

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful “bridges” between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.

YOUTH VOTING: IN THE CLASSROOM AND AT THE POLLS

By Carrie Donovan, CIRCLE Youth Director

Starting Early: K-12 Mock Election Resources

A recent Working Paper released by CIRCLE outlined the positive civic effects of Kids Voting USA. The interactive curriculum exposes K-12 students to the fundamentals of voting during an election campaign. Researchers found that Kids Voting students were more likely to talk about voting at home, thereby stimulating their parents' interest in the election and positively affecting their voting behavior.

So, what does a Kids Voting program look like on the ground? Paula Case, Director of Communications at Kids Voting USA explains, “The program really has two vital components—the educational classroom learning and the authentic voting experience on election day which replicates the adult experience as much as possible.” Students learn about the process of voting and the rea-

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sons for it through a classroom-based curriculum called “Civics Alive.” By the time the election arrives, students are ready to participate. They have their own mock booths and ballots at the polls where they cast votes alongside parents, teachers, and neighbors.

Currently, Kids Voting (KV) has local programs operating in 30 states, and each state has an Executive Program Director. If your state is not among the thirty, it is always possible to start a program. To get started, the national office recommends forming a steering committee of community leaders, education officials, and election officials. In order to operate, a KV program needs the approval of education officials. And, of course, election officials must give permission for students to cast mock votes at the polls. Some states have had to change state laws prohibiting young citizens under 18 from the polls. Additionally, it is helpful to have a partnership with local media. In fact, some local KV programs have been started by local newspapers in service to their communities.

Another classroom resource for teachers is the Youth Leadership Initiative’s (YLI) mock election, the largest online mock election in the nation. Last year over 67,000 K-12 students in classrooms around the country participated in YLI’s mock election. Like Kids Voting, YLI combines civics curriculum with a voting experience. All of YLI’s curricula are available to teachers online, along with interactive activities for students. Students can take a political ideology quiz, research candidate positions, search candidates’ campaign financing, and write letters to members of congress. In 2004 the mock election will include the presidential race, races for the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, and state gubernatorial elections and ballot initiatives.

In order to participate, teachers must register their class on YLI’s Web site. Registration and participation are both free. Typically, students participate as a class, but sometimes entire schools sign up. Lea Brown, Director of Instruction at YLI, emphasizes that the mock election is much more than a day of voting: “The role of the citizen in a democracy is to cast an informed vote. So, we ask teachers to work with students and to . . . lead with the curriculum and have the election be the culmination.”

Once students have voted, they may want to get even more involved and perhaps consider running for office. Middle and high school students can participate in YLI’s e-Congress, where they write bills, discuss proposed legislation in congressional committees, and finally cast their own virtual votes either for or against. Lea explains that both mock programs are designed to stimulate the imaginations of students. Once students start thinking, she believes they will move to action. In her words, “If you want to imagine how this country might be different you have to be involved.”

18 and Ready to Vote!

There is no shortage of efforts gearing up to engage the youngest of America’s potential voters. And, most of them—including Rock the Vote, the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, and MTV—will be marketing their message with music and youth culture. Rock the Vote is a familiar name among most eighteen-year-olds, whether or not they are registered. Founded in 1990 by members of the recording industry, it continues to harness the popularity of musi-

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cians to excite young people about voting. Rock the Vote has a Web-based registration campaign, and a new Street Team system, with groups of young voters working to register other youth

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in 50 cities across the country. Rock the Vote will also work with MTV and Meetup.com to sponsor local face-to-face meetings or "meetups" for young people to learn about the election and get involved.

The World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is also getting out the message to potential young voters via the Smackdown Your Vote! collaboration. Partners include the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, Rock the Vote, the League of Women Voters, the Youth Vote Coalition, and a host of others all committed to registering two million more young voters by 2004. The collaboration recently released an issues guide called 18–30 VIP that features questions young people can ask candidates in order to determine their positions on top youth issues.

The voting message will be reiterated on television sets across the country. MTV recently launched a "Choose or Lose 2004–20 Million LOUD" campaign to help mobilize more than 20 million young adults aged 18 to 30 to vote in the presidential election. Throughout the year, Choose or Lose will air election news and related specials. In the fall they will host MTV's first national, online "PRE-Lecture" in which young adults will declare their choice for President of the United States.

The newly-launched New Voters Project hopes to break records in 2004 as the largest grassroots youth voter mobilization campaign in history. Organizers will work on the ground in six states with populations of at least two million 18 to 24 year-olds: Colorado, Iowa, Oregon, Wisconsin, New Mexico and Nevada. The Project seeks to apply the latest research on what works to get out the youth vote, and will rely heavily on direct contact by fellow young people. "We're going to be working feverishly from here until Election Day to prove that it can be done," says Ivan Frishberg, spokesperson for the project. He maintains that knocking on

doors and spreading the word will get youth to the polls. In his words, "If you ask them, they'll vote." The Project is organized by the State PIRGs and the George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

In the event that any of the above operations miss a potential young voter, there is yet another mobilization campaign gearing up for 2004. Called Declare Yourself, the campaign will bring spoken word artists and musicians to college campuses in an effort to get out the vote. The campaign is also targeting high school students with the help of the Newspapers in Education program. A short comedy film about voting will be hitting the schools in March, along with voting education materials. ★

For more information:

Starting Early: K-12 Mock Election Resources

Kids Voting USA

www.kidsvotingusa.org

1-866-500-VOTE

Youth Leadership Initiative's Mock Election & e-Congress

www.youthleadership.net

1-866.514.8389

18 and Ready to Vote!

Rock the Vote

www.rockthevote.com

Smack Down Your Vote!

www.smackdownyourvote.com

Hip-Hop Summit Action Network

www.hsan.org

Youth Vote Coalition

www.youthvote.org

New Voters Project

<http://www.newvotersproject.org/>

MTV Choose or Lose 2004

http://www.mtv.com/news/topics/c/choose_or_lose/

Declare Yourself

www.declareyourself.com