

## RESEARCH ROUNDUP

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](http://www.ecs.org/nclc).

### SENDING THE RIGHT MESSAGE: HOW COMMUNITIES SHAPE YOUNG PEOPLES' 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

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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.

### Diverse Communities Inspire Political Participation and Knowledge

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young people to participate in the political process than those that are more homogeneous. For example, the authors find that jurisdictions where no one political party dominates seem to be home to students who know more about politics and who feel that their vote could make a difference. On the other hand, areas where one party is consistently elected seem to undercut the incentive to learn about politics and reduce the sense among students that their views and opinions matter. According to Dr. Gimpel, “In politically competitive settings, both sides occasionally win elec-

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tions, at least locally, leading all but the most cynical to the conclusion that the government is responsive. By contrast, in areas lacking partisan diversity, many young people conclude that their political efforts would have no value, generating low efficacy among a sizeable bloc of such potential voters. It is no great surprise that efficacy levels were low in our inner-city neighborhoods. Local elections in these communities are settled so far in advance that they do not stimulate much of a sense that an individual's voice counts."

Poverty and other resource constraints in inner-city neighborhoods are clearly detrimental to the political learning process, but economic resources are not everything. Rural areas and some older suburbs in the study were just as impoverished, but the students in suburbs and small towns usually had much higher efficacy and knowledge levels. This is attributable to community characteristics, principally a more competitive political setting in which participation was more highly valued.

### Schools Play an Important Role

While diversity in a community contributes to the political socialization process, the relationship that students form with school authorities cannot be ignored. Curriculum matters, but students will also judge the fairness of the "system" in reaction to how they are treated by teachers and school administrators. As for curriculum content, schools can help young people develop positive opinions about the political process by providing civics instruction that focuses on the inevitable role of conflict in democratic politics.

According to the authors, "The difference between the youth that like government-related coursework and those who do not lies in how the two groups understand political disagreement." Schools that teach young people that conflict and disagreement are a nat-

ural part of politics help them develop positive attitudes about politically-related subject matter. The book concludes with nearly an entire chapter of concrete recommendations for enhancing civics education and curriculum and promoting political diversity and activism at the local level.

### 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](http://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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## CIRCLE FACT SHEETS

*CIRCLE has produced a number of Fact Sheets which are brief documents with basic information and graphs on various topics. The following new Fact Sheets can be found on CIRCLE's Web site:*

- ≡ **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 Civics Skills: Recent Evidence** (November 2003) explores whether civics education classes in schools actually increase students' civic skills and civic knowledge.