



Fall 2006

Don't know much about... civics

By Carol Brydolf

They're less than a mile from the state Capitol building, where three days earlier the governor and state lawmakers made headlines by agreeing on a budget before the start of the new fiscal year for only the sixth time in the past 20 years. But this trio of high school juniors hanging out at Sacramento's Downtown Plaza on a recent July afternoon might as well have been on another planet for all they knew about what goes on under the dome of the ornate Greco-Roman statehouse just down the street.

None of these bright, articulate 17-year-old juniors—two from Elk Grove and one from Fairfield—could name their local state representatives, and they didn't have a clue about the week's biggest news stories out of Sacramento.

"Didn't they close the borders?" asked Dennis, a supporter of the war in Iraq who said he is thinking of joining the military to get money for college. "Or was that earlier?"

Monica, the most politically savvy of the three, almost got it right when asked who represents California in the U.S. Senate. "Matsui?" she guessed tentatively. (Doris Matsui represents the Sacramento area in the House of Representatives.)

Although all three said they believed they would eventually learn enough about candidates and issues to make informed decisions, none of them had done so yet—less than a year before they are eligible to cast their first ballots.

When it comes to political smarts (or lack thereof), the three Sacramento area teenagers interviewed recently at the mall are typical of their peers, according to the latest statistics about what the country's teens and young adults know (or don't know) about how their government works.

"I wish they'd teach us more about this in school," Monica says. "I mean, we're the ones who are going to be running things."

Monica and her friends could be poster children for a national campaign that's gaining momentum in California and elsewhere in the country to bring civics education back into the public schools.

CIVICS CAMPAIGN GAINING MOMENTUM

Among the prominent national figures raising the call for more and better civic education are retired Gen. Colin Powell, former Sen. John Glenn and retired U.S. Supreme Court

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. Organizations like Glenn's National Commission on Service-Learning and the national Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, co-chaired by O'Connor and Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Roy Romer, argue that rising levels of youthful ignorance and apathy about government and public affairs are nothing short of a national emergency.

The Carnegie Corp. of New York, which is helping fund the national Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, is also providing funds to support campaigns in 16 states, including California. The California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools is chaired by former California Secretary of Education and California state Sen. Gary Hart, Sacramento County Superintendent Dave Gordon and Los Angeles County Superintendent Darline Robles, and includes representatives from 110 education, business, law, service, labor, parent and veteran organizations.

These civics education proponents contend that schools are under so much pressure to raise test scores under the "back-to-basics" mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act, there's little incentive or time to teach students how to become the kinds of active and informed citizens that are essential to a successful democracy. And they argue that schools need to be on the forefront of the campaign to turn things around.

"We need to remember that one reason America established public schools was to educate the next generation of rational and informed citizens," says Todd Clark, a former social science teacher and executive director of the Los Angeles-based Constitutional Rights Foundation. "The founding fathers recognized that for democracy to endure, each generation of Americans must be educated about their constitutional heritage and the rights and responsibilities of enlightened citizenship."

STUDENTS LACK CAPACITY FOR CITIZENSHIP

The 2005 "California Survey of Civic Education," a report by the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, found that most students don't have a clue. "Many of today's young people lack the basic knowledge and skills to effectively participate as citizens, and they often lack the disposition to do so," the report's authors worried. Without "the participation of an enlightened citizenry," they concluded, "the health of our democracy is truly at risk."

The California Campaign is conducting ongoing research about what students in this state know about civics and what they think about government. The preliminary numbers are disturbing.

In 2005, the campaign surveyed 2,366 California high school seniors who (unlike Monica et al) had already completed the semester class in U.S. government mandated by the state. Only 33 percent could correctly identify even one of California's two senators from a list of choices; 41 percent did not know which of the two major political parties was conservative.

Mills College professor of education Joseph Kahne, who conducted the survey, says young Californians are extremely cynical about the government's capacity to make a positive difference in their lives.

WIDESPREAD CYNACISM AMONG CALIFORNIA YOUTH

Only 33 percent of the high school students polled in the California survey agreed with the statement “I trust the people in government to do what is right for the country,” and just 28 percent agreed that “I think that people in government care about what people like me and my family need.”

“The levels of trust among youth are phenomenally low,” Kahne says. “They’re also quite low among adults.”

Clark and other civic education proponents say there’s no question that students in California and throughout the country aren’t getting the tools they need to become informed citizens.

“The Civic Mission of Schools,” a 2003 report by the Carnegie Corp. and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at the University of Maryland, detailed the national decline in civic education.

Until the 1960s, the report concludes, most American students were required to take as many as three courses in democracy, civics and government. Now, most states, including California, require only a single semester on government, and most elementary schools have eliminated history and citizenship lessons to focus on reading and math.

IMMIGRANTS LOSING OUT

Poor and immigrant students, who tend to be concentrated in low-performing schools, are least likely to get any introduction to civics because they attend schools under the most pressure to focus on the basics and raise test scores, the report said. The California Campaign’s survey found that college-bound students were far more likely to get meaningful civic engagement experiences than students not on the college track.

In a state like California, where more than a quarter of residents are foreign born, the implications of these disparities are especially troublesome, civics boosters say.

“These students are actually getting less time for civic education,” says Marshall Croddy, director of programs for the Constitutional Rights Foundation. During a recent visit to Culver City, Croddy says he found it sadly ironic that hundreds of Hispanic students marched on city hall to protest a move by the U.S. Congress to increase criminal penalties for undocumented immigrants. “It’s great they could get energized about the issue,” he says, “but city hall has nothing to do with immigration law. They didn’t understand which branch of government had authority in this area, and some of them missed two, three or four days of school they really couldn’t afford to miss.”

Critics of the present system say students who don’t receive civics instruction are less likely to vote or feel any connection to their government. A look at recent voting patterns gives an indication why civic education proponents are so worried about the youth vote.

ANEMIC YOUTH VOTE

Voters between the ages of 18 and 24 are less likely to register to vote than older

Americans; those who do register are less likely to vote. And with a few modest exceptions, the trend has been consistently downward.

Statistics compiled by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement show that 52 percent of registered voters under age 25 voted in 1972, the first year 18-year-olds were eligible to vote. In 2004, after a massive national campaign aimed at getting out the youth vote, 47 percent of registered voters under age 25 cast ballots. Throughout the intervening decades, voting rates for 18- to 24-year-olds typically hovered around the 30th and 40th percentiles. Statistics for California mirror the national trend.

Although voter participation is lowest among the state's youngest adults, there is considerable voter apathy among older Californians as well. In fact, overall voter participation hit a record low in June 2006, when a paltry 33 percent of the state's voters cast ballots. While citizens of emerging democracies in countries like Iraq risk their lives to exercise their right to vote, substantial percentages of American voters of all ages don't bother.

NOT YOUR FATHER'S CIVICS CLASS

Civic education proponents emphasize that they are not advocating a return to dry, monotonous lectures about the three branches of government or diagrams showing how a bill becomes a law. Boring, rote civics lessons only reinforce the stereotype that government is dull.

Instead, the California Campaign is focusing on six promising practices for making civics fun that are outlined in the 2003 Carnegie report (see page 35). The campaign is also supporting programs in 10 pilot "civic mission" schools to get students engaged and excited.

Civic education backers are working with districts to run campus voter registration drives, mock elections and open-mike debates on hot-button topics like junk food and soda vending machines. They are enlisting students for service learning projects that tackle campus or community problems like litter or underage drinking as a way to teach students how to work the system to effect change.

Getting students engaged in these projects can help disaffected students connect with their schools and community, civic education proponents say, and that sense of engagement can boost student achievement.

Clark says good civic education teaches students how government decisions on all levels impact their lives. "Students can go through their whole school career without ever hearing about what city councils or school boards do," he says. "The issues people confront in later life begin at the local level. No one wants to hear about how a school board is organized. But if you talk about the issues that school boards decide, that's a whole different situation."

Clark, who helped write California's history-social science frameworks, says those frameworks make it clear that civic engagement is the context that gives meaning to lessons in history and social science. "If you ask most history teachers why they're

teaching what they teach, you'll find they don't think of what they're doing in the larger framework," he says. "In teaching American history, for example, the objective is to prepare students to make the connection between the past and current issues."

CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS DEVELOP EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Former CSBA President Juanita Haugen, a member of the Pleasanton Unified school board, has taken a lead role in improving civic education in her district, along with Superintendent John Casey. The board passed a resolution supporting the six promising practices outlined in the Carnegie report and expanded the district strategic plan to include citizenship development. Each district high school has developed its own plan to promote civic education.

Foothill High, for example, established the Active Citizenship and Leadership Academy that involves 120 students who have either been elected to office or are interested in leadership. The academy developed more than 50 civics programs, including the "You're 18 ... so vote" initiative and the "Rosa Parks Commemoration," for which students developed and staffed a historical interactive exhibit on a city bus to honor the civil rights pioneer.

California Secretary of State Bruce McPherson, who was the keynote speaker at the fall 2005 launch of the California Campaign, is an avid civics booster. McPherson is visiting public schools up and down the state to generate student interest in elections. His office has established partnerships with county registrars to register young voters, recruit them as poll workers and educate them about the issues. He brought his message to CSBA's 2005 Annual Education Conference, encouraging school board members and superintendents to establish policies to make it easier for students to work at the polls on Election Day.

Deborah Granger, coordinator for history and social sciences for the Orange County Office of Education, is also interested in using elections to get students and their parents excited about voting. At meetings with the Office of the Secretary of State and at the California Campaign's Sacramento summit last fall, Granger got some new ideas about how to integrate civics education with programs that already exist in her county.

"Amid all the research, one finding really stuck out," she said. "The Carnegie report said students whose parents vote are most likely to vote themselves."

Granger is working with the Constitutional Rights Foundation to design programs to bring parents and students together to learn about American government. The approach could be especially helpful for immigrant families, and for students whose parents have not yet voted in their new country.

"We already host family nights for reading and math," she says. "We could do programs that compare Mexico's system of government with our system or take on other hot topics. We want families to go home and keep the conversation going."

Carol Brydolf (cbrydolf@csba.org) is a staff writer for *California Schools*.

© 2006 California School Boards Association. All rights reserved.