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## Effects of participatory learning programs in middle and high school civic education

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Explore

**Effects of participatory learning programs in middle and high school civic education.** *Simon Kim; B. Sue Parks; Marvin Beckerman.*

**Abstract:** Introduction of participatory learning program in school civic education increases student awareness and improves communication skills through active participation in community services. Citizen Education Clearing House (CECH) programs which include the election, the Missouri state government, and the metropolitan issues program, enable students to improve their basic knowledge of election procedures and awareness of youth violence. A study of students from different racial and academic backgrounds who participated in these programs, reveals that participation leads to better civic education.

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From the National Education Goals Report (1988), we learned that high school students have only a superficial and elementary knowledge of civics and, moreover, lack depth of understanding of this important subject. For example, although almost all twelfth graders had a basic knowledge of civics in terms of elections, laws, and constitutional rights, only about half understood specific government structures and functions. Furthermore, only 6 percent of these students had a detailed knowledge and understanding of institutions of government such as the Cabinet and the judiciary. Similar results were reported in the 1990 National Assessment of Educational Progress Report Card in Civics. For example, only 38 percent of eighth graders knew that Congress makes laws. That lack of understanding may inhibit students' motivation to participate in civic activities.

Because students lack an understanding of civics, many schools are searching for ways to improve civic education and include participatory learning in their curricula. In order to prepare students to be active citizens, Bragaw (1991) recommended a balanced curricular approach to citizenship education, both formal and informal, in the schools. That balanced approach would include a public-interest orientation, especially as it relates to discussion of current critical issues and student participation in community service or other activities that involve them in the democratic life of the community.

These ideas coincide with the National Standards on Civics and Government that were developed by the Center for Civic Education (1994). Those standards specify what students should know and be able to do when they leave the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. The standards include the intellectual skills of describing, explaining, evaluating, and taking and defending positions; and participatory skills of influencing policies and decisions, articulating interests and making them known to policymakers, building coalitions, and managing conflicts. The National Council for the Social Studies supported the standards with the statement that "social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic" (NCSS 1994, 139).

Active participation by students in classroom and community projects has long been thought to be an effective way to learn. Active learning methods have been shown to be the most

effective and the most likely to produce active citizens (Richardson 1993). This idea has been supported by Hobson and Zack (1993) who suggested that students need to learn how to participate in the system if they want to make changes. Active participation projects and service learning may supplement the existing curriculum or add new dimensions to it. As a project, students could gather information on a particular issue and/or disseminate it to become better informed or to inform the public. With an action project, students could attempt "to exert influence on public policy" (Newmann 1975, 8).

Well-designed participatory learning activities allow students to think critically, to improve their communication skills, and to implement action projects. As Perry (1992) pointed out, participatory education enables students to analyze situations and issues from different perspectives and "to focus on the issues that are being discussed rather than personalizing the discussion itself" (16). These participatory learning activities have beneficial results in promoting good citizenship. According to Perry, service projects and law-related education help "students learn about their rights as individuals, and their responsibilities to the communities in which they live. Through the process of clarifying their rights and responsibilities, students form their own framework for citizenship" (16).

As a way of encouraging civic education, Citizenship Education Clearing House (CECH) at the University of Missouri-St. Louis develops programs and works with public schools in the St. Louis area to improve civic education by promoting the informed participation of youth in community and governmental affairs. The overall goals of CECH programs are to integrate participatory citizenship education into school curricula and to facilitate the development and implementation of student initiated action projects. Three programs developed by CECH for the 1994-1995 school year were the Election Program, Missouri State Government Program, and Metropolitan Issues Program (table 1).

TABLE 1--CECH Program

Program	Participants	Purposes
Election Program	High School Students	a. To broaden students awareness of the election process b. To allow students to participate in hands-on election projects
Missouri State Government Program	High School Students	a. To broaden students' awareness of current state legislative issues b. To allow for hands-on on lobbying experiences
Metropolitan Issues Program	Middle School Students	a. To inform and involve students about issues affecting their community
Objectives		Activities
a. To help teachers use the 1994 election as a means by which to teach citizenship Forum		a. Candidates
b. To provide students with information on the election process and major local, state, and national campaign issues.		b. Hands-on election projects
c. To inform students about the positions of candidates on major campaign issues		
a. To increase students' understanding of the		a. Issues Forum

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| <p>structures and functions of state government; the roles and responsibilities of state legislators; different methods of communicating students' view to state legislators; current state legislators; current state legislative issues relating to crime in general and youth violence; and specific proposed legislation</p> <p>b. To encourage students to develop and implement civic action projects.</p> <p>a. To teach students how to become involved with community activities in a positive manner</p> <p>b. To educate students about major metropolitan issues facing the St. Louis community.</p> <p>c. To involve students in civic action learning projects related to those issues</p> | <p>b. Trips to state capital</p> <p>c. Student action projects</p> <p>a. Project fairs</p> <p>b. Exhibits</p> <p>c. Civic action learning projects</p> |
|--|--|

The Election Program focused on the 1994 election, campaign issues, and the election process. The program featured the Teachers' Handbook and other resource materials provided by CECH; student-conducted, hands-on election projects; the Candidates Forum with U.S. Senate and Congressional candidates; smaller sessions with state legislative, city, and county candidates; and workshops on a variety of topics. The purpose of the large- and small-group candidate sessions was to learn the issues that are relevant to each office represented and to allow students to ask questions related to their views on election issues. These activities stimulated students to become involved in such election projects as the mock elections, the letter writing campaign to candidates, the preparation of position papers, and service as volunteers in the campaigns of candidates.

The Missouri State Government Program provided opportunities for the students to study the state government and current state legislative issues. The program consisted of a workshop to orient teachers to the program and to suggest action projects, an issues forum to provide insights to students on the lobbying process and present various perspectives on proposed legislation, trips to Jefferson City, and student-action projects. The specifics of the program are listed in table 2.

TABLE 2--Missouri State Government Program

Issues Forum: The purpose was to provide insight to students on the "lobbying" process, to present various perspectives on proposed legislation from several city and state elected officials and public servants, and to prepare students for the Jefferson City trips. The format for the Issues Forum included:

Welcome: Dr. Marvin Beckerman, CECH Director

Keynote Speaker: Judge David Mason

Workshop I: Presentations by state legislators, elected officials, and public servants on various perspectives on proposed legislation issues and a question and answer period that allowed students to directly question the presenters.

Workshop II: Presented a Structured Exercise on Crime and Youth Violence. The exercise allowed for small group discussions on ranking legislative alternatives on crime in general and youth violence. There were also larger group discussions which allowed each small group to present their group's top three rankings on the legislative issues and to discuss and explain their reasoning.

Trips to Jefferson City: The trips to Jefferson City allowed students to observe the House of Representatives and the Senate in session and to present their position papers, bills, and petitions

related to crime in general and/or youth violence to various members of the Legislature.

The scheduled events on the trips were

- a. Tours of the State Capitol, Supreme Court, and Governor's Mansion
- b. Observation of sessions of the Senate and the House of Representatives
- c. Meeting with individual legislators
- d. Seminars with legislators, the Attorney General, the Lt. Governor, and others.

Student Action Projects: Classes were asked to submit project proposals indicating their action plans and what they would be doing in Jefferson City in relation to these plans. The action projects allowed students to actively participate in their learning.

The student action projects included the following, among others:

- a. Studying issues surrounding juvenile crime, gaining information on these issues by meeting with state senators and representatives, and writing letters to legislators expressing students' views on juvenile crime issues
- b. Researching issues related to crime and youth violence, developing position papers recommending various solutions, writing letters to their legislators expressing these positions, and presenting these ideas to legislators directly
- c. Making a public service announcement which was aired on a local television station.
- d. Designing and conducting community surveys asking people's opinions on potential crime legislation in Missouri
- e. Designing and conducting schoolwide surveys on government entitlement
- f. Doing extensive research to analyze various dimensions of the problem of juvenile crime and to generate ideas for workable solutions
- g. Writing petitions supporting student proposals, communicating these views concerning the pending bills to other students and community residents, collecting hundreds of signatures on their petitions, and lobbying officials concerning these proposals.

The Metropolitan Issues Program was initiated in the fall of 1994 and was ongoing throughout the school year, culminating in the Metropolitan Issues Projects Fairs that was held on April 17 and May 19, 1995. The program consisted of an orientation for teachers to discuss the program and the project ideas, student civic-action learning projects, Project Fairs at which students presented their projects and shared their learning experiences with other participating students, and an exhibit of the students' projects presented at the Project Fairs.

For our study, we chose to examine the effects of participatory learning in civic education and specifically, the effects of CECH programs on the integration of participatory civic education into the school curricula and on the development and implementation of student-initiated action projects as a part of civic education.

## Participants in the Study

TABLE 1—CECH Program

Program	Participants	Purposes	Objectives	Activities
Election Program	High School Students	a. To broaden students' awareness of the election process. b. To allow students to participate in hands-on election projects.	a. To help teachers use the 1994 election as a means by which to teach citizenship. b. To provide students with information on the election process and major local, state, and national campaign issues. c. To inform students about the positions of candidates on major campaign issues.	a. Candidates Forum b. Hands-on election projects
Missouri State Government Program	High School Students	a. To broaden students' awareness of current state legislative issues. b. To allow for hands-on lobbying experiences.	a. To increase students' understanding of the structures and functions of state government, the roles and responsibilities of state legislators, different methods of communicating students' views to state legislators; current state legislators; current state legislative issues relating to crime in general and youth violence; and specific proposed legislation. b. To encourage students to develop and implement civic action projects.	a. Issues Forum b. Trips to state capital c. Student action projects
Metropolitan Issues Program	Middle School Students	a. To inform and involve students about issues affecting their community.	a. To teach students how to become involved in community activities in a positive manner. b. To educate students about major metropolitan issues facing the St. Louis community. c. To involve students in civic action learning projects related to those issues.	a. Project fairs b. Exhibits c. Civic action learning projects

The participants in the programs were academically and racially diverse junior/middle and senior high school students from St. Louis city and county public school districts. A total of 1,222 high school students and sixteen teachers participated in the Election Program; 1,322 high school students and twenty-one teachers participated in the Missouri State Government Program; and 656 junior/middle school students and twenty-two

teachers participated in the Metropolitan Issues Program. The participants represented sixteen school districts in the St. Louis area.

## Instruments

We gathered data, using three main sources—observation, questionnaires, and interviews. We devised structured interview protocols, Likert-type scale questionnaires, and open-ended questionnaires, based on the CECH program objectives for teachers, students, and other participants, to determine the effectiveness of the programs and recommendations for improvement. There were multiple data sources to establish data triangulation for cross-data validation.

At the interviews and on the questionnaires, we included questions about the benefits of the CECH programs, the percentage of the teachers who used the materials provided by CECH, whether the programs enhanced students' participation in civic action projects, whether teachers perceived the programs as worthwhile in helping them introduce major civic issues in their classrooms, and whether students perceived the programs as worthwhile in making them aware of the major civic issues facing the St. Louis community. We invited the participants to make suggestions for improving the program.

## Procedure

The Likert-type scale questionnaires were distributed, as part of a packet, to students, teachers, and facilitators and collected at the end of each forum held at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The Teacher and Student Open-ended Questionnaires for the Election Program and the Missouri State Government CECH-UP Program were given to the participating teachers. The participating teachers also gave copies of the same material to two of their students after their completion of civic action projects. In addition, we randomly selected a number of students and teachers for an interview at their school site. The interviews, approximately fifteen minutes long, were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. For the Metropolitan Issues Program, primary investigators made additional observations during the forum.

TABLE 2—Missouri State Government Program

**Issues Forum:** The purpose was to provide insight to students on the "lobbying" process, to present various perspectives on proposed legislation from several city and state elected officials and public servants, and to prepare students for the Jefferson City trips. The format for the Issues Forum included:

**Welcome:** Dr. Marvin Beckerman, CECH Director

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**Workshop I:** Presentations by state legislators, elected officials, and public servants on various perspectives on proposed legislation issues and a question and answer period that allowed students to directly question the presenters.

**Workshop II:** Presented a Structured Exercise on Crime and Youth Violence. The exercise allowed for small group discussions on ranking legislative alternatives on crime in general and youth violence. There were also larger group discussions which allowed each small group to present their group's top three rankings on the legislative issues and to discuss and explain their reasoning.

**Trips to Jefferson City:** The trips to Jefferson City allowed students to observe the House of Representatives and the Senate in session and to present their position papers, bills, and petitions related to crime in general and/or youth violence to various members of the Legislature.

The scheduled events on the trips were:

- Tours of the State Capitol, Supreme Court, and Governor's Mansion
- Observation of sessions of the Senate and the House of Representatives
- Meeting with individual legislators
- Seminars with legislators, the Attorney General, the Lt. Governor, and others.

**Student Action Projects:** Classes were asked to submit project proposals indicating their action plans and what they would be doing in Jefferson City in relation to these plans. The action projects allowed students to actively participate in their learning.

The student action projects included the following, among others:

- Studying issues surrounding juvenile crime, gaining information on these issues by meeting with state senators and representatives, and writing letters to legislators expressing students' views on juvenile crime issues.
- Researching issues related to crime and youth violence, developing position papers recommending various solutions, writing letters to their legislators expressing these positions, and presenting these ideas to legislators directly.
- Making a public service announcement which was aired on a local television station.
- Designing and conducting community surveys asking people's opinions on potential crime legislation in Missouri.
- Designing and conducting schoolwide surveys on government entitlement.
- Doing extensive research to analyze various dimensions of the problem of juvenile crime and to generate ideas for workable solutions.
- Writing petitions supporting student proposals, communicating these views concerning the pending bills to other students and community residents, collecting hundreds of signatures on their petitions, and lobbying officials concerning these proposals.

## Our Analysis of the Responses

We summarized the responses for the Likert-type scale questionnaires, using tabulation, and compared them to the results from the observations, interviews, and open-ended questionnaires as a form of cross-validation. We used cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990) to analyze the responses from the interviews and the open-ended questionnaires and the field notes from the observers. We grouped the responses from different teachers, students, and facilitators to common questions or to common issues and analyzed them to identify themes and patterns in the data.

## Our Findings about the Individual Programs

### The Election Program

The evaluation data from the Election Program indicated that approximately 60 percent of the students who responded agreed or strongly agreed that the Election Program helped them by increasing their awareness of election issues and their understanding of election procedures.

The students benefited from hearing the candidates for office present their positions and from the opportunity to ask questions and react to the issues. As one student commented, "I learned that people our age play a very important role." Another student added that the program helped him realize "how important it is to vote and understand what you are voting for."

All the participating teachers indicated that CECH provided sufficient support and information, which allowed teachers to present background information to their students. Whereas 91 percent of the teachers felt the program helped students understand the election issues, 100 percent of teachers felt the program helped students understand the election process. The participating candidates indicated that they were grateful for the opportunity to meet with high school students "to increase exposure and gain a greater awareness of voter concerns." From the results, we concluded that the CECH Program positively influenced the students' participation in the hands-on election projects. The student projects included mock elections in which the students researched candidates and issues and presented them to other students before the election, writing letters to candidates expressing their views, volunteer campaigning for chosen candidates, writing position papers and editorials voicing their views, and researching and presenting various national, state, and local election issues. From the hands-on election projects, students indicated that the experience helped them better "understand the election and how it operates," as well as learning there are "many controversial issues that the citizens of the U.S. are concerned with." Teachers felt students benefited from participation in the program. As one teacher stated, the students' learning was demonstrated by "their discussion, enhanced knowledge, increased personal involvement, and their sense of efficacy."

Teachers and students had two major concerns about the Forum for the Election Program. First, they indicated their dissatisfaction with the minimal allocation of time for the question-and-answer period. They felt that a longer period of time could have enhanced students' participation and their understanding of the major election issues. Their second concern involved some poorly prepared students who did not distinguish between state and national issues and directed questions regarding state issues to congressional candidates. Some teachers felt that students needed better preparation so that they could ask more appropriate questions of the candidates.

#### The Missouri State Government Program

The 1994-1995 Missouri State Government Program focused on crime in general and crime and youth violence. The findings from the student evaluations indicated that 72 percent of the responding students believed the program increased their awareness of crime and youth violence, and 69 percent of the responding students felt the program increased their understanding of intended legislation. We found similar results from the teacher evaluations, with 84 percent of the teachers indicating that the program increased students' understanding of crime and youth violence and 77 percent indicating that the program increased students' understanding of the aims of legislation. The program stimulated interest in students' civic action projects and helped bring "lessons taught in the classroom to life for the students." One student in summarizing the learning experience, remarked, "If I want to get something done, I'll have to do something, not just talk and complain." The student projects included the lobbying their legislators during the trip to the state capital, writing petitions and collecting signatures on them before presenting them to the legislators, and writing letters to their legislators. In addition to what the students learned in their classrooms, the program provided them with the "opportunity to see and talk to and have their opinions heard." After the trip to Jefferson City, one student commented that "to be there as our future is being shaped is something wonderful." Another student added that the trip "gave me the information I needed to make an informed decision and lobby for the right cause." Another indicated that the trip gave "the chance to get involved up close with the lawmaking body." Teachers felt the program was worthwhile because it "gave [students] insight to their power as nonvoting constituents." Other teachers added that the program "made state government seem more relevant to the students," and specifically gave students an opportunity to "write a real petition about a real issue."

Even though participants agreed that they liked the program, they had some reservations. First, according to one teacher, "it would be good for the students to interact more with other schools" during group discussion so that students would have an opportunity to talk about their civic projects and their reactions to certain issues with students from different areas. Second, all participants thought it would be helpful to have more time for a question-and-answer period in the forum. Many students had questions and comments and did not get a chance to participate. Third, some small-group discussion facilitators were unclear about what they were expected to do and what the goals for the Program were.

#### The Metropolitan Issues Program

From the findings of the Metropolitan Issues Program, we determined that that was an effective way to involve students in community-action service projects. The projects included middle-school students who read to kindergarten students, formed service clubs within their schools, researched environmental concerns and did what they could to help alleviate the problems, and visited and worked in local shelters and food pantries. Eighty-six percent of the responding teachers indicated that the program helped introduce metropolitan issues to their classes; 72 percent felt the program increased students' participation in service projects; and 100 percent found the class presentations to be informative and beneficial to all the participating students.

One class project focused on encouraging kindergarten students to become interested and



involved in reading by having the middle school students read to them. Students who read to the kindergartners as part of their projects said, "I liked it and I think the kindergartners liked it, and it was worthwhile, and [I liked] the look on their faces when we read them stories and gave them cookies and stuff," and [I liked] "reading to the kinder-gartners and being with them, seeing their faces when we were helping them." A student who did a project on juvenile crime stated that "by doing my projects, I learned there are more juvenile crimes than I really thought there were, and from the other projects, I learned about other programs that I didn't know were going on." A student who had been involved in the hunger project noted that "I learned that hunger is a lot more serious now than it used to be, and there's a lot more people hungry than I thought."

Teachers found aspects of the Projects Fair informative and worthwhile for their students. One teacher stated "students enjoyed preparing for the program; they also benefited from using research skills." Another teacher added that "a focused participation is a worthwhile activity. The kids felt good about helping others in a positive way."

In their evaluations of the program, some students indicated that they did not have enough time to convey their ideas during the ten-minute presentation at the Project Fair. Others reported that there was not adequate time or space to view all the exhibits of student projects. Some teachers and students felt uncertain about what to expect at the Project Fair because of the lack of information about the student presentations and exhibits.

## Discussion

The results of individual program evaluations proved the effectiveness of the CECH programs in integrating participatory civic education into school curricula. A high percentage of teachers used the CECH materials and found them, and the various programs, helpful in introducing civic education in their classrooms. The teachers described the CECH teacher handbooks as "excellent" and "useful" in introducing issues, leading classroom discussions, and in preparing students for action projects. Some of the teachers used the materials in constructing curriculum and in supplementing the existing curriculum that called for community involvement programs in which the teachers were unsure of what to do or how to get started.

The CECH Programs were perceived as worthwhile in terms of helping students become aware of current community and government issues. One of the participating teachers stated that the Election Program "stimulated the young people into wanting to become involved in political activities." Another teacher indicated that "this is the best way to get students 'turned on' to government; without involvement and action projects, the study of government can be tedious."

Although the majority of participants agreed that the programs were worthwhile, there was a significant discrepancy between the percentage of teachers and the percentage of students who thought the programs were beneficial. We feel this may indicate that students were not adequately prepared to understand and participate fully in all the activities or that the topics for presentations and group discussions were less significant and relevant to students. Another possible reason for the discrepancy is the age difference between students and teachers, as well as among the students in different grade levels. Because some presentations and discussions were geared more toward older audiences rather than junior and senior high school students, the programs were less beneficial to younger students.

The findings indicated that through well-designed programs that include student action projects, resource materials and personnel, candidate and community involvement, interdistrict forums, and interdistrict project fairs, participatory learning can enhance civic education. Each program provided opportunities to observe, participate, and reflect. "This process of observation, doing, and reflection allows students to define their view of citizenship and the role that they will perform in our shared democratic life" (Morse 1993,

164). Action and reflection are both important components of learning, as students begin to "see the interconnection between what they do and the informing principles" (Dewey 1954, 70). Reflection allows students to think about what they are learning or have learned from their experiences and to analyze the personal and societal impact of those experiences. Reflection can inspire students to persevere with their civic-action projects and to think about great ideas and the people who have or are making a difference in their communities. Students may also discover the meaning of democracy when they discuss the importance of participation and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Reflection was incorporated into the programs in different ways. Some teachers asked students to keep journals or scrapbooks of their experiences or write essays. Others asked their students to think about the civic values they had gained as a result of their experiences; to think of the local, state, national, and international perspectives of the issues they were addressing; and to determine the relationships between the problems they were addressing and other problems. Some students reflected on the effectiveness of their service to determine whether they have been addressing the causes of problems or just the symptoms.

Student projects were varied and included service projects in local food banks, shelters, and schools as well as action projects focused on environmental concerns, community issues. Students learned ways in which they can become involved to make positive changes. Many students described positive learning experiences from their participation in the CECH programs and by their developing and implementing action projects. As one student summarized, he would "remember what I learned much better than I remember what I learn from books and sitting in class." That statement summarizes the benefits of including participatory activities in civic education. The findings from our study may encourage teachers to design more civic curricula that include active student participation.

### Conclusion

According to the Center for Civic Education, assessment in civic education often focuses too much on students' knowledge and understanding of basic facts and concepts than on their ability to evaluate, take, and defend positions on political and civic issues, discuss and communicate their views on these issues, and actively participate in political and civic activities (Center for Civic Education, 1995). The CECH programs encouraged not only the acquisition of basic knowledge and understanding of civic issues but also active participation in community civic activities. With this study, we have demonstrated that well-designed programs that include student participation can enhance civic education in our middle and high schools. The participatory learning programs provided by CECH, however, are not the only way of implementing civic education in the classroom. The fact that the present study has no way of measuring the long-term effects of these programs in student learning and the later civic participation of the students heightens the importance of continuous evaluation of such programs.

Note: To obtain sample copies of the CECH programs, please write to:

Dr. Beckerman, Director Citizenship Education Clearing House 8001 Natural Bridge Road  
St. Louis, MO 63121-4499 [smmbech@umslvma.umsl.edu](mailto:smmbech@umslvma.umsl.edu)

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