

# Educating for Citizenship

**A systemwide responsibility for preparing students to become wise citizens**

BY CARL GLICKMAN

**H**ow can public school leaders actively support a curriculum that teaches students about their roles as American citizens? You can count these ways, as provided by Kathy Thompson and Lew Allen, co-directors of the Georgia League of Professional Schools:

► 1<sup>st</sup> graders at Oglethorpe Avenue Elementary (most of whom are English language learners) write bilingual books to be distributed in Clarke County, Ga., in places where Latino children may frequent with their parents, such as child health centers;

► 4<sup>th</sup> graders at White County Intermediate School in Cleveland, Ga., design a new school sign and raise funds to have it erected after discovering how difficult it is for visitors to find their school in their hilly, remote area;

► At the same school, 5<sup>th</sup> graders create science learning centers along the school's nature trail, while others restore the grave site found on school property of a doctor during the American Revolution and still others record oral histories

of local senior citizens;

► At Russell Middle School in Barrow County, Ga., 6<sup>th</sup> graders, concerned about the number of plastic milk cartons thrown away each day at their school, propose at a school board meeting to fund a recycling carrier to transport the waste; and

► 7<sup>th</sup> graders at Cowan Road Middle School in Griffin County, Ga., partner with kindergarten pupils for reading and literacy activities once a week. Their teachers lead discussions about literacy and poverty and facilitate self-reflections on the students' participation and its perceived impact.

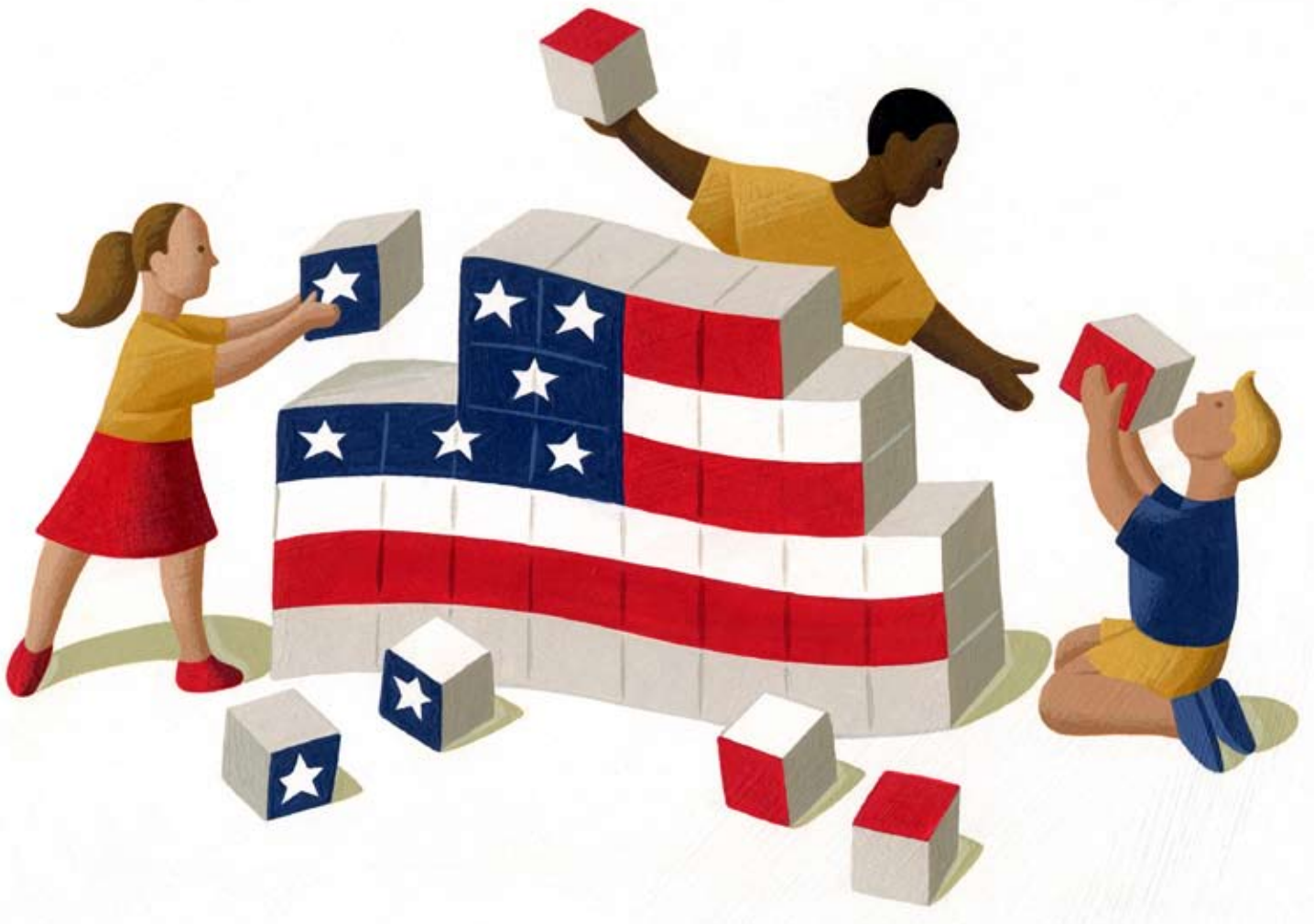
## **Relying on Schools**

The answer to whether the above activities — academic learning connected with service — should be built into the curriculum for every student in every grade level is answered with a resounding yes by Sen. John Glenn and the National Commission on Service Learning that he chaired. Glenn puts it this way: "Our public schools are the personnel division for our democracy" and active citizenry and democracy should be of grave concern to all of us.

For adults, civic engagement has been on the decline for 50 years and even with the recent increase in voting in the primary presidential elections, youth participating in society remains low. For those students who do not complete high school, they have virtually no involvement in civic, political and community affairs. Such realities suggest a marked failure — within government, politics, families, community institutions and our education system — in bringing people together to learn from each other.

The responsibility to reverse this withdrawal from public life lies more and more heavily on schools. After all, education is the one public institution that serves 90 percent of the next generation of adults, that is governed by public authority and that has the explicit mission to educate for democratic citizenship.

To educate our students for wise citizenry we must understand that this responsibility cannot reside only in the hands of civic, history or social studies teachers. It must reside in the hands of all educators, across classrooms, across subject areas and



across grade levels. By doing so, we can increase the motivation, engagement and ultimate academic success of all students while at the same time helping to reverse our diminishing democracy. As Thomas Jefferson, the first to propose public education in America, reminds each generation: "Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories. And to render them safe, their minds must be improved."

### First-Rate Components

What follows are some considerations for school district leadership in planning for first-rate citizenship education for all students:

► **CLARIFY THE DISTRICT MISSION.** I examined mission and vision statements on the websites of three school districts in various parts of the country.

The first statement makes no mention of democracy or public purpose of schools and suggests little awareness for supporting a curriculum for engaged citizenry. Its mission statement reads, in part: "The

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mission of the [the school system] is to form a collaborative effort between home and school that maximizes students' social and academic potential preparing them to compete in a global society."

The second school district mission clearly states the importance of educating for citizenship and it implies programmatic supports. "The mission of [the school system] is to produce responsible, contributing citizens by providing and promoting quality educational opportunities for our students through appropriate programs, facilities and integration of technology

to enhance all components of the educational process."

The third school district mission is both comprehensive and inspirational and indicates that citizenship is essential to every aspect of the district. It reads: "We believe that education can foster understanding among young people around the world, enabling future generations to live more peacefully and productively than before. By emphasizing the dynamic combination of knowledge, skills, independent critical thought and international awareness or intercultural understanding, [The school district] espouses the principles of educating the whole person for a life of active, responsible citizenship."

School district leaders, in collaboration with the school board, should look at their own mission, vision and goals and ask themselves if the statements provide a clear message to develop knowledgeable, wise and productive citizens. After such a clear mission, the next steps would be to define citizenship.

► **CREATE CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES FOR STUDENT ACTIVITIES.** What is rea-

sonable for school district leaders to promote?

When students and teachers become involved in applications of learning beyond the classroom into the school and larger community, controversies may result. School leaders need to be ready to clearly answer questions whether such activities are worth doing and, if so, how the public ought to be informed about them in order to provide support and resources for schools and classroom teachers?

For example, as described in Brian Schultz and Carl Grant's book *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom*, the work of 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students in Schultz's class in urban Chicago offers a first-hand tale about how previously underachieving youngsters, many of them from poor families, can become motivated learners they chose an engaging year-long group project with their teacher.

Schultz's class examined why a new school promised to the community five years before had not been built and why

the existent school remained neglected and sorely in need of basic maintenance. These students conducted study groups, interviews, letter-writing campaigns, marketing strategies, statistical polling and meetings with government officials, legislators, community activists and reporters. This examination led students to study political campaigns, how politicians position themselves on local issues when running for election, how poor people might gain a strong voice and how issues of race and poverty factor into political influence to get things done.

Prior to beginning the project, the teacher received approval from his principal, but as the work of the students became more public, central-office supervisors were increasingly uneasy about a classroom of students becoming so involved in a community and school board issue.

Eventually the students found that, despite their best efforts, the promised new school would not be built. Although the students did not gain a new building, they were able to see much-needed

maintenance completed on the old school, owing to their efforts. The students learned much about how to plan, organize and solve problems. Basic skills testing showed an increase of 35 percent of students moving from below grade level the year before to above grade level at the end of this year. Students who had been known for being chronically absent the year before now had an unprecedented attendance rate of 98 percent. Most importantly, students gained confidence and enthusiasm about reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science and history.

But the question for a superintendent and a school board is whether they should support and encourage this kind of citizenship education. Academic standards were clearly met but so much else happened. The public nature of the student struggle created a much larger media glare than most other projects. I would argue that this project was exactly right as it stimulated students to achieve in ways previously unknown to them. The outcome was a

## Demonstrating Citizenship to Graduate From High School

BY GEORGE H. WOOD

**P**ublic schools are, in Senator John Glenn's words, "democracy's personnel department." But what personnel department would leave all their training to an occasional class or assembly? That seems to be the approach most schools take when it comes to this, their most important mission — preparing our young people to become active and engaged citizens.

At Federal Hocking High School, a school with 360 students in rural Appalachian Ohio, we pride ourselves on the fact that not only is preparing young people for active democratic citizenship part of our mission statement, it is part of daily school life.

For the past two decades, we have engaged students in real decision-making and demonstrations of citizenship to enable them to take up the mantle of citizenship after graduation. This has included students having an equal say in the recommendation of staff for hiring, students serving on all-school committees including site-based management, students managing all student affairs and events through student trustees, students re-writing the hand-

book each year, and even students serving as ex-officio members of our school board.

### Healthy Debates

Having students in such roles and with such responsibility is often hard for district administrators and their school boards to accept. What if the students make a mistake? Aren't we letting the inmates run the prison? Are they responsible enough to take on these adult roles?

It has not always been easy to gain administrative support for the experiences in democracy we provide for our students. In fact, when the students put their right to have a say in the hiring of staff in a student constitution for school board approval, it set off a two year debate about the student handbook before the board finally approved it.

This debate proved to be healthy for the school district and perhaps illustrates how district administrators can support schools in providing genuine practice with democracy



George Wood

for future citizens. In response to school board concerns, a local lawyer with expertise in school and constitutional law was drafted to examine our form of student government and the role students play. He interviewed students, faculty, board members and district administrative staff. Public forums were held at the school to discuss how to prepare

young people for their role as citizens. In the end, the consultant and superintendent presented a report to the local board validating the experiences the students were having and the processes in use.

All of this led to the campaign by students to gain seats on our school board. Realizing how important the board is in determining what goes on in their lives, students researched board membership and developed a proposal for electing two non-voting student members to the board. Their report included examples from other districts as well as a summary of Ohio law indicating the board is permitted to

wiser and active group of youth as citizens and a group of more committed learners.

The context here was poor 5<sup>th</sup>-grade children of color challenging the deteriorated conditions of their school, but the same issues and questions are relevant to any population of students in any school setting. These kinds of projects raise questions that superintendents and boards need to anticipate in order to provide policy direction. Court rulings are quite clear that such classroom activities are legitimate as long as educators can show they are tied to educational purposes. Educators are not liable for what students do on their own outside of school, nor are they liable for how students make up their own minds.

The responsibilities of educators are to teach students on what prior information they need to know and then guide them in the analytical tools to complete a project. But educators can not indoctrinate students in what to think. (An excellent and easy-to-read book on legal parameters for student involvement in public affairs

**“School leaders need to be ready to clearly answer questions whether such activities are worth doing ...”**

is *First Amendment in Schools* by Charles Haynes and others.)

If it's not already in place, I would recommend the superintendent put together a committee of teachers, parents and students representatives from elementary, middle school and high school to develop the criteria for age-appropriate learning activities, guidelines for classroom and school projects and resources and support for conducting such projects. Then the issue becomes one of how much clarity, support and encouragement will a district provide for engaging students in real work?

make room for ex-officio members. After months of debate and discussion, the first student members took their seats on the board in fall 2005.

### Personal Demonstrations

Students at Federal Hocking High School prepare a portfolio of their work that they present in May to qualify for graduation. Each part of the portfolio is directly linked to the school's mission statement with one of the three sections being “Demonstrations of Active Citizenship.” To graduate, students must show active participation in their school and community.

Each year students present their portfolios to a panel of faculty who judge whether they are ready to graduate. In spring 2007, many of the portfolio presentations focused on the campaign students had waged to land a seat on the local school board. One of the students who was elected by her peers to serve, reflected on the experience:

“I never knew what a school board did, let alone think about being on one. But now, after a year of serving, it is clear that board members do more than just buy bread or buses. They choose the people who educate us, figure out how to fund what we get to do and hold ultimate authority over the rules in the school.

Democracy, I have found out, is not just voting for president. It is the hard, everyday work of every day people making our communities better places to live. It is local folks, like those on our board, that make a difference. And now we get to make a difference as well.”

If schools are to live up to their job of filling the posts of citizen, it is through experiences such as the ones at Federal Hocking that will best prepare our children for this role. I think about this every year in late May when I stand on the stage and shake some 100 sweaty hands of young adults whom we are graduating on that day.

They are about to take their place as citizens in the most powerful nation on the face of the earth, and our high school is the last common experience they will share. If they are to make good decisions about paving our streets, taxing ourselves and the leaders of the nation, it is vital that schools provide them with the tools to do this. And it is the responsibility of district leadership to make the space for every school to do this.

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► **GET THE PRACTICE RIGHT.** For the past 15 years, every senior at Hocking High School in Stewart, Ohio, must complete a senior citizenship portfolio to graduate.

The portfolio must include demonstrations of active citizenship in the school or greater community with an explanation of how and why and with what results the student has been involved in the political processes of the school or greater community. The student also must take a stand on an issue, which might involve a paper written in school, a letter to the editor of the school or community newspaper, or a proposal to change something at the school or in the community.

Anything we prioritize as essential to the education of all students needs to be supported. If we make literacy a priority in our school district, we ensure ample time exists in the school day for the use of a literacy curriculum, we furnish supplies and materials to classrooms, we have ongoing professional development with teachers about better literacy practices, we create study groups around literacy, and we develop school-level assessments for every student, ranging from special-needs students to English language learners to our most advanced students, to measure progress. The same is true if we see educating for citizenship as important.

► **LEARNING ABOUT VOTING.** Students in Duluth, Minn., as part of the curriculum, are involved in understanding the election process, examining issues of candidates, understanding the effect of media and actually voting on the same ballots that adults use.

The curriculum for delving into election issues that pertain to one's community is widely available through Kids Voting USA. Students write television campaign ads and act them out in class. They participate in discussions about election issues both in classrooms and at home with their parents, and then they vote with their parents on election day at a separate polling place.

The result of students being involved in such study and participation in local, state and federal elections has led to greater participation in voting as these students reach voting age and increased parent participation at the polls. Japanese journalists recently came to the town in northern Minnesota to document why election participation rates are so high.

► **LEARNING TO USE ACADEMIC CONTENT.** Two teachers, Mike Johnston and Adam Dodge, on their own initiative at The American School in Doha, Qatar, developed an international network with other high schools in the Middle East and Far East called Educate. The program's goals are to embed environmental education and community service learning into the curriculum, maintain cleaner and greener school facilities and establish partnerships within local and international communities to steward a sustainable future.

An excerpt from recent electronic correspondence with the organizers says: "It is time to get together in person again ... to reconvene, submerge ourselves in successes, share our ideas and look to the future. School reps from Educate member schools will play a key role in personalizing the effect sustainable education has on their community. ... From those who have been around since day one to those who just see the goals for the first time and think, "Hey, my school needs more of that."

► **LEARNING TO EXPRESS WELL-INFORMED STANCES ON ISSUES.** Students at Kennebunk High School in Kennebunk, Maine, developed a plan for diminishing



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anorexia, steroid use, cliques and bullying and the potential for teen suicide through research study. Their analysis resulted in organizing school/town meetings and commitments on the part of each student to help solve rather than perpetuate these destructive teenage behaviors. The principal said he gives such prevailing problems to the students to "let them solve it."

► **LEARNING TO CROSS BOUNDARIES.** Turner Middle School in West Philadelphia and the Haverford School in subur-

ban Philadelphia could not be more different in the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition of their student populations. Yet groups of students from both schools work together with a cross-school team of teachers on a joint project on water and air quality at a nearby wildlife refuge.

The "Learning in Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for America's Schools" report, issued by the National Commission on Service-Learning in 2002, describes an unidentified high school where Spanish-speaking students use their language skills in the real world. "Students brainstormed ideas, conducted research at the library and interviewed community leaders ... about a library tutoring program for immigrants wanting to become citizens. For the rest of the year, students spent two hours per week as bilingual tutors to Spanish-speaking adults studying for their U.S. citizenship exams. Students practiced their Spanish inside and beyond school walls and learned ... with their new friends about the rights, responsibilities and expectations of U.S. citizenship."

### **Future Citizenry**

The New Commission on the Skills of

## **Defining Citizenship Learning**

When most school leaders think of educating for citizenship, they immediately identify that preparation as taking place in a certain class or a subject or as a requirement of so many hours doing community service.

Although volunteerism and charitable work are wonderful, they are not the same as learning to become a democratic member of a community working with people who are different in respectful and productive ways. Neither a course in history or civics nor doing service projects gets at the DNA of a democracy — which are well-informed individuals who participate jointly as equals to solve a community concern.

Purposeful schools that take their civic mission seriously are interesting and intellectually challenging places for students, teachers, administrators, parents and the community at large. They have lively halls where students and adults talk with each other with ease about classroom, school and community issues. Student work that improves conditions of the larger society is seen on continuous and changing display on classroom walls and in attractive arrangements.

These classroom and school environments foster genuine interest in students and engage students in seeing first-hand the relevance of what they are learning. Students do interdisciplinary problem solving using their learning of math, music, art, history, English and

mathematics to bear upon issues of the environment, preventative disease, economic development, aging, safety, aesthetics, transportation, government, law, free press, bullying and violence. Students of different race/ethnicities, socioeconomic levels, gender and lifestyles learn to work respectfully, comfortably and productively with each other as faculty and school leaders team students together to analyze and solve common problems.

Students learn the content knowledge, employment and health skills, aesthetic appreciations and understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship — guidance that is not the responsibility of only civic, history or social studies teachers. And such learning is intended for all students, not only those in advanced classes or those who can participate in after-school science fairs. This is done by ensuring there is time within the curriculum and within the structure of the school week for teachers to work together to plan and assess such student work.

The superintendent can drive the concept of educating for democratic citizenship in the planning process and through resource allocations to schools and to see that the outcome of teacher and student work is recognized by the school board, the news media and the general public.

—Carl Glickman

the American Workforce issued its call for preparing future workers by stating, “Complexity of many kinds will be a hallmark of the future workplace, as will swift changes, driven by rapid advances in technology. ... People who prefer conventional work environments are likely to see their jobs disappear. ... But many (who will succeed) ... will work on ever-changing teams with people from other organizations.”

The commission’s report explains that the type of education needed to prepare future employees will focus on ideas and abstractions, creativity and innovation and help students reach out beyond the confines of classrooms and schools.

Last spring the Forum for Education and Democracy issued its call for preparing future citizens this way: “The challenge is clear — improving education and improving democracy go hand in hand. We need to build upon the natural curiosity of children to help them make sense of the world. We need to arm them with the knowledge and skills, as well as the

resourcefulness and inventiveness that will be required to invent solutions to tomorrow’s problems. We need to give them the tools to live their lives respectfully and collaboratively with others, building communities that can tackle the challenges that lie ahead.”

The connection is clear. The skills for a good worker and the skills for a good citizen have great overlap. Both skill sets are based on an education that is interesting and engaging and that results in real contributions. Such an education will challenge all students, keep many more students moving successfully through school and help every student to see first hand what value education has on their life now and in the future. ■

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## Additional Resources

Carl Glickman suggests these resources relating to his article:

- ▶ “Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education,” Forum for Education and Democracy, Amesville, Ohio, [forumforeducation.org](http://forumforeducation.org)
- ▶ “Learning in Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for America’s Schools,” National Commission on Service-Learning, [www.servicelearningcommission.org](http://www.servicelearningcommission.org)
- ▶ National Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, [civicmissionof-schools.org/site/campaign/overview/council.html](http://civicmissionof-schools.org/site/campaign/overview/council.html)
- ▶ “Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce,” National Center on Education and the Economy, published by Jossey-Bass

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