

EVIDENCE OF HOW SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES CAN WORK TOGETHER TO PROMOTE CIVIC EMPOWERMENT

A

dding to a growing list of empirical evidence, new research on *Kids Voting USA*—an interactive civics curriculum taught during election campaigns in 39 states—indicates that the program has positive effects on the civic and political growth of both students and their parents. “CIRCLE Working Paper 07: The Civic Bonding of School and Family” provides a comprehensive explanation of just how this program brings together two powerful institutions—schools and families—to address generational declines in political engagement. A copy of the paper can be downloaded from CIRCLE’s Web site (www.civicyouth.org).

According to the paper author, Dr. Michael McDevitt of the University of Colorado, “We felt it was important to focus our research on the under-examined but powerful linkage between school and family. The goal of the study was to develop a better understanding of how *Kids Voting USA* creates a civic bonding of school and family, in which students influence parents to pay more attention to politics, and parents encourage students to participate more actively in civic activities at school.” The paper includes findings from the first wave of a panel study in which over 500 high school students and their parents, representing over 150 schools, were surveyed in Maricopa County, AZ; El Paso County, CO; and Broward/Palm Beach Counties, FL. Focus group interviews were also held with students to supplement the survey data.

WHAT WORKS: ACTIVITIES THAT PROMOTE CIVIC GROWTH

Students in *Kids Voting* learn about civics by participating in a variety of activities such as taking sides in classroom debates, analyzing political cartoons, and even

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working at polling sites. One of the main purposes of this research was to determine which of these activities had the greatest influence on the civic growth of students. Two curriculum activities in particular—frequent classroom discussion about election issues and asking others to vote—stood out as the most influential with respect to students’ media use, cognition, discussion skills, political opinions, and civic behaviors and intentions. For example, discussing election issues gave students the opportunity

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Continued from page 1 to receive real-time feedback in response to their opinions on a variety of issues.

CLOSING GAPS ALONG ETHNIC LINES: THE CONTENT MAY MATTER

In addition to pinpointing the effects of different curriculum components, the study is the first to document systematic evidence that the *Kids Voting* program promotes equality of civic development among students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Traditionally, there have been substantial gaps between

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non-white and white students in many indicators of civic and political involvement, with white students scoring at higher levels. However, in El Paso County, CO Latino students (along with adolescents from other minority groups) scored the same as non-Latino white students on numerous indicators of civic involvement, including newspaper use, knowledge, strength of partisan opinions, and frequency of discussion. Here, the *Kids Voting* students followed the narrow defeat of Amendment 31—an initiative which would have curtailed bilingual education in Colorado. The gap-closing may have occurred as a result of Latino students applying what they learned through the curriculum to an issue that had a very direct and personal effect on their lives.

CREATING NEW FAMILY HABITS

While *Kids Voting* directly affected student behavior, at the same time it helped to alter family behavior. For example, according to McDevitt, “Families with students participating in the program increased the frequency with which family members encouraged each other to use news media; strengthened the perception of family members that they can carry on political conversations; and promoted an environment in which parents and students held strong opinions on political issues.” The paper shows that the interactive

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs.

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curriculum causes a “boomerang influence,” in which students initiate conversations with their parents about political issues, which in turn stimulates parent conversations about such issues and leads to more parental interest in their children’s civic education.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVICS INSTRUCTION

In light of these findings, the authors offer the following recommendations for civic education.

1. School administrators and parents should encourage teachers to allow for political discussion and debate, even if the topics are contentious. Frequently in the focus groups, students stressed the need for enthusiastic teachers who engage students in the learning process with interactive approaches.
2. Schools should engage students and families through issues that *directly and personally affect them*. While many of these students were already interested in politics, they suggested that their peers would become more involved when issues that were highly relevant to them were emphasized at school. Some of these topics include higher education funding, drinking age, voting age, and school policies. In addition, many students explained that their use of media was partially determined by whether news sources presented information of direct interest to teens.
3. Teachers should implement activities such as student campaigns that mobilize adults to vote. Along with classroom discussion, service-learning activities and the act of encouraging others to vote are the types of activities that empower students and heighten their sense of political efficacy. ★

TABLE 1: Most Effective Kids Voting Curriculum Components

CURRICULUM COMPONENT	POSITIVE EFFECT ON STUDENT*				
	MEDIA USE	COGNITION	DISCUSSION	OPINIONS	CIVIC BEHAVIOR AND INTENTIONS
DISCUSSING ELECTIONS IN CLASS	■	■	■		
TEACHER ENCOURAGEMENT TO EXPRESS OPINIONS					■
TAKING SIDES IN DEBATES					
ANALYZING POLITICAL CARTOONS		■			■
ANALYZING POLITICAL ADS					
SERVICE-LEARNING					■
WORKING AT POLLING SITES					
ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO VOTE	■	■	■	■	
FAMILY HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS					
VOTING WITH PARENT					

*All of the reported positive student effects presented are statistically significant at varying levels.

Please see the appendix of CIRCLE Working Paper 07 for more information on the correlations.