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## Engaging Students in Community Issues

Kara A. McCraw

Susan S. Taylor

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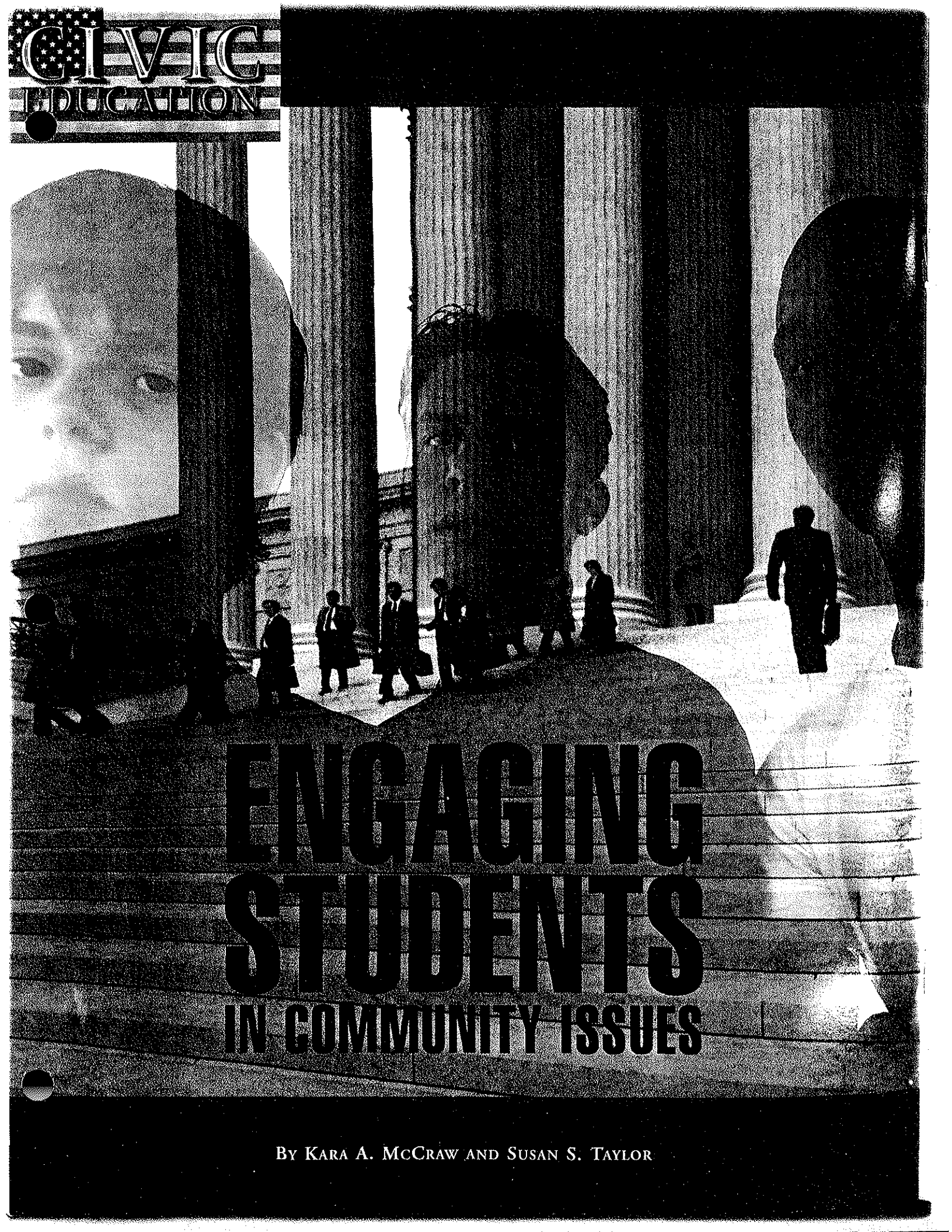
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**CIVIC**  
EDUCATION



**ENGAGING  
STUDENTS  
IN COMMUNITY ISSUES**

BY KARA A. MCCRAW AND SUSAN S. TAYLOR

The importance of a real-world perspective can be invaluable to helping students understand how the bookwork of the academic setting relates to the “real world” beyond the four walls of the classroom.

**H**ow can you integrate community resources in the classroom in an exciting and dynamic way? We set out to answer this question in the summer of 1999 when we attended a conference sponsored by the North Carolina Institute of Government. Our immediate goal was to help the freshmen students we teach in a course called ELPSA (Economic, Legal and Political Systems in Action) understand the importance of active citizenship and prudent fiscal decision making. What better way to teach this than through real life examples? After our conference and the introduction to a number of valuable resources and contact points in the community, we were inspired to design a unit that would spark students' interest while clearly furthering the course of study outlined by the curriculum. Secondly, we wanted to integrate community leaders in a way that allowed them to share their knowledge with students without simply lecturing to them, a sure way to lose teenage interest. Finally, we wanted student learning to go beyond the classroom in a culminating activity that would allow them to share their newly gained knowledge with an outside audience. The ultimate result was a unit entitled “A Local Government Issue: Why Can't I Go To School With You? A Look at School Assignment and Redistricting.”

#### **Sparking Student Interest**

After much consideration, we realized that one topic of continual interest in the growing area in which we teach was school assignment. Because of the rapid growth and the emergence of new schools, students in our area are subject to yearly reassignment as the county struggles to meet the needs of the expanding area. Not only did the topic touch on the economics of rapid growth and population booms in our area, it also related to the legal issue of school integration. One goal of the school system is to maintain diversity in student populations, which involves some busing of students to our school from other areas of the county. Recent court decisions in our state also indicated that this might be a recurring issue in the future as well. Given all of these factors, we felt this topic would excite the students because of the direct effect it has on their lives.

#### **Designing the Unit**

We believed the key to engaging student interest in the topic was active learning, and we hoped to use community leaders as resources to whom students could turn for infor-

mation and use as a sounding board for their ideas. After completing a general unit on state and local government to provide students with a background on the structure and function of government at these levels, we designed a two-week unit in a one-hour/day schedule. The first half of the unit exposed students to the general ideas behind school districting, who was responsible for it, the major goals, and the legalities involved; the second half allowed them to apply that knowledge.

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#### **Making Contacts**

Once the unit was developed, we made contacts for individual lessons. We were fortunate to have the assistance of Susan Flinspach, a faculty member of the North Carolina Institute of Government, who aided us in making initial contacts and provided advice on our topic. We developed an action plan and calendar three months in advance of the unit date and began drafting letters of invitation to our selected community resources. The letters provided both logistical information as well as a general overview of the spirit of the unit. After the letters were sent, we followed up with e-mail invitations and

finally attended a school board meeting to issue a verbal invitation. We felt it prudent to provide contact information beyond the school number and included our home numbers and e-mail addresses. In fact, the majority of respondents contacted us at home. We discovered that a well-planned calendar and sufficient advance notification were key to successfully obtaining community leaders to contribute to the classroom. After volunteers accepted our invitations, we mailed information packets that included maps to the school, information about the days and times they would be needed, parking information, and a copy of the activity with which >>

they would be assisting. We felt that this, in addition to personal phone contacts, would help prepare the volunteers for their time in the classroom.

### Putting It into Action

On four separate occasions, members of the community provided their expertise to help students understand the concepts in the unit.

The first activity involved both a school board member and a county commissioner in an activity called "Whose Job Is It To Fix It?" Students were given scenarios to determine who was responsible for different decisions about local education and brainstormed about who had the authority or was best suited to solve the situation. The commissioner and school board member circulated and discussed the small groups' decisions. Finally, groups shared their answers with the class, and we allowed the experts to provide their opinions. This activity helped students clarify the roles of each of the boards with regard to their involvement with the school system. This was clearly demonstrated in the final research as students recognized the role of funding and the need for approval beyond the school board to create more extensive reassignment plans.

The second activity involved a different type of human resource, a faculty member of the North Carolina Institute of Government who had worked with various types of redistricting plans through her statewide work with school boards. Instead of an organized activity, this volunteer worked with groups as needed while they researched and developed their proposals for the culminating activity. Students used her as a sounding board for their ideas and as an information source on issues that were unclear to them.

In addition to using outside resources, we also solicited the assistance of our high school administrators (all the assistant principals participated) to help evaluate the projects. Each class competed for the chance to present their proposal to the school board members at the simulated school board forum. The groups were selected using a presentation rubric that looked at several factors, including quality of information, full group participation, oral communication skills, and strength of recommendation.

The final event for the unit was the simulated school board forum, where a panel of three school board members listened to the ideas and suggestions of the students. The four groups selected to participate presented their plan to members of the school board for evaluation, as well as to an audience that included fellow students, our principals, parents, and other special guests. The school board members and audience also had time to question the groups about their presentations. The panel provided feedback to the students and expressed admiration for the quality of the research and thoughtfulness of the student proposals.

Students enjoyed the collaborative effort that allowed them to be responsible for their individual assignment while having a chance to discuss and design the overall project with their group. They also welcomed the chance to research a topic in-depth. Students responded well to all of the invited guests and were very attentive during their presentations, but not shy in asking questions and presenting ideas to these individuals.

The format of this unit and the introduction of community resources into all classrooms can be beneficial in engaging students in higher-order thinking, developing communication skills, and honing interpersonal relations. The unit complimented the state standard course of study established for this course, providing a unique approach to integrating community resources and helping students become better citizens.

### TIPS FOR INTEGRATING COMMUNITY RESOURCES

1. **Plan in Advance**—Give yourself adequate time to construct the unit and to make necessary contacts. Realistically, two to three months are needed to prepare the unit.

2. **Create a Calendar**—Outline specific dates for which you will need community resources so that you can give contacts concrete times for when they will be needed.

3. **Find Resources**—Frequently, schools and county offices have personnel who know of available resources who have been used in the past. The Internet can also be a valuable tool; for instance in North Carolina, the Civic Education Consortium has established a online database of community resources in each county.

4. **Establish Contacts**—A personal letter of invitation and explanation a month to two months in advance is a good first step, followed by e-mail or personal phone call.

5. **Prepare Your Resources**—Once resources have committed, adequate preparation will make their presence in the classroom more successful. Information packers with maps, time and date reminders, explanation of their role, and copies of the activity help put guests at ease.

6. **Putting it all Together**—The day of the event, be certain to have an official greeter (possibly a student) to meet the guest, light refreshments if appropriate, and a token of appreciation (certificate, school paraphernalia, etc.). Be sure to follow up with an official thank-you letter.

*Kara A. McCraw (kmccraw@wcpss.net) is a teacher at Leesville Rd. High School in Raleigh, North Carolina. She also coaches the school speech and debate team.*

*Susan S. Taylor (sstaylor@wcpss.net) is a North Carolina Teaching Fellows graduate and has taught Economic, Legal, Political Systems in Action for the past five years. **MSM***