

## FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

*From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful “bridges” between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.*

### INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR BRINGING CIVIC EDUCATION TO LIFE

In February 2003, CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York released the consensus report *The Civic Mission of Schools*. The report outlines a number of recommendations and promising approaches for civic education. Many schools around the country already demonstrate effective methods to engage students in civic learning. The following schools are just a few that offer innovative strategies for bringing civic education to life.

At Cesar Chavez Public Policy High School in Washington, DC you will not find a course listing for *Civics 101*. But, you will find students researching policy issues, debating their positions in class, and designing “public policy capstones” – culminating projects that seek to address an issue. Students have volunteered, protested, lobbied, and written letters on issues ranging from the

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wages and working conditions of migrant laborers to the school ban on cell phones (since overturned). According to recent graduate Cristin Owens, “I feel like I can change things in my community. Before, if there was a problem in my neighborhood I would have moved away. Chavez taught me how to address community problems by rallying my neighbors, writing my representative, or sending a petition to the Mayor and City Council. I can now use what I learned to motivate others.”

The classroom plays an important role in providing students with information to contextualize issues, but students are also encouraged to learn directly from members of the community. Each junior does a 3-week fellowship at a policy-related organization or government agency. Students build up their policy portfolios and experience just in time to research and write a senior thesis on an issue of their choice. Penone Fowler, a rising senior, just completed a fellowship at the Alliance for Justice, where he learned first-

hand how different policies and programs can work to deter gun violence.

The work of high school students at Cesar Chavez may seem advanced, but the experience of students at Nursery Road Elementary School in Columbia, SC shows that you’re never too young to start *teaching* democracy. It all started when staff at Nursery Road began thinking of ways to change community culture and make voting a rite of passage worthy of celebration. They decided to throw a voter registration party for high school students, and put the skills of their own students to work. Fourth graders researched the process of voter registration, and sent letters to Irmo High School students explaining the details. Second graders designed raffle tickets, and teachers secured donations from local businesses. Kindergartners made festive bags of red, white, and blue M&M’s. When the day came—complete with balloons, candy, and almost 500 students—the Nursery Road students were ready. Third graders signed in their high school “guests” and guided them through the raffle process. Fifth graders registered new voters. And, second graders stamped and mailed the registrations. All of their party planning and teamwork paid off; at the end of the day, 300 new voters were registered! According to Sarah Sheely, Media Specialist at Nursery Road, the party was a great experience for everyone involved: “The teachers who were involved can’t wait to do it again next year. We already have a date set with the high school!”

The school’s enthusiasm for voting shows no sign of waning. Plans are in the works to bring newly-registered high school students back to Nursery Road Elementary to show off their voter registration cards and to register 3rd graders for school elections. Teachers are also planning ways to make the school a more exciting precinct for elections. They hope to offer refreshments, decorations, and even live music to encourage voter turnout.

Hudson High in Hudson, MA is another school that takes its civic mission to heart. Hudson builds its curriculum on the value of democracy. In fact, the idea of democratic town hall meetings has driven the architectural design of a new school building. Once construction is complete, students will meet in thematic “clusters” of 100-150 students where they will explore a shared interest in-depth. The new structure will encourage greater interaction between students and teachers, and will allow for a good deal of student input. Cluster members will discuss and debate school

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*Cesar Chavez students campaigning in the neighborhood.*

issues, and brainstorm solutions. Each cluster will have a delegate to the Community Council where students will make recommendations for the school. Sheldon Berman, Superintendent of Schools, explains the philosophy behind the cluster model. “What we are doing is taking the bold step of creating small communities within the high school that involve students in the very governance of their school. And the students are very excited!” Each of these schools has been recognized as a First Amendment School in a program supported by the Association for Supervision



*Students and faculty at Hudson High School discussing how the new cluster governance model will work.*

and Curriculum Development and the First Amendment Center. The initiative recognizes schools that provide students and their entire school communities with opportunities to practice democracy and uphold inalienable rights. Sam Chaltain, Coordinator of the First Amendment Schools initiative sees public schools as potential “laboratories for democracy.” He explains, “Like everything else, democracy and freedom take practice. Where better to pass on those skills and that message than in our nation’s public schools?” ★

## 6 PROMISING APPROACHES TO CIVIC EDUCATION

*The Civic Mission of Schools outlines approaches deemed most effective for teaching civic education.*

1. Provide instruction in government, history, law and democracy by doing more than teaching rote facts about procedures.
2. Incorporate discussions of relevant current issues and events in the classroom, including complex and controversial topics.
3. Implement programs that link community service to formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Offer extra-curricular activities that involve young people in their schools or communities.
5. Encourage student participation in school governance.
6. Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures, such as voting, trials, legislative deliberations and diplomacy.

For more information on the schools above please view:

The Civic Mission of Schools webpage:  
[www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org)

First Amendment Schools  
[www.firstamendmentschools.org/](http://www.firstamendmentschools.org/)

Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy  
[www.cesarchavezhs.org/](http://www.cesarchavezhs.org/)

Nursery Road Elementary School  
[www.lex5.k12.sc.us/nres/default.htm](http://www.lex5.k12.sc.us/nres/default.htm)

Hudson High School  
[www.hudson.k12.ma.us/](http://www.hudson.k12.ma.us/)

If you know of other schools that have put the “6 Promising Approaches to Civic Education” to work in schools, please contact us and let us know.