Education Consortium recently released a “civic index”—the first-ever statewide assessment of civic education and engagement. Results from the index led state lawmakers to pass legislation encouraging more classroom discussion of current events and increased responsibility for student councils in the North Carolina schools.

Delaware lawmakers are making concerted efforts to ensure their teachers receive the necessary preparation and training to teach students effectively about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Recently the state authorized $100,000 to fund civics education for teachers. Similarly, the state of Michigan authorized $750,000 for the development of the Michigan virtual high school. Initial plans for the project include developing a rigorous civics curriculum that teachers could access by going online.

Other states are concentrating on finding innovative ways to address the decline in the number of young people who vote. A bill signed by Governor Davis of California would require the Secretary of State to provide voter registration forms and information to all high school, community college, and state university students. In Illinois, recent legislation created a joint voter education program of the State Board of Elections and the State Board of Education for K-12 students. The program will allow students to vote in a simulated election taking place at an actual polling place during the general election.

As part of this series on policy and citizenship education, ECS/NCLC will also release a set of surveys and case studies that examine citizenship education at the district and school levels. To access them, and to find out what your state is doing to improve citizenship education, visit www.ecs.org/nclc.

**SENDING THE RIGHT MESSAGE: HOW COMMUNITIES SHAPE YOUNG PEOPLE’S ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICS**

*Cultivating Democracy,* a new book supported by CIRCLE, chronicles the political socialization process of over 3,000 high school students from 29 economically, politically, and demographically diverse communities in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. Written by James Gimpel, J. Celeste Lay, and Jason E. Schuknecht, the book offers a new framework for understanding how young people form their attitudes toward politics and civic life. The book suggests that for Generation Y adolescents, the characteristics of the community in which they grow up profoundly affect the political attitudes they form. These attitudes, in turn, influence how civically engaged they will be as adults.

Drawing on previous research as well as the thoughts of numerous high school students throughout the Washington D.C. and Baltimore metropolitan areas, the authors attempt to identify the local conditions that influence the political and civic attitudes of immigrant and native youth. According to Dr. Gimpel, “We tried to find the sources of attitudes that lead to political engagement—not just in individual traits that are commonly tapped by surveys, but also in the characteristics of the neighborhoods that shape experiences during later adolescence.” The authors find two factors in particular—the ethnic and political diversity within a community and relationships with family and school authorities—play significant roles in the development of attitudes necessary for civic engagement. In addition, the book provides concrete policy recommendations for mitigating the risk-factors within communities that keep young people from developing the knowledge and attitudes that advance civic engagement.

Communities that are ethnically and politically diverse, regardless of socioeconomic status, appear to do a better job of preparing young people to participate in the political process than those that are more homogeneous.

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CIRCLE FACT SHEETS

- Young People and Online Political Campaigning (January 2004) provides a snapshot of the types of online campaign techniques young people use and which they say would make them more likely to vote for a candidate.
- Volunteering Among Young People (Updated January 2004) has been updated with the latest data on youth volunteering rates.
- Civics Curriculum and Civic Skills: Recent Evidence (November 2003) explores whether civics education classes in schools actually increase students’ civic skills and civic knowledge.

CHALLENGES FOR NATIONAL SERVICE

The President’s call for more Americans to engage in national service through programs such as the USA Freedom Corps brings new attention to a long history of voluntary service programs in America. Since the New Deal, Americans have participated in a variety of civilian national service programs. A CIRCLE Working Paper by Melissa Bass traces the development of the three most prominent civilian national service programs—AmeriCorps, VISTA, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)—and gives reasons why to date national service in the United States has not been recognized and supported as a viable policy option for addressing the nation’s needs and a viable life-option for significant numbers of young adults. For a copy of “CIRCLE Working Paper 11 National Service in America: Policy (Dis) Connections Over Time” visit CIRCLE’s Web site www.civicyouth.org.

Challenges to Institutionalizing National Service

After ten years of existence, the most recently created national service program, AmeriCorps, is facing many of the same challenges to secure stable funding as its predecessor programs VISTA and the CCC. According to Ms. Bass, “In the U.S., domestic civilian national service has been difficult to create and even harder to maintain and expand. While all three programs have faced similar obstacles, none have been deeply institutionalized, nor have they built on one another.”

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