

School As A Space For Promoting Civic Behavior

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Abstract

There is wide agreement that the school can and should promote the kind of civic behavior that is not only appropriate but essential to a democratic society. This paper considers the importance of the school's civic climate. It reviews some recent research relevant to programs and practices that promote positive civic behavior. It also discusses how pro-social behavior can be encouraged through civic service connecting the school with the larger community.

The Importance of the School's Civic Climate

The “tone” or “atmosphere” that pervades a school often is referred to as its climate. A school's climate is indicative of its quality and character. Oftentimes it is palpable from the moment one enters a school. Researchers now are paying increased attention not only to school climate in general, they are particularly attentive to the civic climate within schools—and with good reason. The civic climate of a school can be described as the prevalence of norms, which encourage participation in both civic and political life. Recent studies show that academic achievement is significantly increased when schools create a safe, caring, and participatory environment. One student of civic behavior has summed up the findings of recent research in this way:

A school's civic climate is shown to have a long-term impact on voter-turnout—stronger civic norms in high school increase the probability of voting 15 years later. A school's civic climate has an equally long reach as a positive influence on civic participation like volunteering... Furthermore, a participatory norm in high school also exhibits evidence of a “sleeper effect,” having impact that grows over time.*

Other researchers confirm the existence of “sleeper effects” or how adolescent school experiences can come to affect their public engagement as adults. Civic norms incubate.

They motivate behavior only when an individual's situation in life facilitates it.

The seeds planted during the high school years germinate and only gradually bear fruit. As people move into the life situations of middle age that evoke or require civic engagement, they draw on the predispositions and skills set in place at an earlier time. Pre-adult experiences do eventually matter.**

Just as plants require fertile soil and adequate care if they are to prosper, so, too, do children. Schools must cultivate a feeling of community—a sense of “we” that nurtures civic norms and shared purpose. In the words of a landmark report on civic education:

Schools are [or should be] communities in which young people learn to interact, argue and work together with others—an important condition for future citizenship. Schools have the capacity to bring together a heterogeneous population of young people—with different backgrounds, perspectives and vocational ambitions—to instruct them in common lessons and values. They can also bring young people into significant relationships with adult role models.***

Significant relationships in a school go beyond those of teachers and students. If there is to be a sense of community within a school, an atmosphere of mutual respect and genuine concern for the well-being of all must be evident. An atmosphere of caring must extend to the relationships among and between the students themselves, their teachers and the school administrators. Family members—parents, grandparents, and guardians—

* David E. Campbell. *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 148.

** Kent M. Jennings and Laura Stoker. “Social Trust and Civic Engagement Across Time and Generations.” *Acta Politica*, 2004, Volume 39, Number 4, p. 363.

*** *The Civic Mission of Schools*, Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 2003, p. 12. www.civicmissionofschools.org.

must feel welcome in the school. Their concerns must be addressed and their involvement happily received.

Individuals do not exist or act in isolation. Neither are they acted upon in isolation. Schools, therefore, need to encourage pro-social behavior and the internalization of civic norms appropriate to a society that is both democratic and caring. Where civic norms are internalized and shared, trust is thickened and a sense of community enhanced.

Programs and Practices That Promote Positive Civic Behavior

Recently a distinguished group of more than 50 scholars and practitioners gathered to review the evidence in favor of civic education in K-12 schools.* They not only considered research conducted in the United States, they also examined evidence from many other countries and from cross-national studies. Their report found that research supports several recommendations in regard to educating students:

- **Study a wide range of topics**—Students perform better on tests of civic skills and knowledge if they have studied a range of relevant subjects, such as their country’s history and its constitution, the structure of government and elections and the legal system.
- **Use interactive lessons**—Students who participate in active debates that make connections to current issues have a greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communication skills, and are more likely to say they will vote and volunteer as adults.
- **Service-learning is an effective tool**—Students should be provided with the opportunity to apply what they learn through the performance of community

* *ibid.*

service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.

Known as “service-learning,” this approach can be more effective at instilling civic skills and values among students than volunteering that is unconnected to the school’s curriculum. Unfortunately, the report found that a majority of schools do not currently link community service programs to the curriculum.

- **Encourage student participation in school governance**—Research suggests that giving students more opportunities to help manage their own classrooms and schools builds civic skills and attitudes. Unfortunately, more recent research shows that only a small percentage of high school students are involved in the governance of their schools. Just eight percent of American students report having been involved in elections or administration—either by running for office, working on a campaign of a student government candidate, or serving as a student representative.*
- **Extracurricular activities are valuable**—Long-terms studies show that, even over several decades, those who participated in high school extracurricular activities remain more civically engaged than those who don’t.
- **Simulations show promise**—Empirical evidence indicates simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberations and diplomacy can lead to students becoming more informed and interested in politics and government.

The report concludes by urging policymakers to use the above recommendations to identify, showcase, and reward schools that have exemplary citizenship education programs. In addition, the report challenges policymakers to reexamine their existing

* Cliff Zukin, *et.al. A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life and the Changing American Citizen*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 140.

curriculum and civic education standards to ensure that they reflect what research shows are the most promising citizenship education strategies.

Two recent surveys, the National Youth Survey (NYS) and the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES), shed light on specific classroom practices and other conditions that can predict civic engagement among high school students. Although the surveys were conducted in the United States, the results mirror findings of research in Europe, Australia, and Latin America. The American results of the National Youth Survey are summarized in the table below. Note that coefficients in boldface are statistically significant.

Predicting Engagement among High School Students	
	<i>Beta</i>
Learned to write a letter to someone you don't know	.21
Enjoys high school	.19
High school arranges volunteer work	.18
Discussed politics at home while growing up	.16
Learned to debate	.15
Female	.11
Household income	.11
Learned to give a speech	.08
Efficacy	.08
Perceived impact of government on daily life	.07
Issue mobilization	.07
Political knowledge	.05
Requirement to volunteer	.03
Taken a course on politics or government	.03
Hispanic	.02
Interpersonal trust	.02
Age	.02
White	.01
Perceived ability to influence high school government	.00
Mobilization	.00

Note: Coefficients in boldface (first seven items) are statistically significant

Source: NYS

A second survey, The National Civic Engagement Study created a scale of 18 indicators of civic engagement that can be used to predict engagement among high school students. Voting, an indicator used with adults, is not included, because most high school

students do not meet the age requirement for voting in national or state elections. Note that coefficients in boldface are statistically significant.

Predictors of a Summary Index of Engagement among High School Students	
	<i>Beta</i>
Weekly Internet use	.21
Someone in the household volunteers	.17
Female	.17
Political knowledge	.14
Discussed politics while growing up	.12
Civic duty	.11
Number of friends	.11
Mobilized	.10
Income	.10
White	.09
Mother's education	.09
Daily television watching	.09
Discuss political and social issues in class	.08
Religious service attendance	.07
Strength of partisanship	.05
Efficacy	.05
Generational identity	.05
Class requirement to follow politics	.04
Government regulation of business	.04
Positive view of politics	.03
Encouraged to make up mind about issues	.03
Interpersonal trust	.02
Age	.01
Length of residency	.01
Non-native born	.00

Note: Coefficients in boldface (first nine items) are statistically significant
Source: NCES

In reflecting on the results of these two surveys, researchers noted that while both surveys “do relatively well in overall explanatory power, no single factor stands out as especially important for predicting engagement.”* This suggests that there is no “silver bullet” or one way to foster civic engagement, but also that widening many narrow pathways can help young people find their way to active citizenship and public life.

Promoting Civic Behavior By Connecting With the Larger Community

Although a school can be considered to be a community within itself, it also is enmeshed in the larger community. The school and the larger community are, in fact,

* Zukin, *et.al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

interdependent. The school depends upon the larger community for both financial and social support. The larger community, in turn, depends upon the school not only to prepare the workers it needs, but more importantly to help to develop the kind of citizens it needs for a healthy, democratic society.

One of the major ways in which the interconnections between school and larger community are being realized is through what is called civic service. Civic service can be defined as “an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal compensation to the participant.”*

Some scholars draw a distinction between community civic service and service-learning. Civic or volunteer service refers to work done in a community which is not directly linked to an academic course or part of the formal school curriculum, even though the service may be arranged by the school. Service-learning, in contrast, refers to activities in the community which are incorporated into an academic course or into an academic course or the formal curriculum. The volunteer experience in service-learning usually is preceded with information about social problems, political issues, or the agency in which the student will serve. Classroom discussions and written reflections follow on the volunteer experience. Research strongly favors service-learning over community service, because it is directly tied to what is taught and learned in the classroom.

A study conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 28 countries found students in the United States were by far the most likely to report civic or volunteer service. High levels of volunteering also were

* Michael Sherraden. *Youth Service As Strong Policy*. St. Louis: Center for Social Development. Washington University, 2001, p. 2.

reported by 14-year-olds in other English-speaking countries. In addition, students from two Latin American, one Asian, and four Nordic countries included in the IEA study reported civic service. Two of the 11 post-Communist countries (Hungary and the Czech Republic) engaged students in civic service.*

One of the most extensive studies of civic service was conducted by the *Independent Sector* and the *Gallup Organization*, two well-known, non-partisan polling services. American adolescents were asked why they volunteer. On the whole, adolescents were more likely to report that their voluntarism was motivated by public-spirited considerations. For example, 84 percent said they were prompted by compassion toward people in need. Essentially the same proportion reported performing civic service “to do something for a cause that is important” to them. Two causes frequently cited as important to adolescents were human rights and the environment. Students often noted participation in international organizations such as Amnesty International, Green Peace, and church-related outreach programs.

When adolescents were asked what benefits they thought they received from their volunteer service, over 95 percent responded that learning to respect others was an important benefit. Comparable percentages reported learning to be kind and helpful (93%), getting along and relating with others, gaining satisfaction from helping others, and coming to understand people who are different (92, 90, and 85% respectively). Notably, 83 percent of teen volunteers said that helping them understand more about good citizenship was an important benefit of their civic service.**

* Judith Torney-Purta, JoAnn Amadeo, and Wendy Klandl Richardson. *Civic Service Among Youth in Chile, Denmark, England and the United States*. Department of Human Development, University of Maryland, 2005, p. 25, Jt22@uemail.umd.edu.

** See David E. Campbell, *op.cit.*, pp. 105–109.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the school as a space for promoting civic behavior, this paper has emphasized the critical importance of the school's civic climate. Its long-term impact on voting, volunteering, and other forms of participation has been verified. Increased research attention to programs and classroom practices now provides guidance for both practitioners and policymakers desirous of promoting positive civic behavior. Finally, this paper noted the benefits of linking the school to the larger community through civic service. Archimedes once said that if he were given a place to stand, he could move the world. Today the school represents a promising place to stand if we wish to promote the kinds of civic behavior which enable a society to be both democratic and caring.