

EDUCATING CHILDREN ABOUT CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Apathy or Activism?**Objective:**

Students will consider how youth develop civic virtue and make suggestions for better educational practices.

Estimated time: 1 - 2 hours

- Ask students to read the “Apathy or Activism?” handout and define the terms in bold print on the page. Discuss students’ views on these ideas and encourage them to relate these ideas to their personal experiences.
- Have students read the “Examples of Activism” handout. Discuss the question printed there. If young people find something to care about and get involved with in their community, can it have an effect on their feelings of efficacy and enfranchisement?
- For homework or in small groups, ask students to consider the following question: What problems exist in your community? For example, are the streets and neighborhoods safe at night? Is there a lot of domestic violence? Is drug and alcohol abuse a problem? Do the parks need to be cleaned of litter? Do parents get out to vote and participate in local elections? Are streams being polluted? Do students demonstrate good sportsmanship at athletic events? Are there enough stop signs at busy intersections? Have you seen evidence of hate crimes in the community? Is bullying going on at the elementary school? There are hundreds of issues that can be studied and addressed to make a community a better and safer place to live.
- Have the class think of a community problem or issue that needs to be addressed and brainstorm what could be done about it. As a class decide on several ways that youth can get involved in current local issues and how such involvement might change their attitudes about participating in the political process.



Apathy or Activism?

Is the temperature of America's youth running hot or cold in current political waters? Studies show that young citizens have a wide variety of attitudes in regard to politics. According to the National Association of Secretary's of State the youth of our nation feel fairly **disenfranchised** from the political process. Many of them don't see how government policies affect their lives and they have little or no interest in the political process. Some students report that their high school government classes are boring, yet there are those who take an interest in politics and voice their opinion that the act of voting is an important civic duty.

Social scientists have found that young people learn their civic habits and attitudes most often from their parents, but as the number of voters decrease for all ages, so does the chance that parents will teach their children the value of civic duties. Some youth learn through volunteer experiences that participation in their community is important. Studies done by the League of Women Voters show that many people enjoy working with others in their community to solve problems even though they have little interest in government involvement. Since community and government are so closely linked perhaps it is possible for people to find political **efficacy** through community service.

References:

League of Women Voters: "Working Together: Community Involvement in America" http://www.lwv.org/elibrary/pub/cp_survey/cp_2.html

National Association of Secretaries of State. "New Millennium Project". <http://www.nass.org/nass99/sect4.html>

Examples of Activism

High school students in Jeanine Redlinger’s social studies class completed the projects described below. The comments were made in assessments following the completion of their projects. If young people find something to care about and get involved with in their community, can it have an effect on their feelings of efficacy and enfranchisement? You decide.

Make Way for Help

Three students who share a neighborhood became concerned when they realized how difficult it was to maneuver a full size pick-up between numerous cars parked on both sides of their street. What if a fire-truck or other emergency vehicle needed to pass down the street to save a life? How would they be able to get through?

The young women went to work measuring street clearance between cars, measuring emergency vehicles and interviewing firefighters and residents of the neighborhood. What they found was that an emergency vehicle would have to backtrack and drive several more blocks in order to reach their destination if called to this street for action.

Armed with pictures, interviews and measurements the students approached the city streets engineer with the suggestion that parking on their street be changed to allow for one-side only parking. Their project was a success and because of them the people in their neighborhood can count on reliable emergency services in the future.

“If you put forth the effort and actually act, then you can affect the community.”

Chilling Out

During the fall and spring of each year the old brick high school became unbearably hot, especially on the upper floors where there is no air-conditioning. One student became aware that in the bell tower at the top of the school there was an exhaust fan that once cooled the whole building. It was currently sitting motionless due to a lack of working parts. His investigation found that as new technologies began to replace the old sometimes they were not as efficient and in this case a simple old-fashioned ball-bearing, if the right one could be found, might help to solve the problem of overheated learners.

The student interviewed building maintenance workers and toured the old bell tower to see for himself what was needed. He wrote letters to the school superintendent and school board members requesting that they put some extra effort into locating the part needed to restore power to the fan. By the next warm season the fan was back in action, and so were students who found cooler classrooms in which to study.

“I feel more aware of my influence in the community and my responsibilities to it.”



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Elementary Student Interviews



Objective:

Students will interview an upper elementary age student from their families or neighborhood about their ideas on politics and voting.

Estimated class time: 2 - 3 hours

- Have each student think about a student between the ages of 10 and 12 with whom they could complete a 30-minute interview. This could be a child in their family, neighborhood, church, or youth group.
- As a class, develop a common set of questions for the interview. Following are some possibilities:
 - What is your name, grade, and age?
 - What do you think “politics” is about?
 - What is voting? Do you ever use voting at school or home? Have you participated in Kids Voting USA?
 - Why do you think adults in our democracy vote?
 - Do you know any adults who vote?
 - Do you think you will vote in elections when you grow up? Why or why not?
 - What other ways do people help others or make a difference in their community?
 - How have you made a difference in your community? Do you have ideas for additional ways students your age can get involved?
- Have each student record the results of the interview according to each question and use only one side of the paper they are writing on to record their results.
- In class, ask each student to cut their interviews in strips with one question and response on each strip.
- Create small groups of high school students who will each read, analyze, and present the findings on one of the questions to the rest of the class.
- Have students write and/or discuss their answers to the following questions. What do the results of our interviews tell us about youth *knowledge* of politics and voting? What do the results tell us about youth *interest* in voting?

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Elementary Teacher Speakers



Objective:

Students will listen to and ask questions of elementary school teachers in regard to their ideas about assisting elementary age students with civic participation.

Estimated class time: 1 hour

- Invite 2 or 3 elementary teachers from a local elementary school to your class or club to speak with the high school students about possible ideas for collaboration between the high school students and elementary age students around civic participation.
- Ask the teachers to comment on the following in their presentations:
 - types of service activities youth enjoy
 - types of service-learning activities in the elementary curriculum
 - elementary youth interest in politics and voting
 - topics in the elementary social studies curriculum that deal with politics generally or voting in particular

(If any of these topics are not addressed during the presentations, the high school students could ask about them at the end.)



If the high school students have completed Elementary Student Interviews (preparation activity #1 on p. 56) they could discuss their findings with the teachers after the teachers give their presentations.

- Follow up with the elementary teachers and/or the principal of the school to explore the possibilities for collaboration between high school students and elementary students. (See the remaining service-learning activities in this section of the curriculum for ideas about possible projects.)



This lesson and those that follow could be conducted at the middle school level as well.



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Direct

Teaching an Elementary Lesson

Objective:

Students will teach a lesson on some aspect of civic participation to an elementary class.

Estimated class time: 2 hours

- Have interested students work in pairs with an elementary teacher who would like a 30 to 45 minute civic participation lesson in his/her class. Each high school student pair should be given or collect the following information:
 - 1) the name of the elementary teacher
 - 2) the grade of the class
 - 3) the number of students in the class
 - 4) the location of the school
 - 5) the discipline/management system used in the class
- Have students develop a brainstormed list of possibilities for the elementary teacher to choose from. These should be sent to the teacher at least one month ahead of the scheduled day for the lesson. Possibilities include:
 - teaching a Kids Voting USA lesson from the elementary Kids Voting USA *Civics Alive!* curriculum
 - teaching a lesson of the teacher's choosing from the social studies curriculum
 - high school students designing and teaching a lesson on a suitable topic: city government, voting, elections, the U.S. Presidency, and so forth.



If high school students develop the lesson, they should send it to the teacher at least two weeks ahead of the scheduled day to teach so that the teacher has time to review it and suggest changes. Also, high school students should make sure that they bring the needed supplies for the lesson or that the supplies are available at the elementary school.



- After the high school students teach their lessons, have them write short reflections about how the lessons went. Did you accomplish your goals? How did the elementary students respond to your lesson? What did you learn from this experience about elementary youth's knowledge and interest in the topic about which you taught?
- Send the participating elementary school teachers a short evaluation form to fill out and return. Questions on the form might include the following:
 - Were the high school students responsible and well prepared to teach?
 - How did the lesson go? How did your students respond?
 - Do you have any suggestions for improving this collaboration?
 - Would you like to participate in this collaboration again?



The elementary lessons or youth group discussions in the next activity could be conducted on a designated "day of service" such as Martin Luther King Day (in January) or National Youth Service Day (in April).

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Talking with Youth Groups

Objective:

Students will facilitate a discussion on civic participation with a local youth group.

Estimated class time: 2 hours

- Have participating students look through the yellow pages and talk to family members to come up with a list of local youth groups who might be interested in having high school students facilitate a discussion about civic participation. Possibilities include: 4-H, Campfire, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, religious education classes, and so forth.
- Contact the leaders of these groups to determine who would be willing to have one or two high school students come to one of their meetings to facilitate a twenty to thirty minute discussion. Be sure to get the location, time, and date of the meeting for each participating group.
- High school students should brainstorm a list of ideas and questions for the discussion. Possibilities include the following:
 - What opportunities do you know of for youth your age to get involved in the community?
 - Is helping others part of your activities in this group?
 - What interests or concerns do you have about your community? What projects would you like to be able to do to help your community?
 - Do you think youth should help others in their community? Why or why not? Can youth help solve community problems?
 - Do you think adults should be involved in their community? Why or why not?
 - What other kinds of things can adults do? (Make sure to mention voting if the youth don't.)
 - What do you think might happen in our democracy if no one voted or participated in the community to help others?



- After participating students have completed the discussions with the youth groups, spend some time in class talking about this experience. Were children interested in the discussion? What types of activities were they most excited about? Was this a worthwhile experience for you? For the youth? Do you think you made a difference? If so, how? If not, why not?



Another option for this activity would be to bring several youth groups together at one time and place, mix up the members of these groups into small discussion circles of 3-6 students, and have the high school students facilitate the discussion circles.



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Kids Voting Club



Direct

Objective:

Students will organize an after-school “Kids Voting” club for upper elementary or middle school students interested in learning about voting, politics, and ways they can get involved in their community.

Estimated class time: varies depending on choice and duration of activities

- Contact a nearby elementary school (or middle school) to see if the principal and teachers will support the idea of an after school club for students focused on politics, voting, and civic participation. It is likely that the club will need a teacher sponsor at the school even though high school students will do most of the work.

- Have the high school students develop a proposal for the club that includes all of the following information:

- 1) purpose of the Kids Voting club
- 2) day of the week for meetings
- 3) time and frequency (Weekly? Monthly?) of the meetings
- 4) open to which grades
- 5) open to how many students
- 6) where the club will meet
- 7) supervision provided (suggested: at least one high school student to each 3-4 youth)
- 8) possible projects and activities



- Have high school students brainstorm possible projects and activities for the club. They could include fun ways to learn about politics and voting as well as community activities. Community activities could include a variety of service-learning experiences (such as cleaning a park, visiting a nursing home, or walking dogs at the animal shelter) as well as service activities focused more directly on voter registration and voting. (See the activities in the earlier sections of this curriculum for possible ideas.)
- Have high school students make posters to put up in the elementary or middle school to encourage youth to come to an informational meeting about the club. Have refreshments at this meeting and ask those who attend to contribute ideas about possible projects and activities of interest to them.



Make sure to determine ahead of time how long the Kids Voting club meetings will last. Six to eight weeks? One semester? The whole school year? High school students need to plan accordingly so they can follow through on their commitments to the youth. This activity may work best if facilitated by a high school service club.

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Kids' Guide to the Community

Objective:

Students publish a community guide for ways elementary and middle school age youth can volunteer in their community.

Estimated class time: 5 hours

- Have students research existing opportunities for 8-14 year olds to volunteer their time in the local community. Following are some possible methods for this inquiry:
 - look through the yellow pages for community agencies and organizations and then contact the directors to ask about their interest in young volunteers
 - search the Internet
 - talk to parents of elementary age youth and students themselves
 - contact the local public library's reference librarian
 - talk to the school district's service-learning coordinator
 - contact the local United Way or Volunteer Action Center



If guide for young volunteers already exists in your community, perhaps high school students can take on updating it and/or developing a distribution plan.

- As a class, develop a common format for typing up the information about the various volunteer opportunities. Following is a suggested guide:
 - a) name of agency or organization
 - b) contact name of director or volunteer coordinator
 - c) phone number
 - d) address
 - e) e-mail address and/or web site, if available
 - f) types of activities elementary students could be involved with at the agency
 - g) days/times for volunteering
 - h) any specific requirements (age, skills, etc.)
 - i) procedure to follow if youth is interested in volunteering



If different students will be involved with typing the guide, choose a common format in terms of font, size, spacing, etc. for greater ease of production.

- Decide as a class if the guide will include illustrations, graphics or photos. Several students could work on the visual aspects of the guide.



- Either print the guide at the school or contact local printing businesses to see if one will donate their services in exchange for the publicity they will get in the guide as the sponsor.
- As a class, brainstorm possibilities for distributing the guide to youth in the community. Consider the following options:
 - giving them to elementary and middle school teachers
 - having copies at the local public library
 - distributing to pediatricians, dentists and orthodontists
 - sending copies to local youth groups and organizations
 - advertising it in an article in the local paper with contact information for those who wish to obtain a copy
- Include a section at the end of the guide asking for feedback from those who read it and/or use it. Also, if possible, keep the guide updated by asking those agencies included to send current information on a yearly or bi-yearly basis. At the end of the school year, discuss the feedback that was received and students impressions about the usefulness of this resource.



- Further evaluation and reflection of this project could involve contacting the agencies listed in the guide and finding out how many new youth volunteers they have.

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Youth Summit

Objective:

Students plan and conduct a Youth Summit for local 6th graders.

Estimated class time: 8 - 10 hours



Planning for a youth summit in the spring should begin in the fall. Contact local 6th grade teachers early on to insure their interest and gather their ideas to make the event a success. Encourage the high school students to have ongoing reflection and trouble shooting sessions as they work over the year to complete this activity. This activity can be conducted with an entire school district or just one school.

- Have students form the following committees to plan and carry out the youth summit preparations and event:
 - essay contest – develops the essay guidelines, develops and sends out flyers about the essay contest, organizes reading and scoring of the essays
 - teacher liaison – communicates with participating teachers about the youth summit, obtains permission from participating students
 - city council liaison – communicates with city council members about the youth summit
 - food – plans snack and/or lunch on the day of the youth summit
 - summit activities – plans others activities for the 6th graders on the summit day
 - media – contacts local newspapers and TV stations about the summit
 - evaluation – design, collect and analyze feedback sheets, write a report for the school newspaper

- Have students organize an essay contest for local 6th graders. Sixth graders will be invited to write essays on “How Kids Can Make a Difference.” The students should choose a problem of concern to them and write a 300 to 500-word essay that:
 - a) briefly describes the problem and how it exists in the local community
 - b) gives ideas for what the community would look like if this problem were solved
 - c) outlines a plan of action, something kids their age can do to help alleviate this problem

- After the essays have been submitted, the essay committee can organize the effort to read and score the essays. Criteria might include: originality, grammar/writing, emotional appeal, feasibility of the action plan for children, and so forth. Select as many “winners” as possible to attend the day of the summit (or organize the activity at just one school so that all submitted essays are “winners” and can attend).



The number of winners selected depends on the size of the town hall, how many high school student “buddies” there are available for the day of the summit, and in general, how big of an event you want the summit to be.

- The teacher liaison committee works with each teacher to communicate which students from the class have been chosen as essay winners (and therefore, summit attendees). The committee also makes sure that the teacher sends home information about the summit with these students and gets parental permission for students to attend the day of the summit.



The summit could be held on a school day, an evening, or a weekend day. Check with the city council members and teachers to see which time is most preferable.

- The city council liaison committee sends information to the city council members about the summit meeting and follows up with them to find out how many council members will attend. If possible, hold the summit meeting in the council chambers.
- On the day of the summit, high school students should be matched as “buddies” with all participating 6th graders. Activities can be planned for the students to learn about communication, conflict resolution, and youth leadership. The actual summit meeting is where the 6th graders present their concerns and ideas to the city council members. If more than 10 students wish to speak at the summit, have small groups of students elect a spokesperson for their group.



A workable plan for the summit is to have a one-hour meeting in which 5 students present their concerns and ideas and then council members have an opportunity to respond. Then another 5 students present their ideas and again, there is a short time for council to affirm and make further suggestions to the youth. It is also possible for some students to present their ideas at a regular city council meeting. Existing programs, such as the model congresses, may provide further ideas for adaptation.



- Have both the high school and 6th grade students complete feedback sheets at the end of the summit, indicating how much they enjoyed and learned from the summit. There could also be a space on the sheet to write comments or offer suggestions for future summit events. The evaluation committee can collect the feedback sheets, analyze the data, and write up a brief report for the school newspaper.