

The empires of the future are the empires

■ *Rhonda Barton and Bracken Reed*

More Than Just Service

Service learning that is integrated into the curriculum can teach students how to be proactive citizens.

The historic 2008 presidential election provided unprecedented opportunities to engage young people in civic education—including heated classroom debates on contentious issues, social studies lessons on the electoral process, and opportunities to volunteer for national and local campaigns. Students from more than 15,000 schools cast a record 5 million votes in the National Student/Parent Mock Election, prompting Mock Election Director Gloria Kirshner to point out that the total number of votes exceeded the population of 30 states.

Although Barack Obama undeniably drew the youth vote, the 2008 turnout was not an anomaly, but part of a trend. Youth voter turnout has increased in each presidential election since 1996. And there's been a similar increase in youth volunteerism.

How can educators build on those trends in meaningful ways without the backdrop of a galvanizing national election? Civic engagement can take many forms, including individual volunteerism, community involvement, electoral participation, and service learning. But as Nicky Martin, a service learning trainer at Education Northwest, pointed out, "If service isn't linked to the curriculum and totally integrated, it's not service learning. It's just service."

Peter Levine, director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, echoed the belief that service learning needs to be well-conceived and planned, and not simply a requirement that students "do service." "I think part of it is working civic outcomes into other outcome measures and evaluations in such a way that doesn't let [service] turn into trivia," he said. "It shifts the focus from ensuring that the students are going through certain hoops to ensuring that students are being offered meaningful opportunities."

Levine said this is a particular concern when comparing service learning opportunities in schools that serve low-income students with those that have more affluent populations. Citing both a "civic opportunity gap" and a "civic achievement gap,"

of the mind.

—WINSTON S. CHURCHILL



Levine said that students who are more successful in school are typically given greater opportunities for civic engagement and that those opportunities are more effective in more advantaged schools. “Maryland, for instance, has a requirement of 75 hours of service learning for every single student in the high schools, and I fear it’s counterproductive,” said Levine. “The kinds of experiences that inner-city Baltimore kids get under the heading of service learning can be demeaning and disempowering.”

Tackling Vital Issues

A look at the experience of Montana social studies and language arts teacher Sally Broughton shows just how empowering service learning can be if it’s embedded in the academic curriculum. Broughton, who is the 2009 Montana Teacher of the Year and a past recipient of the American Civic Education Teacher Award, teaches middle school students at the small, rural Montforton School just outside Bozeman. For a dozen years, she has integrated We the People: Project Citizen into her curriculum and spent her summers as a professional development trainer for the national program.

Although Project Citizen, developed by the Center for Civic Education, can be used in many settings, it’s most often incorporated into secondary social studies, civics, or government classes. The project follows a three-step process:

1. Facilitate a discussion about a school or community problem that can be improved through a change in policy
2. Study the issue and decide on a plan of action
3. Implement the plan.

The first year that Broughton used the curriculum, her class chose a daunting issue: water quality. A student at the school had become ill from a contaminated well, and her family was forced to move out of the district. The students, many of whom also got their water from wells, were upset about the situation and decided to see what they

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Service Learning Supports Student Engagement

In a 2004 research summary (Meyer, Hofshire, & Billig, 2004), the Corporation for National and Community Service (www.nationalservice.gov) identified the attributes of effective service learning that support student engagement:

- Highlights ways that learning can be applied in real-life situations
- Helps students feel that their schoolwork is significant, valuable, and worthy of their efforts
- Allows students to have some degree of control over their own learning
- Assigns challenging but achievable tasks
- Stimulates students' curiosity about the topic being studied
- Designs projects that allow students to share new knowledge with others.

Source: Meyer, S. J., Hofshire, L., & Billig, S. H. (2004). The impact of service-learning on MEAP: A large-scale study of Michigan Learn & Serve Grantees: Year Two Evaluation Report. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation.

could do about it. They researched existing regulations, found out which agency had authority over the regulations, and interviewed local residents. It didn't take long to realize that a comprehensive change in water policy was beyond their capability. Instead, they decided to take a grassroots approach: with the help of a small grant, they purchased water test kits and collected water samples from their own homes. Aided by expert volunteers, they tested each sample for contaminants.

When the results came in, the students discovered that several samples showed high levels of contamination. The problem was caused primarily by an overreliance on septic tanks, especially in areas that used wells for drinking water. Until the class made a presentation to the county water quality officials, the problem didn't get much attention. Afterward, "it got the community pretty

stirred up," says Broughton. It took another year, but the county implemented a policy change and created a Water and Sewer District for the area around the school.

Since that introduction to Project Citizen, Broughton's classes have amassed a long list of school and community issues that they have tackled. They created a new school breakfast program, revamped the lunch program, pushed for a districtwide bicycle helmet policy, got a sidewalk built in front of the school, and launched a yearlong exploration of a four-day school week. Reaching outside the school walls, they advocated for a new county jail, got city developers to build public restrooms in downtown Bozeman, and raised community awareness over the lack of an emergency warning and evacuation plan at a nearby dam. In the latter case, the students' work led directly to a \$267,000 Homeland Security grant to the county.

"I'm trying to teach them that when they grow up, if something's not how they think it should be, then they should get busy and fix it," says Broughton. "You don't just sit around and complain."

Principal Lynne Scalia also sees how empowering Project Citizen can be. "When kids are truly doing something that changes their school community, or the outside community, they're more likely to be engaged," she said. "The learning is relevant to their lives, and they get fired up. When they get the tools to truly make a difference—to be able to really change a policy or a law—then that experience of how to be a citizen in a democracy stays with them."

Answering Phones, Knocking on Doors

At Evergreen High School in Vancouver, WA, Patti McMaster takes a different approach to introducing students to the responsibilities of being an involved citizen in a democracy. She requires students to volunteer a minimum of five hours on a political campaign of their choice, local or national. "What I'm trying to instill in them is it's not just about having your own political voice," she explained. "You have to step out and do something for the common good. Working on a campaign gives them a bird's eye view of what that is."

During the 2008 election, McMaster also volunteered, putting in time on one Democratic, one Republican, and one nonpartisan race so that no one could accuse her of favoritism. The campaign experiences became rich fodder for classroom discussion. Jaclyn, a student who worked the phones for a state representative's reelection bid, got a taste of voter back talk. "Some people were really uncooperative and I was surprised at how set they are along party lines," she told her classmates. Jeff, who rang doorbells for the same campaign, had a similar experience. He reported, "I learned about the mind of the common voter and I realized that some voters don't base their vote on what they know, but on who they've heard about more."

McMaster's students even had a hand in making legislation. During the 2007–08 school year, one of her AP government classes wrote a bill to require the teaching of state government and politics in Washington State schools. House Bill 2781 was conceived when McMaster was helping students prepare for We the People,

a national constitutional competition. One of the questions in the competition asked how students' state constitutions compared with the U.S. Constitution. "My kids sat there like deer in the headlights and looked at me as I said, 'What is your problem? You should have learned that in eighth grade when you took state history.'" Students replied that their state history lessons consisted of making covered wagons out of shoeboxes and tracing Lewis and Clark's journey to the Pacific Northwest—with not a word about state government.

When McMaster asked what could be done about it, students got busy drafting a bill to ensure that high school classes on Washington State history included instruction on the state's economy, constitution, and geography. They convinced their local state representative to sponsor it in the House. Then they met with the social studies specialist at Washington's Office of Public Instruction to gain the department's support. One of McMaster's former students, now a state senator, agreed to bring the legislation to the state senate. Students dove into a lobbying campaign and wrote to all the state legislators. They even traveled the 120 miles to the state capitol to testify for the bill, which passed unanimously. McMaster and her students were guests of honor in 2008 when Governor Chris Gregoire signed the law, which went into effect on the class's graduation day.

Paying Long-Term Dividends

There is evidence that school-based service and service learning don't merely yield more-engaged students. They can also produce positive benefits that persist over time. In 2005, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the U.S. Census Bureau, and Independent Sector surveyed more than 3,100 young people between the ages of 12 and 18 (Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). They found that participation in school-based volunteer service, especially high-quality service learning, was linked to increases in several measures of civic engagement:

- Youth who reported current or past participation in structured service learning for at least one semester were 63% more likely to say that they take a good deal of interest in world events, as compared with their peers who had never participated in service
- Participants in school-based service talked about politics with their friends and parents more than nonparticipants did—even more so when their service is part of a structured service learning opportunity
- Youth who reported current or past participation in service learning were almost three times more likely to believe that they could make a great deal of difference in their communities than their peers who participated in service but not in structured service learning.

Whether it's working to change school policy, tackling a community issue, or delving into political campaigns, meaningful service learning can make a difference in students' lives, today and in the future. **PL**

REFERENCE

- Spring, K., Dietz, N., & Grimm, R., Jr. (2006). *Educating for active citizenship: Service-learning, school-based service and youth civic engagement* (Brief No. 2). Retrieved from Corporation for National and Community Service Web site: www.cns.gov/pdf/06_0323_SL_briefing.pdf

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Pilot Project Links Service Learning to Technology

An innovative public-private partnership between the Corporation for National and Community Service and Microsoft aims to engage students in helping teachers better use the latest technology. The START (Service & Technology Academic Resource Team) project will work with students in up to 10 demonstration sites selected in January 2010.

The students will receive technology training and certification and be deployed to help teachers use social media and other online tools to enhance classroom teaching and learning. The student "techies" may be supported by AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA members as well as higher education service-learning students. As part of the project, a national help-desk model will be created that combines service and tech support in schools and communities.

"This project allows us to capture the best practices from established student help-desk models around the country and infuse them intentionally with the principles of service learning," said Nicky Martin of Education Northwest, which is coordinating the project. "Student participants will gain technology, academic, career, and customer service skills that will all contribute to their future success."