

Winter 2003

**Civic Education**

## **Civic Virtue in the Schools**

### **Engaging a New Generation of Citizens**

*Rick Allen*

Like limbs that weaken from lack of use, students' democratic muscles lack vigor if they don't have a chance to use them. To halt an evident decline in civic engagement among youth, an increasing number of educators are urging U.S. schools to reinvigorate their mission to nurture democracy.



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Even when civics was widespread as a school course, it generally gave students a textbook acquaintance with the three branches of government and a feeling that voting was a good thing to do. Still, young people rarely exercise the long-anticipated right to vote. U.S. Census statistics show that only 32 percent of people ages 18–24 voted in the 2000 presidential election, compared to 54.7 percent of all voting-age citizens.

“Schools need to reclaim the purpose of public education and the notion that one's education is part of a larger good and can contribute to the betterment of society,” says Carl Glickman, an expert on school renewal whose new book,  *Holding Sacred Ground*, examines leadership in democratic schools.

Rather than hold our schools captive with high-stakes testing, Glickman argues, we should require them to provide opportunities for students to put their learning to work in the larger community, whether that means the school or the neighborhood, the city or the state.

Also, although a student's individual goals for higher education and a career are important, schools should consider these plans as part of a larger objective to improve society and allow justice and equality to flourish, stresses Glickman.

### **Largely Untried**

Rejuvenating and reforming civic education won't be easy. Thomas Jefferson asserted that a sound education would produce enlightened citizens able to sustain a balanced democracy. Yet some educators say Jefferson's vision remains unfulfilled in most U.S. schools.

“Civic education is still a project that has been largely untried in the schools,” says Walter Parker, professor of education at the University of Washington. When compared with a systematic civics program like that outlined in the Center for Civic Education's National

Standards for Civics and Government, “the current state of civics in the schools still looks poor,” he comments. “To carry out a full-blown civic engagement program would require much more work.”

The president-elect of the National Council for the Social Studies, Denee Mattioli, also laments the apathy toward civic education, saying schools reflect the nation's neglect. For example, she notes, “People don't want to pay taxes for schools if their kids are grown up.” Each generation needs to appreciate basic democratic values if the republic is to survive, Mattioli continues. “If people remembered and understood that charge, schools wouldn't be having to have bake sales to make sure they have enough textbooks.”

## **Making a Start**

In the midst of overall school reform that stresses not only high standards but also self-initiated, constructivist, and practical learning for students, some educators see opportunities to recast civic education into an active, or even activist, mode. Simply put, good civic education depends on varying combinations of learning, talking, and doing, say experts and practitioners.

The good news is that civic education in U.S. schools is in a state of revival, according to Mattioli. She has talked with district and state education officials around the country who say they are contemplating how to better fit civic education into the curriculum.

The methods of these revival efforts vary—from reinstating civics courses, to revamping schools into mini-democratic societies, to teaching the art of civil discussion amid diversity. Experts agree that civics instruction should balance content and practice to give students a deep understanding of what it means to live in a democratic society.

## **Democratic Muscle**

For more than 10 years, Federal Hocking High School in the Appalachian foothills of southeastern Ohio has quietly been carrying out an experiment in democracy. At the helm of this experiment is former political science professor-turned-school principal, George Wood, who believes that delegating decision-making power in a democratic fashion will help to increase student achievement and teacher satisfaction.

“For the most part, we don't let kids have control of their lives in high school,” says Wood. This is an essential problem with the way most high schools operate.

In his book *A Time to Learn*, which is an account of Federal Hocking's transformation, Wood writes that “high school . . . is democracy's finishing school—the last shared experience that all Americans will enjoy; the place where the skills and dispositions that citizens in a democracy need should be secured and nurtured in all of our youth.”

High school's most important goal is not “getting kids jobs,” Wood insists in his book, but “helping kids develop habits of heart and mind that will help them be good citizens.” At Federal Hocking, this includes keeping a citizenship portfolio in which students track their attendance at local government meetings, their ability to obtain and analyze information and take a stand on public issues, and their reflections on what they learn about government. Collectively, students

also develop their democratic muscle by having a real voice in school matters.

Federal Hocking gives its students a great deal of decision-making power that is integral to the smooth running of the school. Students even take part in the teacher-hiring process by reading applications, reviewing sample lessons, and interviewing applicants.

Having so many voices involved in making decisions takes organization. The school's student delegation is made up of two bodies: student trustees and a student council. To select the trustees each year, departing seniors evaluate essays written by student applicants and select 20—five representatives from each class. This process avoids a popularity contest, notes Wood. These student trustees meet with a faculty advisor each day and the principal weekly to carry out decisions made at monthly meetings by the school's larger 60-member student council, which consists of class officers and representatives from school groups, in addition to the trustees.

This year—with funding from the First Amendment Schools project sponsored by the First Amendment Center and ASCD—students, teachers, and parents have formed a committee to address unresolved and often hidden issues of class-based and racial inequality. Although the school population is 10 percent African American and 90 percent white, students' household incomes vary widely. Some families have no phones, and some travel the world, says Wood.

## **Daily Practice**

High school isn't the only place students can experience the democratic process firsthand. Teachers can turn elementary schools into laboratories of daily democratic practice as well. Fifth grade teacher Nadine Roush designed her students' entire school year around citizenship education at the Amelia Earhart Elementary School in Lafayette, Ind.

To start the school year, Roush's class holds a “mini-constitutional convention” in which students create a document complete with a preamble and an outline of their rights and responsibilities as “citizens” of the class. The constitution becomes effective after a signing ceremony, and it is posted in the classroom as a constant reminder to students.

To mirror the organization of a democratic government, students join a variety of class committees that run different aspects of the classroom, from distribution and maintenance of materials to conflict resolution. The organizational committee, for example, sets the agenda for the daily community circle, in which the whole class meets to share birthdays, celebrate triumphs such as a chess tournament victory, and solve logistical problems. The community circle also allows the class to focus on what students call the “big question” of the day related to an academic concept.

During midterm elections in November 2002, the big question focused on the schoolwide mock election that Roush's class organized to mirror Indiana's congressional and general assembly elections. Her class asked: What can we do to encourage student voting? As a result, students placed posters they created in hallways and classrooms as gentle reminders to vote.

Roush also makes sure she works seven core democratic values—individual rights, the common good, justice, equality, diversity, truth, and patriotism—into subjects such as science, reading,

and writing. Her efforts to reconfigure her class along democratic lines began after a “transformational” two-week seminar she attended in 1995 at Purdue University's James F. Ackerman Center for Democratic Citizenship.

As a result of her efforts, Roush has also seen changes in her students. “It's made them more aware of collaboration and given them a much greater understanding of how people in a community work together to achieve a common goal. They've also become more proficient in the art of compromise,” Roush says.

Democracy also produces more noise in the class, Roush acknowledges. “But it's productive noise.”

## **Creating Citizen-Activists**

Service learning is another practical and increasingly popular way to activate a civics curriculum across a spectrum of content areas. When such projects are done well, students put their interdisciplinary content knowledge and critical thinking skills to work to solve a real problem in the larger community, says Glickman. Service learning can help young people see beyond the common view of politics as “an ego thing,” he says, and understand how public service is democracy in action.

“If students don't have those experiences, we're losing potential leaders in society,” Glickman warns.

At Roush's school, for example, students directly connect to the Lafayette community outside the school. During the first semester, students usually help a local food bank by soliciting and boxing up about 8,000 pounds of goods. In the second semester, students must identify a local problem and a way to solve it as part of a service-learning project, which Roush ties into appropriate state subject standards. One year, students noted a foul odor coming from a pond in a local park. After testing that park's water quality, along with water in two other parks for comparison, students discovered fertilizer runoff was causing the problem. They presented their findings to the city's parks board.

“Students were glad to find an explanation for the funny color and odor of the water—and were relieved that it was not harmful,” recalls Roush.

Two schools in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley also use service learning to encourage students to be citizen-activists. James Wood High School seniors spend a semester of their government class (dubbed “applied government”) working for local government agencies to research a problem that they can help to solve. For example, some students sought to reduce the amount of time probation officers wasted in court waiting to make a statement when they could be working with their juvenile clients. Students researched procedures in other communities and recommended setting aside certain times for such routine court statements or using teleconferencing.

At nearby Sherando High School, the work of service-learning students persuaded the Shenandoah County board of supervisors to pass an ordinance to start curb-side trash pickup in more densely populated parts of the county. Students also examined the possibility of a

private-public funding partnership for a local animal shelter, and they analyzed the effects of consolidating state agencies due to budget shortfalls.

“These kids are not afraid to question what government does. They understand that the process is burdensome, but they can still use it to make changes,” says Kathy Fout, social studies chair and service-learning coordinator at Sherando. One of her former students credits service learning for inspiring her to become a town planner after graduating from college, Fout notes.

“Students find it so rewarding because the projects are serious,” says Michaellean Monahan, a senior government teacher at James Wood. “People in local government and the community take them seriously and treat them as adults. It makes students want to live up to expectations.”

As these students learn how local and state governments operate and attach names and faces to local agencies, they are also less likely to be cynical about government and politics. They may be stronger advocates of raising taxes, for example, because they've seen the effects of underfunding firsthand, Monahan concludes.

Monahan notes one drawback: not all seniors take part in the service-learning program. First there's the logistical difficulty of placing all 600 senior students in the community, then there's the limited funding for service learning. The greatest worry of all is Virginia's high-stakes tests, which students must pass in order to graduate, says Monahan. “Several years ago, I thought that service learning was up and coming, but it's been pushed into a corner by testing,” Monahan explains.

## **Deliberation and Diversity**

When working to create a democratic society, whether in the classroom or the wider community, the practice of deliberation is an essential tool. Deliberation and “lively, vigorous discussion” will hone students' decision-making abilities, says the University of Washington's Parker. He contends that reviving student councils and classroom meetings to engage students in the democratic practice of deliberation would do even more to foster democracy than service learning. In his book *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life*, Parker explores the concept of using dialogue to bridge differences. Even in kindergarten, he maintains, students can talk about the rules that the teacher proposes. In middle school and high school, students can discuss policies about cheating and attendance and engage in a host of academic discussions that arise from content in science, literature, and social studies.

Bridging differences is important because U.S. schools are becoming increasingly diverse, especially regarding race, language, and national origin. Already the largest 100 school districts are 68 percent nonwhite, according to government statistics, which project that the nation's schools will be 30 percent Hispanic by 2050.

“When you have diversity at the table, you have multiple perspectives on the problem being discussed. Those multiple viewpoints will produce more just decisions,” Parker asserts. But teachers need proper training in the democratic art of deliberation, especially in diverse

classrooms, Parker warns. “There’s no more difficult pedagogy.” Deliberation counts on teachers getting all students to participate, “surfacing the diversity of opinion, and then keeping it there—in a civilized way.”

The main goal of a class deliberation is to reach a fair decision about an issue, which differs from a seminar approach that seeks to enlarge the group's understanding of a topic. The second goal for both types of discussion is to create a feeling of “being in this together” among students that cuts across diversity.

Nicolle Robinson, a social studies teacher at Granite High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, has taken advantage of diverse voices in classroom discussions to deepen understanding among her students. She teaches in a school where students speak 27 languages and may be refugees from Somalia or Bosnia or immigrants from Latin America or as far away as the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific.

Robinson asks her students from other countries to share their experiences with her American-born students. “Learning to compare and contrast validates beliefs [of students born outside the United States] and gives a new perspective to those who have always lived here,” Robinson declares. “We were discussing the idea of U.S.-centrism. The perspective of those immigrant students was vital to our conversation—they served almost as expert witnesses to how the world views the United States.”

## **New Voices, New Citizens**

Immigrant students might find the U.S. concept of democracy difficult to grasp. How can a school make students with different languages, ethnicities, races, and complex personal histories understand the importance of the democratic tradition even as they pursue individual dreams of achievement?

The answer: Make learning student-centered and activity- and project-based, say educators. Allow immigrant students to communicate in both English and native languages and work in small groups to create a play, collaborate on a work of art, or hash out a mathematical concept.

“This feeds into democratic values and civics because it allows students to use their voices and gives them lee-way in decisions that affect their lives in school,” says Eric Nadelstern, deputy superintendent of new and small schools for New York City's Bronx borough.

Immigrant students also need help balancing the pursuit of individual goals—whether academic or economic—and their role in the larger community, says Nadelstern. Students at International High School in Queens, a school geared toward English-language learners, connected to the wider community by studying nearby Newtown Creek and making recommendations for cleaning it up and strengthening its role in the local economy. As part of their project, students worked with community organizations and sought ways to present their recommendations to local politicians and the press.

## **Whole-School Democracy**

To send a consistent message about the value of democracy, schools should not reserve its

practice for students alone. Teachers, foremost, must “speak truth to power,” to borrow a Quaker adage about confronting authority, says Nadelstern.

“The governance structure of the school is inextricably linked to the methods of the teachers. A ‘fiat-and-memorandum’ principal will have teachers dictating to kids,” which squelches any democratic efforts in the classroom, Nadelstern warns. “You can’t do it for kids unless you first do it for teachers.”

The democratic practice encourages all teachers to question authority, even that of superintendents and the school board. “We want to empower teachers to collaborate on the curriculum, speak the truth, and question the school board,” Nadelstern says. “Democracy is messy, so we’re not dictating from the central office how it should be done. As long as rigorous learning connects to kids’ lives, we leave it up to the local schools to decide the details.”

Democracy may be a messy and complicated process, but teachers can and should teach, practice, and pass it on in the schools despite the effort such a reinvigorated and nuanced civic education would require, these educators say.

“Citizenship is not just what you drop in the ballot box,” says Wood. “You have to live and breathe it every single day.”

### **First Amendment Schools**

Eleven First Amendment project schools around the United States are exploring ways for students to better understand their roles as citizens in a democracy as they learn a deeper practical appreciation of the five freedoms of the First Amendment (freedom of religion, speech, the press, peaceful assembly, and freedom to petition the government for redress of grievances).

Projects at these schools, funded through the collaboration of the Freedom Forum’s First Amendment Center and ASCD, will serve as models that other schools can adapt to their own communities. For more information about the First Amendment Schools project, go to <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org>.

## The Basics for Creating a Democratic School

Principal George Wood and his students and staff have run a laboratory of democratic practice at Federal Hocking High School in Stewart, Ohio, for the past 10 years. Wood offers the following essential tips for teaching students the skills of democracy.

1. **Find as many ways as possible for students to take responsibility for the daily life of the school.** At Federal Hocking, these opportunities include involving students in making decisions about school schedules, curriculum, and a whole array of student activities, including new clubs that students themselves initiate.
2. **Find ways for students to apply the critical thinking skills that are essential to citizenship.** Students need to be able to gather information from many sources, reflect on it, and then make decisions based on it. That's what voting, thoughtfully done, is all about, says Wood.
3. **Practice the rights and the responsibilities of the U.S. Constitution within the school.** Administrators and teachers should ask whether there's a free press in the school, whether students can express dissent, and whether students can elect their own leaders. These constitutionally guaranteed freedoms are what U.S. citizens are willing to go to war over, emphasizes Wood, but "if students don't practice them in high school, they're not necessarily going to pick them up anywhere else."