

KIDS VOTING EVALUATION SHOWS LASTING IMPACT OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Kids Voting USA (KVUSA) is a curriculum that helps several million students to study and discuss politics and issues and then participate in mock elections. An ongoing evaluation by Michael McDevitt of the University of Colorado and Spiro Kioussis of the University of Florida has provided important evidence about civic learning, thanks to their rigorous, quasi-experimental research design. The evaluators compared students exposed to Kids Voting with similar students not in the program. The latest product of their research is a CIRCLE Working Paper (#49) "Experiments in Political Socialization: Kids Voting USA as a Model for Civic Education Reform."

FILLING IN THE GAPS IN RESEARCH ON CIVIC LEARNING

The new paper addresses three questions of broad importance to the field of civic education. First, can young people gain knowledge, skills, confidence, and interest in politics through classroom exercises? We know that students who take classes on civics and government are more knowledgeable and interested in politics, but that could be because interested students elect to take these classes. The rigorous evaluation of Kids Voting demonstrates substantial positive effects from this particular program, showing that it is possible to make a difference through interactive lessons and discussions in the classroom.

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Second, if young people's civic knowledge and attitudes improve because of a class, do these gains soon wear off? Or does learning about politics help students to begin following the news and discussing current events, so that their knowledge actually improves after the course ends? The new Working Paper is based on two years of follow-up data. While some of the positive effects of Kids Voting waned over those years, the program did spark an ongoing learning process. Two years later, students who had experienced the program were still more likely than their counterparts to discuss issues outside of class and to follow the news.

Third, does civic education widen or narrow gaps in knowledge, skills, and likelihood of participating? It is possible that a civic education program would have the greatest benefit for students who were already civically engaged (and who tend to come from more advantaged homes). In that case, it would expand gaps in civic participation. But the evaluation of Kids Voting shows that the program reduced such disparities.

PROMISING CURRICULUM ACTIVITIES

The KVUSA curriculum appears to teach civic habits that are "self-perpetuating" with long-lasting effects. In particular, three KVUSA curriculum components—frequent discussion of the election in class, teacher encouragement of opinion expression, and participation in get-out-the-vote drives—showed lasting effects on the civic development of the high school students studied. Table 1 shows the effects of these curriculum activities on students three years after the program ended.

According to the authors, "These activities allow adolescents to practice communication skills and to build social confidence, dispositions that are easily transferred to other domains of civic engagement. The students in our study remained receptive to

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors provide the following eight recommendations for civic educators. Please see their CIRCLE Working Paper (#45) for a complete discussion of the recommendations.

- ★ Incorporate parents.
- ★ Deploy media in civic learning.
- ★ Teach to take advantage of big political events.
- ★ Translate classroom instruction into community activism.
- ★ Promote discussion on topics of greatest relevance to youth.
- ★ Do not shy away from topical debates.
- ★ Do not give up on low-income students.
- ★ Promote citizenship beyond voting.

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

independent learning opportunities that came along after the Kids Voting program ended, such as new political controversies or the eruption of political debate at home or with friends.”

The researchers found that even though the Kids Voting curriculum was taught during a short time period—the final weeks of the 2002 elections—the program still had powerful and lasting effects on students’ civic development. Part of the success of the program lies in its ability to bring together schools, families, the media, elections, and peer groups to create “a kind of

political immersion for students.” According to Dr. McDevitt, “The single most important lesson from Kids Voting is the benefit of integrating different influencers such as schools and families.”

The complete findings as well as detailed recommendations for civic education are contained in CIRCLE Working Paper (#49) “Experiments in Political Socialization: Kids Voting USA as a Model for Civic Education Reform” which can be downloaded at: http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm



TABLE 1: CORRELATIONS OF CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND VOTER ENCOURAGEMENT IN 2002 WITH STUDENT CIVIC MEASURES IN 2004

<i>Civic Involvement in 2004</i>	Frequent discussion of election	Free expression of opinion	Student encourages adults to vote
Media Use			
Attention to political news	✓		
Attention to Internet news	✓		
Encourage parent attention	✓		✓
Cognition			
Political knowledge			
Issue salience			
Information integration	✓	✓	✓
Discussion			
With parents	✓	✓	✓
With friends		✓	✓
Size of discussion network		✓	✓
Deliberative habits			
Listen to opponents			
Willingness to disagree			
Testing opinions for response			✓
Testing opinions to persuade			
Civic Identity			
Partisanship	✓		✓
Ideology			
Conventional participation	✓	✓	✓
Unconventional activism			
Participation			
Volunteering	✓	✓	✓
Campus Activism		✓	✓
Voted in 2004			

Table 1 Notes: ✓ = significant at the .05 level or higher. The partial correlations control for the following variables: ethnicity, year in school when exposed to Kids Voting in 2002, grades earned in 2002, gender, religious group membership, parent SES, and voting history of parent.