

Democracy's Next Generation

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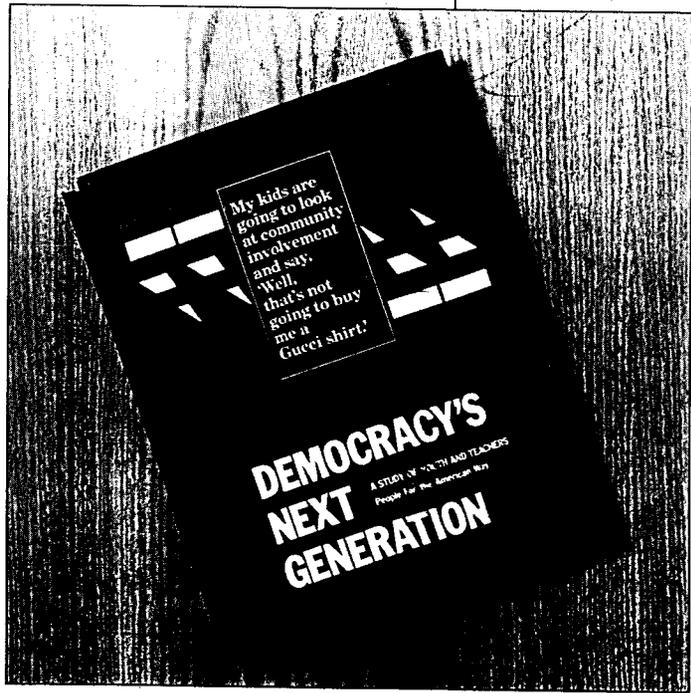
A recent study conducted for People For the American Way recommends three ways schools can help students develop the values and habits of responsible citizenship.

Catherine and Drew are activists. Their commitment to service and involvement causes them to stand out among the young people interviewed for "Democracy's Next Generation," a recent study of young people and social studies teachers. Seeing herself as someone whose future includes making "an important contribution to society," 24-year-old Catherine chose to work for a California food bank when she finished college. Drew, a 10th grader, was very involved in the Special Olympics in his community and spent his Saturdays as a volunteer in the local hospital. Both spoke enthusiastically about their participation. As Drew summed it up, "I'm trying to be a good citizen, caring about people and *doing* something about it, rather than just caring."

But even activists like Catherine and Drew sometimes fall prey to the widespread cynicism and indifference they see among their peers. Catherine sees "a lot of cynicism in young people today. There's been so much scandal and so much sleaze and fraud going on in the government. . . . You get to the point where you think that all politicians are corrupt, so why even be involved in it?" Drew describes his

sense of detachment from politics: "It's almost as if politics has lost its meaning of helping, of doing what people want it to do. I seem so far away from the decisions they're making that . . . it doesn't feel like I'm really involved."

Detachment from Public Life
Most of the more than one thousand young people aged 15 to 24 surveyed for Democracy's Next Generation *aren't* involved.¹ The findings of the study suggest that we, as a nation, need to strengthen our commitment to pre-



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paring young people for informed. civic citizenship. They also outline the dimensions of the problem.

Asked to rate a series of seven possible goals, study respondents ranked "being involved in helping your community be a better place" dead last—well behind career and financial success, a happy family life, and "enjoying yourself and having a good time." Seventy-two percent agreed with the perception that young people seem less involved these days than in the past, and their social studies teachers concurred, seeing their students as less knowledgeable and less interested in public affairs than previous generations. As one social studies teacher lamented, "A very small percentage of them care, and a very small percentage are interested. The others think it is boring, boring, boring."

This disconnection from public life undoubtedly has many roots. But surely one source is the impoverished idea of citizenship held by most of these young people. Asked to describe in their own words what constitutes a good citizen, most equated being a good citizen with being a good person. "Honest, a good friend, trustworthy" was one typical description. Their notion of a good citizen rarely had a social or political dimension, and only 12 percent believed that voting was an important part of citizenship.

Asked to describe what makes America special, respondents focused overwhelmingly on rights and freedoms. They clearly appreciate the privileges they see as uniquely American, but their notions of these are personal, rather than social or legal. Alarming, the touchstone of their concept of rights was a sense of license and of total freedom from limits and obligations. One respondent captured this view succinctly by saying that what made America special was "the freedom to do as we please when we please."

Today's students show little grasp of the responsibilities that accompany the freedoms of citizenship, and they find politics and government remote from their lives and concerns. Sixty percent said they knew just "some" or "very little" about how government

works, and slightly fewer (53 percent) said they trust Washington to do what is right only "some" or "none of the time." Seventy percent agreed that "sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on."

The School's Role

While the study brought troubling news, it also told us where young people learn about citizenship. When asked to identify the strongest influence on their views of citizenship, 70 percent pointed to their parents. Teachers came in a distant second (21 percent), and peers were third (12 percent). Social studies teachers underlined this point, stressing that, without support from home, their efforts to instill strong civic values were doomed to failure.

Schools got mixed reviews; most young people found citizenship education neither better nor worse than their other studies. Asked how schools could improve teaching about citizenship, they called for a more active, hands-on approach. A surprising number (51 percent) favored making community service a requirement for high school graduation.

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These youth signal clearly that they are willing to get involved, but they also say they need help from adults. A majority claimed that pressures to do well in school and get a good job keep them from engaging in community activities. Forty-five percent cited lack of parental encouragement, and 42 percent felt that "no one asks young people to get involved or shows them how."

Since young people themselves cite schools as the second most important influence on their views of citizenship and participation, there are several steps schools can take to strengthen citizenship education. Ideally, school programs should contain the following three mutually reinforcing elements: a solid intellectual background for participation, a taste of active involvement, and voter registration as a rite of passage to full adult citizenship.

A Solid, Hands-On Curriculum

An active approach to teaching about civic participation need not sacrifice rigorous content. A good history and social studies curriculum teaches not only the mechanics of government and the facts and principles of history but also helps instill democratic values and highlights the excitement of citizen involvement. Young people say that they learn best about participation by participating, the earlier the better. As Drew put it, "It's not like you can just switch on our 'vote' modes [at age 18] and [we'll] go out and vote. I think if we were encouraged to be involved earlier on, then we'd definitely have a bigger showing."

Experiences in participation can be incorporated into the social studies curriculum or offered through a community service program, either voluntary or mandatory. In Sandy City, Utah, for example, citizen activism begins at a young age, as part of the elementary curriculum. In 1983, Principal Bruce Barnson encouraged his 5th graders at Ridgecrest Elementary School to undertake a "legislative project," identifying an issue, proposing a legislative remedy, and lobbying to have their proposal enacted. Students noticed that Utah had a state motto, state song,

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and state bird, and even a state fish, but no state bug—and thus their project was born. Gathering statistics about the honey industry and the bee's importance to Utah agriculture, students went to work on the legislature. Along the way, they learned about the rough-and-tumble of politics and endured some tough lessons about confronting opposition and ridicule on their way to success. But their work paid off: their bill passed and was signed into law by the governor.

Since then, Barnson's young activists have tackled more serious issues. One year, noting that Utah lacked a "child safety restraint" law, they campaigned for seat-belt legislation. The project became a full-fledged crusade, as the students conducted their own study of seat-belt use, raised \$20,000 for a billboard campaign, and sent information packets to other schools. Eventually, a bill was passed that required mandatory seat belts for children under age five. Nuclear waste came next, with students lobbying to prevent one of Utah's national parks from becoming a temporary storage site for radioactive material.

The lessons students can learn from such efforts are myriad—the importance of individual participation in public life being only the most obvious. They also learn to do research, construct a compelling argument, communicate through different media, cooperate, organize, and respond constructively to frustration and setbacks. They learn firsthand how government works—not methodically and orderly as textbooks would have it, but in fits and starts, in conflict and compromise, and in a cacophony of interests and voices.

A Taste of Involvement

Good community service programs for students, the second element of school programs that enrich citizenship education, have several key characteristics. They are integrated into the curriculum, not treated as frills or add-ons. They also incorporate time for reflection, discussion, and writing, linking service experiences to explicit instruction. Wherever possible, they encourage students to generate and

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organize their own projects. In addition, programs should be flexible, offering in-school service opportunities as well as those out in the community, so that all students—including those who may have job or family responsibilities after school—can participate.

Last but not least, community service should be meaningful. It should be an opportunity for students to learn about the overall social and political context in which they are serving, with all the attendant frustrations and limitations. It's as important for students to understand the apparent intractability of some social problems as it is for them to see that their individual effort makes a difference.

Service in the community can include work in senior citizen programs, soup kitchens for the homeless, literacy programs, environmental projects, or local counterparts to the Utah legislative project described above. In-school service programs take a variety of forms. For example, San Antonio high school and middle school students, many of whom have their own academic problems, serve as mentors to elementary school students. The happy result is that grades for both the elementary students and the mentors have improved. Such a program can serve as an in-school service project that builds confidence and a sense of efficacy in both groups, as well as producing tangible academic advances.

In-School Voter Registration

Voter registration should be a significant rite of passage to adult status for 18-year-olds, but more often it is a source of confusion. Young people are often intimidated by the registration process and don't understand how it

relates to voting. Schools can help change that.

The in-school registration program in the Dade County, Florida, public schools can serve as a model.² It is elegant in its simplicity and impressive in its results. The district social studies department is responsible for the program, which begins with the deputizing of social studies teachers, conducted by the county elections department at back-to-school orientation. Eligible students are identified and tracked through the school's computer system, which supplies lists of potential registrants by school and by social studies class. Since taking students through the mere mechanics of registration will not necessarily inspire them to vote, social studies teachers also incorporate lessons on decision making and the importance of voting into their instruction.

Once teachers receive the lists of eligible students in their classes, they can conduct registration in class as a special activity or on a continuing basis until June 1st. Registration cards are then checked for completeness, counted, and forwarded to the elections department by the social studies staff. School staffs check the cards against the list of eligible students and make a tally.

In 1987-88, the district registered 98 percent of eligible students, and 20 out of the system's 25 high schools registered 100 percent of eligible students. The approach inevitably attracts some adult registrants as well—school staff, adult education students, community residents. In that same year, the Dade County program also registered 2,257 adults, adding a total of 12,251 registrants in one year. In operation since 1972, the schools' program alone has produced 82,000 new registrants in Dade County.

Several aspects of the program help explain its success. First, it operates at the classroom level, and it depends on the personal involvement of teachers. These two related factors have been found to contribute to the effectiveness of school registration programs. Second, it involves minimal costs and staff time, exploiting computer technology to make identification and

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tracking easy. And, third, it has the support of the administration and school board and has become a source of pride to the community.

Show, Not Tell

As every teacher knows, adolescents have finely honed instincts for discerning when adults "really mean it." They gauge how important adults consider something by whether or not we practice what we preach and by the amount of effort, attention, and enthusiasm we invest. And they respond accordingly. Telling students about the importance of participation is a good idea; getting them to practice it through a hands-on approach to citizenship education, community service, and in-school voter registration is

even better. When such programs are an integral part of the curriculum and command the enthusiastic involvement of teachers, administrators, and parents, students will understand that when it comes to learning their citizenship responsibilities, we really mean it. Over time, democracy's next generation will come to include more young activists like Catherine and Drew and fewer of their indifferent and uninvolved peers. □

¹*Democracy's Next Generation*, (November 1989), (Washington, D.C.: People For the American Way) is a study of young people and social studies teachers that explored attitudes and beliefs about citizenship, participation, and social responsibility. Conducted for People For the American Way by Peter D. Hart Research

Associates, the study consisted of telephone surveys with a representative national sample of 1,006 youth aged 15-24; in-person interviews with a subsample of 100 young people; telephone surveys of 405 social studies teachers; and focus group interviews with social studies teachers in Providence, Rhode Island, and Kansas City, Missouri.

²For more information about the Dade County in-school voter registration program, as well as about Democracy's Next Generation, write to: People For the American Way, 2000 M Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036.

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