

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

Strengthening Civic Education in California's Schools

The California Campaign's Pilot Schools

By Debbie Genzer and Susan Philips

Introduction

The California Campaign to promote the civic mission of schools differs from other states in that we had the opportunity to work closely with schools to promote the six promising approaches outlined in the Civic Mission of Schools report published by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2003).

Early on in the Campaign, we formed a School Committee of experienced educators in civic education and school change to develop a strategy for working with the schools. We asked: What would it take to implement these recommendations? What could schools realistically accomplish in two years? And how could we share what we learned with other schools?

We then recruited 10 school districts representing the state's geographic diversity and academic achievement levels and asked each district to identify one high school to participate. We designated these schools as CMS Pilot Schools. (Figure 1)

The School Committee then developed a straightforward, but untested process, designed to help the schools strengthen civic education in a systematic way. This involved establishing a Leadership Team at each school, reviewing current civic education programs and curriculum in terms of the six promising approaches, creating a plan to strengthen civic education at the site, and implementing the plan. The Campaign supported the schools by providing consultants, who documented and helped facilitate the process, and a nominal budget for the schools to help defray expenses and support necessary activities. The pilot school consultants were Don Hill, Debbie Genzer, Carol Hatcher, Cricket Kidwell, Smokey Murphy, and Susan Philips.

Pilot schools also became actively involved with other aspects of the campaign, including research, public awareness, and the adoption of policies to strengthen civic education.

In this article we will focus on the work at the school site—what we accomplished and what we learned.

What did we accomplish?

Many of our Leadership Teams reported that one of the most important parts of the Campaign was the opportunity for teachers, administrators, students and community members to come together as colleagues to discuss an important issue in education beyond reading, math and test scores. Sadly, these kinds of discussions rarely happen.

Through the work of the leadership teams, each school successfully completed the process we established. Naturally, there were differences among the schools in how they implemented the process, but each of the leadership teams relied on a few dynamic and committed people who “by hook or by crook” pushed the work forward.

Just as the process varied from school to school, so did the implementation plans created. Each reflected the unique needs and concerns of the given school. Ultimately, the majority of the sites used the initiative as an opportunity to shore up the civic components of existing programs, but others took the opportunity to give life to ideas that had been on the back burner. The initiative gave them the push they needed.

What follows is a summary of the programmatic accomplishments of the 10 pilot schools. You will note that in many instances, the plans incorporated aspects of several of the recommendations, but all selected a primary focus.

Recommendation 1: Provide formal instruction in government, history, law and democracy.

The Eureka Unified School District provided staff development for the majority of its middle and high school social studies teachers on the use of simulations to teach about the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the function and workings of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Foothill Academy in Pleasanton developed a new “Active Citizenship and Learning Academy” linking social studies classes with a leadership class during which students take action on local, state, national and global issues. The state superintendent of schools has recognized the academy as a model.

Recommendation 2: Incorporate discussions of current local, national and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important in their lives.

Foothill High in Palo Cedro used the initiative to promote the discussion of civics and related issues on a school-wide basis. Each month, the school’s leadership team wrote and distributed materials for the entire faculty to use as they guided their students through the discussions. The materials dealt with issues of ethics, the rule of law, rights and responsibilities, and the value of teamwork.

The Social Justice Academy at Marshall High used the initiative to provide staff development to its academy teachers on methods for conducting effective discussions about controversial issues. This was viewed as particularly important on this site because of a recent surge in racial tensions and conflict on the campus. Hoping to find a way for students to discuss these

conflicts and other controversial issues, the academy sought a common structure in guiding these discussions.

Recommendation 3: Give students the opportunity to apply what they learn through community service linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.

In the West Contra Costa Unified School District, the initiative assisted with the development of a new service-learning requirement to be implemented in Government and Economics classes.

In doing so, teachers built civic skills into their approach. Many received staff development for implementing *Active Citizenship Today* (CRF & Close Up Foundation, 2005), a civics-based service-learning model that helps student’s identify and analyze a community or school problem, examine policy relating to the problem, and develop and implement a project to address it. Sample projects included voter registration drives, writing letters to the editor about given issues, and organizing student forums.

Bell Gardens High used the initiative to establish what they are calling a “Senior Community Project.” The projects are a blend of several of the promising practices. As part of their Senior Community Project, students learn about the institutions in their community, discuss controversial issues and policies, and conduct a service project. The Senior Community Project program is housed in Government and Economics.

Recommendation 4: Offer extra curricular activities that involve students in their schools and communities.

Foothill High in Bakersfield used the initiative to add a civic component to its new “Link Crew” program. As part of the Link Crew’s effort to orient and support freshman, they specifically focused on freshmen students becoming involved with school clubs and activities. As a result, more than one-third of the incoming freshmen signed up for an extra-curricular activity.

Recommendation 5: Students participation in school governance.

Amador High School in Pleasanton started new student committees, which focus on critical issues facing the campus. During registration and “walk-through” in the fall, students can sign up to work on the various issues, including diversity. In addition, a new principal’s council has been formed of both elected and non-elected student leaders to meet and talk with the principal about matters in the school.

Recommendation 6: Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

Figure 1

Districts	Pilot High School
Elk Grove	Sheldon
Eureka	Eureka
Kern	Foothill – Bakersfield
Los Angeles	Marshall
Montebello	Bell Gardens
Pleasanton	Amador, Foothill –Pleasanton
Sacramento	John F. Kennedy
San Mateo	Aragon
Shasta	Foothill – Palo Cedro
West Contra Costa	Pinole Valley

John F. Kennedy and Sheldon High Schools offered staff development on the six promising practices prompting several teachers to then use *CityWorks* (CRF, 2004) and *History Alive* (TCI, 2000-06), two curricula that incorporate simulations.

Several schools also conducted simulations outside of the classroom. Mock elections were held for state elections and Aragon High School revamped ASB elections to more closely simulate the process of real elections.

LESSONS LEARNED

Based on the experiences of the 10 Campaign pilot schools, we learned some valuable lessons about the process of trying to strengthen civic programs, practices, and curriculum.

• **Take into account the political realities of your school and district.** When we began working in the 10 pilot schools, we realized rather quickly that they, like tens of thousands across the country, are under intense pressure to meet content standards and increase test scores. In addition, each school had its own priorities and prior improvement initiatives planned for implementation, including service-learning, senior projects and small learning communities/academies. In this climate, it was difficult for pilot schools to “take on” any new initiatives, no matter how important. We were often confronted with the question: how can we ask our teachers to do one more thing?

If we were to make headway, we decided to use this initiative to help schools also meet existing goals or challenges. In fact, all but two of the pilot schools used the CMS initiative to support an existing program or mandate. Fortunately, by tailoring these existing plans, they could also advance at least one of the recommendations. West Contra Costa and Marshall High Schools established civic-based service-learning programs for a new district requirement, Bell Gardens infused civic engagement into a new senior project requirement, and Bakersfield’s Foothill High School connected civic engagement to a new freshman program, Link Crew.

Though imperfect, our approach proved to be a winning strategy. On the one hand we were able to help our schools meet some of their needs. On the other hand, few of our schools were able to fully plan for or implement all six recommendations.

• **Begin where there is interest, enthusiasm and momentum, but keep your eye on the larger goal.** It is crucial to build both long- and short-term goals into your plan. The short-term goals allowed us to get started and they helped build interest and momentum in the initiative. At the same time, in most instances, they became the main focus of the work. The important lesson here is that while you want to build on interest and enthusiasm, you must also make sure that your long-term plan includes strategies to address all six recommendations in some fashion. It is important to remember that only by experiencing a combination of the promising approaches will the range of student civic competencies and capacities be improved. .

• **It’s always about leadership.** To successfully implement this process, a supportive administrator must be identified who is in a position to help move the process forward from the top and a “go to” person within the school must be chosen who will be responsible for the day-to-day work of organizing the site’s leadership team. Individuals in both positions must be passionate and effective advocates of the CMS recommendations, have the respect of teachers and staff, and be committed

for the “long haul.” Reforms take time. Some research suggests that school reform takes up to ten years. As such, it is critical that the people in leadership positions understand how to make change happen in schools.

• **Building your team is an organic and dynamic process.** A key requirement for success is to build a leadership team that represents all parts of the school and community, including teachers, students, administrators, staff, parents, alumnae and community members. We have learned that building a team takes time, patience and persistence. Begin with a small team of committed and energetic people and build from there. We have learned that this process has a formal and informal dimension. While leadership teams made formal presentations at school board, department, and faculty meetings, even more progress resulted by talking with teachers over lunch, inviting interested community members to participate in a discussion around a community issue, or inviting community members and other school staff to engage with students as they make presentations or participate in civic-based lessons or activities. In many cases, teachers and administrators joined leadership teams after participating in this way.

In truth, the recruiting process never stops. It is important to communicate about the process in as many ways as possible to students, faculty and the community. We also learned that it is important to work with existing committees, such as school site councils or alumni organizations. While these groups have their own agendas, you will find common ground as well. For example, in Los Angeles a serving city council member is an alumnus of Marshall High School. He routinely sends speakers from his office to make presentations and to work with students on their civic-based service learning projects, as well as contributes funds.

• **Establish an open, honest and collegial planning process.** In implementing the process, we relied on the simple premise that the people who actually worked at in the pilot schools knew better than anyone else what needed to be done to enhance their civics program. We provided a structure and support to help facilitate and guide the discussion. We began with four basic questions: What are we doing now that supports the six promising practices? What ideas do we have for strengthening these practices? Where do we begin? What is our vision? This allowed our teams to “take stock” and to think together about how to enhance what they were already doing. This established a positive tone for the discussion by not focusing on potential deficits in civics programming, but instead on what was already in place building on that work.

• **Showcase work and accomplishments, often, and in large and small ways.** Establishing good public relations works wonders. It motivates participating students and teachers, and serves to recruit more people into the process. There are many ways to showcase work and accomplishments. Foothill High School in Shasta established a yearlong calendar of monthly themes related to civic involvement. Each month, the leadership team gathered and distributed multidisciplinary lessons focused on the theme, sent it out to the faculty, and posted notices about it around the campus. At Marshall High School in Los Angeles, the leadership team asked the campus newspaper to print the results of a student survey about the causes and effects of teen pregnancy; drug and alcohol abuse, and the increasing drop-out rate conducted as part of a student civics-based project. A third school held an afternoon assembly featuring a debate on a local issue, and another school organized a mock trial. Students from a fourth school succeeded in getting the State Superintendent of Schools to visit its academy, and media covered the event.

Establish from the beginning a plan for developing resources. Adequate resources are essential for successful implementation. Fortunately, in addition to the modest support the Campaign was able to provide, resources do exist at the school and district levels. Explore sources such as school improvement funds, and funding opportunities through local community groups, or city and county offices. One school offered our “go to” person a class period to use for planning. Another school funded a coordinator position out of school funds. We have received funds from the office of a city council member, and are working with service clubs in one community to support the Senior Project Scholarships. State funds designated for after school clubs also can be utilized.

The work of the 10 pilot schools strengthened civic education programming at various sites and provided valuable lessons in the creation of a model for other schools to follow around the state. The Campaign will continue to refine and adopt this model as the work continues to improve civic education throughout California.

RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS TO ENGAGE IN THE PROCESS

The California Campaign’s Website section on “Schools” provides the planning tools the pilot schools and consultants used, as well as additional resources to support a school-team approach to assessing and strengthening civic education. Schools are encouraged to adapt these resources to suit their needs.

In addition, the Campaign is kicking off a statewide program to recognize elementary, middle, and senior high schools that are engaging their students in high-quality civic education programs and activities, and implementing the six CMS promising approaches.

Visit the Website at: **www.cms-ca.org**

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