

Citizens in Training

Young people don't care much about government. But some groups are out to change that.

By Garry Boulard

In Barbara Dupre's seventh grade language arts class, the students have decided that it was OK for a neo-Nazi group to march through a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Skokie, Ill., in the late 1970s.

They also decided that anti-gay demonstrators at the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a young man who was murdered in 1998 because of his sexual orientation, was an expression of freedom of speech.

"It may have been in really bad taste," remarks student Jade Rivera-Armendarez of the funeral protestors, "but no one has the right to tell someone else they can't say what they feel."

This youthful tolerance even extends to the remarks of a World War II veteran who told one of the students that, if it were up to him, he would not allow people to protest the United States war in Iraq.

"I tried to understand his point of view," says student Kyle Mathewson. "He fought in a war and has a different perspective. Even though I disagreed with him, I thought he had a right to say what he said."

If the students at Jefferson Middle School near the University of New Mexico campus in Albuquerque seem particularly intelligent and insightful for seventh graders, it's because they are.

But if they also seem surprisingly preoccupied with the daily issues that surround freedom of speech, the Constitution and how the democratic process works, it is more than likely because they have been part of a program sponsored by the Center for Civic Education and the National Conference of State Legislatures called "We the People—Project Citizen." The program fosters experiments in how democracy works

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and encourages vigorous classroom discussions on topical issues.

"It's a wonderful way for them to learn not only how the process works, but to also share their thoughts and opinions with others. And everyone else might not agree with those opinions," says Dupre.

Although Dupre's class may seem unremarkable to those of us educated in the immediate decades following World War II (when all students learned about government and the Constitution), it is, in fact, part of a national effort to reintroduce civic education to the nation's youth. And to do so in a way that both grabs and keeps their attention.

NO INTEREST IN GOVERNMENT

The reason behind the movement is a simple one: Young people, according to a series of studies, don't generally care much about government, whether it's based in Washington, D.C., or any of the state capitols.

They are not fascinated by the things that dominate a lawmaker's life, such as the process: negotiations, debates and how or why a bill eventually becomes law.

More than 50 percent of the nation's youth agree with the statement: "You can't trust politicians because they are dishonest," according to a recent report published by the National Association of Secretaries of State. Nine out of 10 are certain that government in general is run "by a few big interests."

A new report, "The Civic Mission of Schools," a joint project of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, contends that young people are not interested in voting, the most minimal measure of participatory democracy.

In fact, the voter turnout rate among

young Americans has fallen by some 15 percent since 1972, when 18-year-olds were first given the right to vote. There's been no decline among people 25 and older. The youth vote in the presidential election year of 2000 had fallen to only 8 percent of the overall national vote—an all-time low.

If the demographers are right, the problem is only going to get worse. While 70 percent of Generation X (those born between 1964 and 1976) are registered to vote and 34 percent regularly cast ballots; only 60 percent of the DotCom generation (born after 1976) are registered. And only 24 percent vote. These figures are particularly disturbing when contrasted with the generation that came of age during World War II: 89 percent of them are registered, and 72 percent vote regularly.

ALARMING STATISTICS

For many, such statistics—and there's more from dozens of reports charting the same decline—are not only depressing, but alarming.

"I feel terrible about it," remarks Massachusetts Senate President Robert Travaglini.



"When I hear about 50 percent of young people saying they would never get involved in a political campaign, all I can think of is the opportunities they are missing."

For Travaglini, who comes from a tough Boston neighborhood where politics is as much a part of life as following the Red Sox, a political campaign is "an opportunity—a chance to advance yourself, build character and make friendships that very well may prove beneficial someday down the road."

Civic education can be a formative event in a young person's life, as well, asserts Oklahoma Representative Lance Cargill. As a seventh grader, he witnessed the unfolding of the 1979-81 Iranian hostage crisis



REPRESENTATIVE
LANCE CARGILL
OKLAHOMA

and the swearing-in of President Ronald Reagan on a large television monitored by his civics teacher.

"We talked in the classroom about all of these gigantic events," Cargill says. "And I can tell you for a fact it helped push me in the direction of public service. I found all the big issues and challenges so exciting. I knew then that I wanted to someday be in the public arena where all these important issues were discussed and decided."

For Stephen Macedo, who has written more than 10 books on democracy and the deliberative process, youthful indifference to the nation's politics and government sends a troubling signal that could someday erode the very core of the republic—the voice of the people.

"The one thing that gives the republic its authority is the consent of the governed, the people's participation," says Macedo, who also is a professor of politics and director of the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University. "If that disappears, then the concept of participatory democracy goes with it. What will we have left?"

FINDING SOLUTIONS

Yet, as discouraging as the figures may be, there is reason to believe that all hope is not lost, according to the authors of the "Civic Mission of Schools." More young people today than ever before are involved in some form of community service or general volunteerism, they say. Based upon a survey conducted by the International Association for Evaluation of Education, the authors note that more than 80 percent of high school seniors in 2000 were engaged in some form of volunteer activity. That percentage has been steadily growing since 1989 when it stood at 68 percent.

"Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 are more likely than any other age group to report participation [in a volunteer effort]," the report says. "Nearly 40

percent say they have volunteered at some point in their lives."

"The volunteer rate and level of enthusiasm among young people for getting involved in something they believe in is very impressive," says Tobi Walker, a public policy program official with the Pew Charitable Trusts in Philadelphia.

"Repeatedly we hear comments from young people who talk enthusiastically about how they think they made a difference," she says. "It's enthusiasm you rarely hear when they talk about politics."

But the problem is that youthful interest in voluntarism usually focuses on service projects like serving at soup kitchens or entertaining at nursing homes and has very little public policy orientation.

In fact, youth volunteerism has through the years increased in almost inverse proportion to the declining percentage of young people who say they want to get involved in public life or simply follow political events in the news.

In the late 1980s, for example, nearly 60 percent of college freshmen said they considered it important to keep up-to-date with political affairs. But in 2001, only 30 percent agreed with that statement. Conversely, more than 80 percent of college freshmen in 2001 said they were involved in some form of volunteer work, a number that has enjoyed a nearly 20 percent increase since the late 1970s.

WILLING TO GET INVOLVED

"It's proof that young people are willing to get involved, they are not indifferent," says Alison Byrne Fields, the former chief strategist for Rock the Vote, a non-profit group dedicated to enhancing political awareness in young people. "But it has to be in an area where they feel they can make a difference or see some sort of effect from their work."

That such a chasm exists has long vexed both educators and policymakers. But recently, many have realized that our youngest generation's seemingly congenital indifference to the fate of the republic is not their fault alone. The problem is embedded in the way civic education, when it has existed at all, has been taught in recent years.

"It's boring," remarks Wisconsin Senator Robert Jauch. "We're not telling them the exciting stories about how this country was founded, what our country stands for, the great issues that we still debate and fight over every day," he says. "Instead, we're teaching them statistics, hitting them with all of these facts and dates to the point where it seems irrelevant and boring. No wonder they don't want anything more to do with government when they leave school."

"We had to take several courses of civics," says author Macedo. And teachers felt free to also talk about everything—the controversial issues then in the news and how they related to the Constitution and the found-



Senator Hanna M. Gallo, left, and Representative Susan A. Story, far right, hosted Rhode Island's first Civic Education Day at the State House in June. With them are the nine student winners of an essay contest on "Celebrating Freedom: Rhode Island Past and Present."

ing of the republic. "It was exciting."

Studies point out that civic education has almost disappeared from the nation's schools. Education today comprises roughly a semester course on government—a far cry from the three-course democracy, civics and government requirements demanded by most public school systems up into the 1960s.

Walker of the Pew Charitable Trusts, says this means that "basically, everyone who is an adult is to blame for this: educators, parents, administrators, lawyers...everyone, that is, except the children, who have shown they can be interested in civic education when it is presented to them in a meaningful manner."

Mary Kirlin, a professor of public affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, agrees, noting that young people are always willing to become involved in larger projects outside their normal daily lives, "as long as they are engaged."

In North Carolina, concern by public leaders that the state was in danger of developing a new generation of citizens unprepared to lead their communities spurred the creation of the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium in 1997. It has been busy building public awareness of and support for civic education and involving teachers, community leaders, children and youths in revitalizing civic education. The consortium is promoting a "new way of teaching" that, for example, will get students to prepare for a class debate on hate crime or present their own plan for school redistricting to the school board instead of requiring students to answer questions from the back of a book. Consortium members hope teachers will challenge their students to find real solutions to real problems.

"The key is that initial experience," says Kirlin, "If it's a positive one, it may very well spark future citizen participation. But if it's negative, you may lose them forever." Experts recommend making civic education

CIVICS COME FIRST IN HUDSON'S SCHOOLS

Nearly eight years ago, teachers and administrators of the Hudson public schools in Hudson, Mass., 30 miles west of Boston, came to a startling conclusion: Teaching civics at the 12th grade level may be a great American educational tradition, but it really doesn't work.

By the time most 17- and 18-year-olds become seniors, they either care or don't care about government. One class for one semester in the final year, as they are eagerly anticipating life out of high school, probably isn't going to change much of anything.

"We began to rethink the process," says Sheldon Berman, superintendent of the Hudson public schools, whose students are mostly from blue-collar families, with a large percentage foreign-born.

There is a national movement among high school science instructors to teach physics at the freshman level, instead of later, because it is thought that it will lead to a better understanding of biology and chemistry. Berman says the Hudson schools decided to do the same thing with civics, making it an early requirement for incoming freshmen on the premise that it would enhance later classes in history and government.

"After the students have grasped the concepts of civics, they can have a better appreciation of the issues involved in American and world history," continues Berman. "They see the meaningful play of everything they learned as theory in civics."

But the Hudson schools have done even more to enhance civic awareness: Its elementary school students are required to get involved in "service learning programs," such as adopting a nearby woodlands area so they can better understand the issues involved in conservation and environmental protection.

Hudson elementary and middle school students also are part of what Berman calls the "responsive classroom." These students learn

conflict resolution and anger management skills, as well as formulate policy governing basic classroom behavior. By the time Hudson students enter high school, they are better prepared to deal with such emotionally demanding topics as the Holocaust. They can also handle the question of whether or not anyone is ever an innocent bystander (i.e., if you see a terrible thing happening, but take no step to stop it, are you guilty, too?)

High school students are divided into what Berman calls "democratic clusters" of between 100 and 150. This creates not only a smaller community feeling among the participants, but a growing sense of responsibility for not only each other's welfare but for the community as a whole.

The idea of an early emphasis on civics and encouraging students to participate in a high school version of representative democracy has won a good deal of press attention for the Hudson schools. *The Boston Globe* lauded a student body "actively involved in decision making within their school," and schoolwide discussions "held on a variety of topics, ranging from school lunches to foreign students."

The Hudson system has also sparked the curiosity of dozens of other high schools nationally, who view it as a potential model of what they would like to try. "We get calls all the time from other schools who want to come here and see what we are doing for themselves," says Berman. Is a more thorough immersion in topical issues, as well as a hands-on approach to actual school policy, an antidote to civic indifference?

Berman says no one approach is entirely foolproof: "We recognize that not every student leaving here is going to become a political activist," he says. "But if we can teach them the essentials of civics and then encourage them to put those essentials to work, we're betting that will stay with them long after they leave high school."



SENATOR
ROBERT JAUCH
WISCONSIN

come alive by wrestling with current events in the classroom, no matter how controversial. And they encourage student participation in school governance and simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

In the Center for Civic Education's *We the People ... The Citizen and the Consti-*

tution program, upper elementary, middle and high school students look at constitutional issues that have a contemporary relevance. They are required to vigorously argue virtually every side of issues just as lawyers might in a court of law.

"This is the kind of thing that young

CIVICS OUTREACH: LEGISLATORS LEAD THE WAY

Lawmakers troubled over the decline in civic education may wonder what they can do to stem the tide.



REPRESENTATIVE
DENISE MERRILL
CONNECTICUT

The answer, it seems, is plenty.

Connecticut Representative Denise Merrill read a study that charted a decline in civic knowledge among young people in her state. Is civic education required by law? she wondered. To her surprise, the answer was no.

"I just always took it for granted that our young people were still studying civics and were required to," said Merrill. She sponsored a bill requiring at least a half credit course on American government and civics for all public high school students in the state.

It's now the law in Colorado that high school students pass a course in federal and state government in order to graduate, thanks to a bill sponsored by Senate President John Andrews. State law had always required



SENATE PRESIDENT
JOHN ANDREWS
COLORADO

that civics courses be taught, but there was never any accountability showing a student passed them, Andrews says.

The legislation drew bipartisan support, with two Democrats helping co-sponsor it. "I'm very pleased," says Andrews. "I think the debate brought out the fact there is no magic bullet in dealing with civics illiteracy. This is only one course offered between grades nine and 12, but at least it's a beginning, and it's

uniform across the state."

Other lawmakers have become involved in America's Legislators Back to School Week sponsored by the National Conference of State Legislatures. The event is designed to teach young people—the nation's future voters and leaders—what it's like to be a state legislator. They meet legislators face to face and learn about the processes, the pressures, and the debate, negotiation and compromise that are the fabric of representative democracy.

Held the third week of September each year, Back to School Week has proved to be effective and popular with lawmakers, educators and students. Last year 1,600 legislators visited more than 200,000 students in their classrooms.

Some states sponsor their own student outreach programs. Massachusetts Student Government Day has been ongoing for nearly 60 years. Last year brought more than 400 students from across the state to Boston.

"It's just great," reports Senate President Robert Travaglini, who also notes that the students come from more than 200 high schools.

"At the end of each day, you can just feel the difference among the kids. They are less critical, more respectful and much more interested in what goes on in their state capital and why."

Wisconsin Senator Robert Jauch holds Superior Day every session, inviting high school students from his mostly rural district to Madison.

"I think it's a real eye-opening experience for them," Jauch says. He has also made it his practice to visit schools regularly in the district he represents 320 miles from the Capitol.

"What I like the most is when they finally see that the government is not about us elected officials," says Jauch. "It's about them as citizens—this is their house. And when they get that idea into their heads, I think they also realize that they have as much right to be here—even more—as any lobbyist or

politician."

After discussions with his colleagues about how legislators can get kids involved, Representative Doug Hart started the Michigan House Civics Commission. The bipartisan, ad hoc commission set up a program where legislators travel the state and conduct hearings



REPRESENTATIVE
DOUG HART
MICHIGAN

with students about issues of concern to young people.

They also developed a curriculum to help teachers. So far, lawmakers have held 14 hearings with students in a variety of grades across the state. Twenty-one legislators are involved with more signing on.

"These hearings are not simulations. This is real. We are genuinely interested in listening to kids. We know bills will be introduced and laws enacted as a result of this effort," says Hart.

For example, one young woman told legislators that she was worried about how much overseas military personnel must pay for phone calls home. She wanted the Legislature to appropriate money to help pay for phone cards for state residents serving overseas. It was a solid idea, and a bill has now been introduced. "These hearings empower kids and get them excited about being citizens and participating in democracy," says Hart.

Legislators in Rhode Island set up a commission to keep everyone involved in civic education informed of what others are doing. In late May, the commission sponsored a "civics fair," and groups set up displays and booths and shared ideas.

For links to innovative state civics initiatives and a database on state legislation on civics education, go to www.ncsl.org/trust

people really like because it puts them in the middle of the action," says the center's Tam Taylor. "They come up with a position on a certain issue. Then they have to defend it with solid thinking and reason. It's a challenge that engages them."

Other programs, such as the new Project 540, are designed to enhance and supplement a traditional high school civics curriculum by putting ideas to work in everyday high school life. Funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, Project 540 is the brainchild of Rick Battistoni, who also is a professor of political science at Providence College in Rhode Island.

In its first full year of operations, beginning with the 2002 fall semester, Project 540 counted more than 250 participating schools in 14 states: Alabama, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Vermont.

Designed to give students a louder voice in their schools and in the larger community beyond, Project 540 encourages them to engage in protracted conversations on whatever topics interest them, whether it's personal or something in the news.

Those conversations are then fed into a dialogue with other students from other schools across the country who are also participating in the program. "I really have never thought that students are actually apathetic," says Battistoni. "They care about a lot of things, but almost instinctively they feel that if they speak up, no one is really going to listen. Hopefully, Project 540 will help address that."

This spring nearly 140,000 students engaged in a national dialogue organized by Project 540 that was designed to elicit comments about the issues that mattered to them the most. Perhaps inevitably, most of the topics revolved around the daily, unique perspective of being a high school student, including the quality of school lunch offerings, dress codes, and the condition and availability of bathrooms.

But No. 3 on the Top 10 items listed as most talked about in the national dialogue was the issue of "war and peace." Concerns about the environment rated seven. Students also expressed strong opinions about homelessness, homophobia, and racism—

and voiced a determination to do their part to gradually make such problems disappear.

"I wasn't surprised by the results," says Battistoni. "I had always felt that students had opinions about any number of issues. But this is the first time we had any proof. To me, it showed that young people are far more engaged than we generally give them credit for."

Meanwhile in Dupre's Project Citizen class in Albuquerque, students this year picked as their project the building of a school-based health center that would provide indigent care. During a six-month period, the students collected data from a variety of Web sites and other sources and presented their arguments to the school's governing body, as well as city and state leaders.

"They have been very excited about this project," Dupre says, as her students completed the final details with the kind of energy usually displayed at a sporting event. Then they traveled to Santa Fe and made a final presentation to judges in Project Citizen's statewide competition.

Talking about their experience with Project Citizen, the students said they feel more positive about how government works. And each said they were determined to register and vote when they reach 18.

But as far as running for or holding public office, most of the students still expressed reluctance: "I think there are good people in government, more than I thought about before," said student Kyra Gurney. "But I still don't think I'd like to run myself—it takes a really tough person for that." 