ethnicity, religion, and race? In what ways has the 2008 campaign reflected these issues?
- What concerns are central to the lives of single mothers? How did Cahill address these concerns? Is there any advice you would have given her as she struggled to keep her family afloat?

• epilogue

Tierney Cahill's story is a very personal account of one woman's triumphs and tragedies, but in a number of ways, her life follows a narrative common to many Americans as they struggle to carve out personal and professional identities, often in difficult times. Cahill's venture into politics raises a critical issue for all who live—or dream of living—in a democratic state: how do we foster, form, and maintain an active citizenry? The American body politic cannot function without citizen participation. The nation and its citizens must continually strive to channel their enormous energy, limitless abilities, and extensive resources into political participation, especially among the young. That effort, on a very small level, is the essential contribution made by Tierney Cahill and her sixth graders.

• about this reader's guide author

NANCY SCHICK, a graduate of Michigan State University and the University of Pittsburgh, taught history and mathematics in public schools for 38 years, including, most recently, 20 years at Los Alamos High School in New Mexico. She retired in 2006.

She serves as a national leader and consultant for the College Board, leading workshops in Advanced Placement United States History and Advanced Placement European History. She is the co-author of the AP U.S. History Teacher's Guide and spent four years on the Advanced Placement United States History Development Committee. Schick has received three grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, studied in Cambridge, England through a grant from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, attended a United States Institute of Peace summer institute, and participated in a Goethe Institut (no e - it's German) program in Germany. In 2005 she was a Fulbright-Hays fellow in Southeast Asia.

Schick has been recognized five times by the White House as a Presidential Scholar Distinguished Teacher. She was the 2005 New Mexico Teacher of the Year.

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