Educational Leadership

The Civic Opportunity Gap

Half the youth population in the United States is left out of civic life. Schools must help change this situation.

Peter Levine

May 2009

A few years ago, depressing statistics dominated conversations about youth and social responsibility. For instance, the voter turnout of adults ages 18–29 had fallen by one-third since the 1970s, reaching a low point when only 36 percent voted in the 1996 presidential election (Lopez, Kirby, & Sagoff, 2005). This declining turnout, many claimed, indicated that young Americans were either less concerned about social issues or less confident that their votes could make a difference—or both.

Another oft-quoted statistic was that only one-fourth of high school seniors scored as proficient or better on the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress's civics assessment (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007). These facts boded ill for youth's civic participation. And news reports about young people who were alienated, uninformed, or downright destructive abounded.

But the situation began changing in the early 2000s. Youth voter turnout, for instance, rose in both 2000 and 2004, returning to levels last seen in the 1970s. Today's young people volunteer at record rates. And youth are often the most idealistic users of the new electronic media. According to the National Conference on Citizenship, within the last year more than half of young adults used a social networking site like Facebook to express an opinion about a social or community issue (National Conference on Citizenship, 2008).

The 2008 presidential election demonstrated how extensively our current crop of young people is willing to engage. Their turnout rose for the third presidential election in a row, surpassing 50 percent (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2008), and young adults were heavily involved in volunteering, fund-raising, and reaching out to potential voters.

The National Exit Poll, conducted on election day, found that 16 percent of young voters had been contacted by someone in the Obama campaign, compared with 4 percent contacted by the McCain campaign. That was an extraordinary level of outreach that helped to produce a higher than usual youth turnout and an unprecedented tilt in favor of the candidate who did the most youth outreach: Obama won two-thirds of the youth vote, far higher than the previous record set by Reagan in 1984 (CIRCLE, 2008).
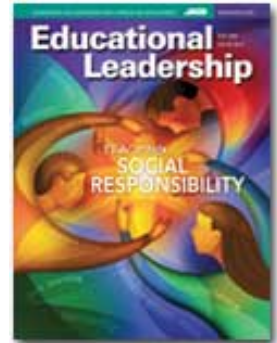
Obama's enormously successful appeal to youth proves that it is effective to call on young people to serve, to approach them individually, to offer concrete opportunities, and to state this call in idealistic terms. Research bolsters this idea: When researchers examine why young people perform community service, join civic groups, or attend meetings, participants often report that they took these actions because someone asked them to (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

But Who's Left Out?

The 2008 election provides another less heartening lesson. Although overall youth turnout rose, those who voted were almost all college students or young adults with college experience. In the 2008 presidential primaries, about one in four young adults who had attended at least some college voted, but only about one in 14 of their non-college-educated peers turned out (Kirby, Marcelo, Gillerman, & Linkins, 2008). Preliminary estimates from exit polls suggest that college students also dominated youth voting on the day of the presidential election.

About half of the young people in this country have not had any college experience at all—not a single course. These young people are increasingly being left out of civic life in the United States. They are less likely to vote, volunteer, belong to civic groups, and even join unions than are their college-educated peers (Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009).

Immediately before the 2008 presidential election, my colleagues at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and I spoke with some noncollege-educated young adults in a major U.S. city. Virtually none of them expressed any interest in or excitement about the campaign. They did not believe that the winner would make any difference to their community or that there were significant differences between the leading candidates.

Most of these young people were black, but they were less interested in the race of the Democratic candidate than in the vast perceived gulf between their own lives and all political institutions. They told us numerous stories of mistreatment by the police, schools, and municipal agencies. They did not expect any of this to change.

When these young adults mentioned their experiences with volunteering or community service, the opportunities they described were not at all empowering, educational, or inspiring. Instead, they recalled being assigned menial, unpaid work under the label of "service" or "civic education." In contrast, when CIRCLE talked to almost 400 college students in 2007, we found that many of them had performed challenging, meaningful forms of service. For example, the noncollege youth most often recalled cleaning up streets as their voluntary service, whereas college students recalled being asked to testify before public officials and using innovative technologies to address environmental problems.

This civic opportunity gap between college-bound and non-college-bound students has worsened over the last three decades. People without college experience are virtually invisible in civil society. This civic opportunity gap is a profound problem—one that educators should not

accept—for three reasons:

1. *Young people who are active with social institutions do better in life*. They are more likely to stay in school and out of trouble. Participation in community groups can even reduce teen pregnancy (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

2. *Youth have different interests than older people, and someone needs to represent those interests*. For instance, Social Security is a bigger issue for senior citizens than for youth and therefore gets disproportionate attention from politicians. The unemployment rate for people ages 16–19 is above 20 percent, but candidates rarely talk about unemployment as a youth problem—because working-class youth don't vote enough.

3. *We need young people's energies to address the complex problems that will face us in coming decades*. The United States has never overcome any major challenge without unleashing the skills, energies, and passions of millions of citizens. Collaboration is the genius of American democracy. But according to my analysis of data from the Needham Lifestyle Survey, which was conducted annually from 1975 to 2006 (DDB Worldwide, n. d.), people are less likely to work on community projects than they were a generation ago. If we want to turn this decline around, we must focus on youth. Very few programs, projects, or even movements have changed passive *adults* into active citizens.

What Teachers Can Do

The decrease in civic participation of non-college-bound youth has many causes, including the decline of certain key organizations. Labor unions encourage all their members to vote and teach many members leadership skills, and metropolitan daily newspapers provide essential political information on their front pages. But both of these institutions have shrunk dramatically and have especially lost influence for people without college backgrounds. For educators, however, the most important causes of the civic opportunity gap are those connected to K–12 education.

It's not that we don't know what to do: Research shows that specific practices, done well, increase students' civic engagement and social responsibility (CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003). These include service activities connected to course content and discussions (service learning); mock trials and other simulations of practices central to citizenship; participation in groups like student government or the school newspaper staff; and community research projects. All these practices involve relevant issues, challenging concepts and skills, and active student participation.

One of the most strongly supported practices for increasing civic participation is civil, balanced classroom discussion of controversial events or issues. As University of Wisconsin professor Diana Hess (in press) found, such discussions increase students' knowledge of—and interest in—politics. Some research indicates that most of the positive influence that civics classes have on civic engagement can be attributed to the discussions in these courses. Michael McDevitt (2003) of the University of Colorado found that such in-class discussions contributed to similar conversations at home and thereby raised *parents*' voter turnout.

It's essential that teachers develop skill at moderating such sensitive discussions. It may be

especially challenging for younger teachers to moderate current-events discussions because the examples we see on television tend to be shouting matches, and few of today's teachers experienced such discussions as students in the 1980s and 1990s. By that time, the once-popular high school class called Problems of American Democracy, which involved reading newspapers and debating issues, had largely disappeared.

Schools should provide teachers with professional development to help them initiate and handle discussions on controversial issues. For example, thousands of Chicago high school students are now involved with Mikva Challenge (www.mikvachallenge.org), a project that helps students conduct informed discussions of serious issues, such as teen violence. After 30 students from the Chicago public schools were killed by gun violence in the 2007–08 school tear, Mikva Challenge's Youth Safety Council conducted research, prepared a report, and presented its ideas to city officials (Klonsky, 2009). Groups like the National Issues Forums, Public Agenda Foundation, Everyday Democracy, and Streetlaw also have good materials and models available.

At the same time, our education system needs to change reward structures so that we encourage teachers to promote meaty discussion of current events—rather than penalize them for taking the time or the risk. Skills and knowledge related to current events are not measured on high-stakes tests. And controversial discussions sometimes get teachers into hot water. Teachers need support from administrators and education policy leaders.

Efforts to infuse class discussion and other engaging forms of civic education into schools must concentrate on getting these practices into schools and classes that serve disadvantaged students—because that's where the need is. Researchers Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh (in press) found that, within a given high school, students taking college-preparatory courses were more likely than those taking less advanced courses to report that their classes included such experiences as service learning, classroom discussions of issues, field trips, or visiting speakers.

When we compare suburban schools with urban and rural schools—or compare schools with high test scores with those with lower scores—we find that privileged schools are more likely to offer interactive civic education. Struggling schools tend not to provide such experiences, either because they lack resources or because they concentrate on "fundamental" academic subjects (Kahne & Middaugh, in press).

As frequently as possible, given the constraints of today's curriculum mandates and high-stakes testing, educators—particularly those working with youth from less advantaged backgrounds—should offer their students opportunities to choose issues to focus on and discuss. As students discuss issues, teachers should moderate, promoting civility, diversity of perspectives, reliance on trustworthy information, and the application of such perennial principles from the U.S. Constitution as freedom of speech.

Encourage students to take whatever social action they can on the basis of such discussions. They might conduct voluntary service (for instance, tutoring younger children), prepare testimony for political leaders, contact the media, or create their own Web sites or videos.

Toward Better Politics

There is another crucial reason that we must close the civic opportunity gap: It will create a better form of politics and education for everyone. Good school-based programs of service learning, youth-led research, and even civil discussion of issues exemplify a kind of politics that's in desperately short supply today. Civic education runs counter to three harmful trends in how society approaches politics and education:

We treat young people as bundles of problems. High-quality civic education embodies the alternative approach of positive youth development. This approach treats young people as assets and says that if you want young people to thrive, you must give them opportunities to contribute. Young people need a sense of purpose and value. We undermine that sense when we treat youth as crises waiting to happen and constantly test, treat, and discipline them.

We see education as the job of teachers and principals, a specialized task that only experts can perform and measure. Education should be the process by which a whole community transmits to the next generation appropriate values, traditions, skills, and cultural norms. Civic education at its best crosses the line between schools and communities and reflects a more inclusive definition of education.

We see politics as government centered. Governments are not the only institutions that matter, and a government-centered view of politics leaves citizens little to do but inform themselves and vote. Youth civic engagement epitomizes a citizen-centered politics in which people form relationships, exchange ideas, and use a range of strategies to bring change, some having little to do with the government.

Good civic education is open-ended politics. In fostering students' civic participation, we don't try to manipulate them into adopting the opinions or solutions we think are right—at least, we shouldn't. Instead, we give them opportunities to learn, deliberate, and act in ways that seem best to them. At a time when most politics is manipulative—when politicians, advocacy groups, and the like study us, poll us, and send tailor-made messages designed to encourage or scare us into acting just how they want us to—such opportunities are precious. If we want our democracy to flourish, we must make sure *all* students have these opportunities.

References

CIRCLE. (2008). *Young voters in the 2008 presidential election*. Medford, MA: Author. Available: www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_08_exit_polls.pdf

CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York. (2003). *The civic mission of schools*. Medford, MA: Author. Available: www.civicyouth.org/?p=209

DDB Worldwide. (n.d.). *DDB Needham Lifestyle Survey Archive*. Chicago: DDB Worldwide.

Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development: A report of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Committee on Community-*

Level Programs for Youth. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Flanagan, C., Levine, P., & Settersten, R. (2009). *Civic engagement and the changing transition to adulthood*. Medford, MA: CIRCLE. Available: www.civicyouth.org/?p=327

Hess, D. E. (in press). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. New York: Routledge.

Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (in press). Democracy for some: The unequal provision of civic learning opportunities in U.S. high schools. In J. Youniss & P. Levine (Eds.), *Engaging Young People in Civic Life*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Kirby, E. H., Marcelo, K. B., Gillerman, J., & Linkins, S. (2008). *The youth vote in the 2008 primaries and caucuses* (Fact sheet). Medford, MA: CIRCLE. Available: www.civicyouth.org/?p=302

Klonsky, J. (2009, January). Political power: Mikva Challenge gets youth involved in politics, policymaking. Providence, RI: What Kids Can Do. Available: www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/2009/01_Mikva

Lopez, M. H., Kirby, E., & Sagoff, J. (2005). *The youth vote 2004* (Fact sheet). Medford, MA: CIRCLE. Available: www.civicyouth.org/?p=8

Lutkus, A. D., & Weiss, A. R. (2007). *The nation's report card: Civics 2006*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Available: http://nces.ed.gov

McDevitt, M. (2003). *The civic bonding of school and family: How kids voting students enliven the domestic sphere* (Working paper). Medford, MA: CIRCLE. Available: www.civicyouth.org/?p=58

National Conference on Citizenship. (2008). *2008 Civic health index: Beyond the vote*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: www.ncoc.net/index.pfp?tray=series&tid=top5&cid=97

Youniss, J., McLellan, J. A., & Yates, J. (1997). What we know about engendering civic identity. *American Behavioral Scientist, 40*(5), 620–631.

Peter Levine is Director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University in Massachusetts; Peter.Levine@tufts.edu.