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Youth Civic Engagement: Is it Critical to Our Democracy?
Youth Civic Leaders Summit – March 2-4, 2012
Youth-Led Issues Forum – "Civic Engagement" Track
Background Information

Overview:

"Youth civic engagement is critical to our democracy. Young people benefit personally by participating and communities need their voices and their energies to address problems. The future of our democracy depends on each new generation developing the skills, values and habits of participation."
  *(CIRCLE, Executive Summary, **http://www.civicyouth.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/11/CIRCLE_cluster_exec2010.pdf)***

The Problem:

At a time when the nation is confronting some of the more difficult decisions it has faced in long time, a lack of high quality civic education in America's schools leaves millions of citizens without the wherewithal to make sense of our system of government. Reasons for concern are reflected in the answers from recent Annenberg Public Policy Center surveys in the past decade. Among the findings were:

- Only one-third of Americans could name all three branches of government; one-third couldn't name any.
- Just over a third thought that it was the intention of the Founding Fathers to have each branch hold a lot of power, but the president has the final say.
- Just under half of Americans (47%) knew that a 5-4 decision by the Supreme Court carries the same legal weight as a 9-0 ruling.
- Almost a third mistakenly believed that a U.S. Supreme Court ruling could be appealed.
- When the Supreme Court divides 5-4, roughly one in four (23%) believed the decision was referred to Congress for resolution; 16% thought it needed to be sent back to the lower courts.

While there is no single solution that alone can revitalize our democracy, there is one common-sense step our nation can take to strengthen it. Too often overlooked by politicians, educators, and civic engagement advocates, investing in civic learning strengthens American democracy.

Self-government requires far more than voting in elections every four years. It requires citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are involved in the political process, and possess moral and civic virtues. Generations of leaders, from America's founders to the inventors of public education to elected leaders in the twentieth century, have understood that these qualities <u>are not</u> automatically transmitted to the next generation—they must be passed down through schools. Ultimately, schools are the guardians of democracy.

Research shows that students who receive effective civic learning are:

- More likely to vote and discuss politics at home
- Four times more likely to volunteer and work on community issues
- More confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives.

Likewise, improved civic learning can address many of our democratic shortfalls.

- It increases the democratic accountability of elected officials since only informed and engaged citizens will ask tough questions of their leaders.
- It improves public discourse, since knowledgeable and interested citizens will demand more from the media.
- It fulfills our ideal of civic equality by giving every citizen, regardless of background, the tools to be a full participant.

Despite these obvious benefits, a majority of America's schools either neglect civic learning or teach it in a minimal or superficial way (too often as an elective). The consequences of this neglect are staggering, but unsurprising. On a recent national assessment in civics,

- Two-thirds of all American students scored <u>below</u> proficient.
- On the same test, less than one-third of eighth graders could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and
- Fewer than one in seven high school seniors were able to explain how citizen participation benefits democracy. Despite the highest levels of voter turnout in over forty years, the 2008 presidential election witnessed nearly one hundred million Americans who were eligible to vote but did not.
- The data revealed that only 27 percent of fourth-graders, 22 percent of eighth-graders and 24 percent of twelfth-graders scored proficient or higher in civics – meaning that millions of young Americans will be unprepared to be the informed and engaged citizens a healthy democracy requires.

Scores were even lower for low-income and minority students, with black students scoring on average, 24 to 30 points lower than their white counterparts. This persistent civic achievement gap undermines the equality of all citizens.

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According to research conducted by CIRCLE, a leading research organization at Tufts University, to understand the civic achievement gap, they looked at the youth vote in 2008 and 2010. From their studies, they believe that what America needs is "to understand the differences among this diverse group so we can work to reduce the number of disengaged youth."

In their Executive Summary from "Exploring A Diverse Generation," CIRCLE conducted a cluster analysis of Census civic engagement data from 2008 and 2010 to explore differences. Their cluster analysis identified groups of youth with different patterns and levels of civic engagement… According to CIRCLE, "in 2008 the presidential election mobilized millions of young people to vote and got many talking about political and civic issues. Three of the six clusters that emerged reported

voter turnout rates at or close to 100%. These clusters, Broadly Engaged (19%), Political Specialists (19%) and Only Voted (18%), differed mainly in whether and how they were engaged beyond voting. The rest of the youth population clustered into Civically Alienated (16%), Politically Marginalized (13%) and Engaged Non-Voters (14%). While largely comprised of non-voting youth, these three clusters also differed primarily by their engagement beyond voting. The 2008 clusters clearly reflect the excitement around the 2008 presidential race and overall high levels of civic - especially political - engagement among young Americans.

To illustrate how different these clusters were, CIRCLE looked at the Broadly Engaged and Civically Alienated clusters. Almost everyone in the Broadly Engaged cluster voted and many also volunteered, worked with youth in their communities, attended public meetings or worked with neighbors to address community problems. Most had at least some college education and 70.6% were White. Meanwhile, the Civically Alienated group did not vote, volunteer, belong to any groups or otherwise participate in local civil society. A majority held a high school diploma or less, only ten percent were college graduates, and a majority were people of color."

CIRCLE believes that "although it is unlikely that 2012 will replicate either 2008 or 2010, their cluster analysis holds important lessons for the future:

- Reflecting underlying inequalities in social circumstances and opportunity, young people will probably divide into groups ranging from highly alienated to deeply engaged. Policymakers and others responsible for civic education in schools, communities and community service programs should focus on the severe gaps in civic participation.

- **Engaging more young Americans** in civic and political life requires an awareness of how the young adult population is segmented and the engagement of those subgroups. For example, the Talkers cluster demonstrated interest in civic and political issues, but many did not vote 2010. Our own focus group research has found many disadvantaged young adults fit this profile. Other research suggests that some of these young people could be persuaded to vote if they were directly asked to participate or if voting seemed more accessible. Another important group consists of those who voted in 2008 but did virtually nothing else in the civic or political domain. Their interest in the 2008 election could be leveraged to get them involved in other ways.

CIRCLE

Understanding a Diverse Generation
Youth Civic Engagement in the United States
www.civicyouth.org/featured-new-study-dispels-stereotypes-about-young-voters-ahead-of-2012-elections/

Benefits of Civic Learning:

According to the Civic Mission of Schools in their "Guardian of Democracy" report, "a large body of research demonstrates the tangible benefits of civic learning. First and foremost, civic learning promotes civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions—research makes clear that students who received high-quality civic learning are more likely than their counterparts to understand public issues, view political engagement as a means of addressing communal challenges, and participate in civic

activities. Civic learning has similarly been shown to promote civic equality. Poor, minority, urban, or rural students who do receive high-quality civic learning perform considerably higher than their counterparts, demonstrating the possibility of civic learning to fulfill the ideal of civic equality.

Research also demonstrates non-civic benefits of civic learning. Civic learning has been shown to instill young people with the "twenty-first century competencies" that employers value in the new economy. Schools that implement high-quality civic learning are more likely to have a better school climate and are more likely to have lower dropout rates.

Six proven practices constitute a well-rounded and high quality civic learning experience, and this report details both what they entail and the research demonstrating the advantages of each. These include the following:

1. Classroom Instruction: Schools should provide instruction in government, history, economics, law, and democracy.
2. Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues: Schools should incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.
3. Service-Learning: Schools should design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Extracurricular Activities: Schools should offer opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom.
5. School Governance: Schools should encourage student participation in school governance.
6. Simulations of Democratic Processes: Schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures."

Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools: Executive Summary
http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/
The full data from the 2010 Civics NAEP is available at <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>.
http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/site/documents/naep2011

Ways to Engage Young People—What's Being Done?

What are some strategies for strengthening youth participation in public policy at the local level? Young people already participate in public policy. There are young people organizing around policy issues, adults involving them in the proceedings of public agencies, and youths and adults collaborating in intergenerational partnerships. There is evidence that initiatives are increasing and will continue in the future.

The National League of Cities, for example, describes approaches to youth service, youth mapping, youth summits, and youth councils in American cities.
Still, such efforts are exceptional. Young people do not normally view themselves as a group that can influence policy, adults do not view them as competent citizens, and public officials do not view them as central to their work.

With the formation of an Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) to strengthen organizational partnerships and community resources for youths and families, the first administrator—a strong youth advocate—argued that young people "should be a presence at city hall." She collaborated with a few high school students to propose an ad-hoc Mayor's Youth Council, and the mayor and city commissioners passed a resolution supporting its creation.

Today, the Mayor's Youth Council aims to give "a voice for Grand Rapids youth to city government to plan a better future for when it is in our hands." Fifteen council members are selected for their potential for future municipal leadership, with special emphasis on representation of racial and ethnic diversity. Council members are sworn in by city commissioners and serve a one-year term. Council members attend orientation sessions, leadership retreats, and training workshops, such as the annual National League of Cities Congress of Cities, where they participate in issue discussions and interact with other youth council members nationwide. Council members meet regularly to involve young people in policy formation and municipal government.

Overall, the Mayor's Youth Council in Grand Rapids, Michigan enables young people to participate in policy discussions and public affairs at the local level. Some municipal officials express pride in their work, but there is no permanent mechanism to sustain its support over the long haul.

Observations

Young people want to participate in public policy at the local level. Given opportunities, they serve in formal and informal roles on youth councils and agency boards. They express positions on issues, speak at meetings, and make recommendations to public officials. They mobilize peers to represent their views and plan programs of their choosing. We believe that the number of youth participants is limitless, an observation in contrast with views of today's youth as withdrawn from community and disengaged from democracy.

Youth Participation in Public Policy at the Local Level
New Lessons from Michigan Municipalities, National Civic Review
BY KATIE RICHARDS-SCHUSTER AND BARRY CHECKOWAY *26 © 2010*

"Young people (high school students and young adults) are an often-overlooked civic asset. Establishing youth councils or other structures for youth leadership not only brings the perspectives of the younger generation to the table, it also catalyzes and enriches engagement efforts generally."

Democratic Spaces for Young People—Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure Building Block 3 of 12 –Creating Spaces for Citizens--National League of Cities

In Missouri, the Ferguson Youth Initiative (FYI) is a combined effort involving Ferguson, MO youth, city officials, residents and educators to find ways to help better serve the young people of our community. Their goals include:

- Developing a communication system that informs youth on programs that are available for them
- Connecting organizations that are doing things so there is a network of resources developed

- Developing collaboration efforts that continues to strengthen the youth network
- Coordinating these efforts in a process that is youth driven and sustainable

On July 26, 2011, the Ferguson City Council adopted Ordinance #3469 which establishes the Ferguson Youth Advisory Board (FYAB). The purpose of the Youth Advisory Board is to provide the Ferguson City Council a youth perspective on issues that affect the City of Ferguson and to provide youth with a forum to be active and make a difference in their community. Eight students from the City of Ferguson who range in age from 13 to 19 years were selected to serve on the first FYAB.

For More Information: http://fyifergyouth.org/about-us/

"Across the country, municipal leaders are discovering one of their greatest assets: the youth of their city. Increasingly, youth are working with elected officials and other city leaders to tackle the important issues of local government. More and more young people are also discovering that their voices matter to their communities, and that they can make their communities better places to live."

Drawing upon the experiences of communities with the most robust youth engagement initiatives, the guide offers a definition of authentic youth civic engagement (AYCE) in which young people:
- are seen as valuable participants in the work of local government;
- are prepared to take on meaningful roles in addressing relevant issues; and
- work in partnership with adults who respect, listen to and support them.

In cities and towns that promote a strong youth voice in local decision-making processes, youth work side-by-side with municipal officials and other adult allies to make their communities better places to live. Through these partnerships, young people and adults focus not only on "youth issues," such as school safety, afterschool opportunities or use of public space, but also local economic development plans, "green" initiatives and other issues that affect the entire community.

Their efforts frequently lead to budget savings, increased support for city decisions and wiser policy and program choices. Youth who are engaged in meaningful civic engagement opportunities also tend to do better in school and avoid risky behaviors. In addition, they are more likely to vote, volunteer and become lifelong civic leaders as adults.

So how can municipal officials develop or improve their efforts to involve youth in the work of their city government? The guide presents an AYCE framework consisting of four critical elements for a successful initiative:
- A setting in which the civic climate of the community is welcoming and inviting to youth, acknowledging their role in public policy, planning and decision-making;
- A structure in which the organization and system that supports AYCE meets both the needs of the local government and the interests of the young people;
- A strategy that offers a wide range of activities and provides youth with a breadth and depth of meaningful opportunities for participation in local government; and
- Support from adult allies, both within and outside local government, which enables the young people involved in AYCE efforts to have a real impact on issues that concern them.

Executive Summary: Authentic Youth Civic Engagement-A Guide for Municipal Leaders.

10 Strategies Beyond Youth Councils to Engage Youth in Public Policy, Planning and Decision-Making (AYCE), National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families

1. **Assessment/Mapping**: This strategy involves active research by young people about the resources available to them in their neighborhood and community. There are numerous variations. In the first step, youth canvass or survey a given area to uncover its youth-related services, supports and opportunities. The next step is cataloging and analyzing the data to determine youth needs. Additional steps can include advocating for needed services and programs or creating referral and information services for their peers.

2. **Bill of Rights**: A number of cities have supported youth-led processes to identify and articulate the basic rights of children and youth. The resulting document raises community-wide awareness of youth issues, and helps young people hold adult decision-makers accountable to their youngest constituents.

3. **Congress/Summits/Speakouts**: Cities use a variety of strategies to bring young people together to identify and set youth priorities. The most extensive of these models is the Youth Congress, fashioned after the U.S. Congress and complete with an annual General Assembly, in which youth research and shape local policy. Summits and speakouts are generally single events, often held annually, for youth to raise and discuss issues. City officials and other adults may be invited to these events, but are asked to listen rather than speak.

4. **Design and Planning**: It is a pretty safe bet that for every youth-related issue the city must tackle, there is a group of youth with the expertise and willingness to provide ideas and recommendations. From neighborhood centers to skate parks to websites to afterschool programs, cities can engage youth to design workable plans that will meet the needs of their peers. These opportunities can range from one-time planning charettes to ongoing employment in city departments.

5. **Funding and Philanthropy**: In youth-run grant programs, young people take responsibility for a sum of city funding and ensure that it is appropriately awarded to programs benefitting other youth. Youth set priorities, create funding criteria and applications, screen and review proposals, appropriate funds, monitor implementation and create final reports.

6. **Issue-Based Advocacy:** This strategy is generally best tackled in partnership with an outside intermediary or youth development organization. Young people learn skills in analysis of public policy and social issues, and then identify doable projects that often include organizing other youth in support of policy recommendations. Youth across the country have created successful advocacy projects around financial literacy, tobacco advertising, rights of foster care youth, fitness and obesity, violence prevention, media bias and the voting age for local elections.

7. **Membership on Boards, Commissions and Committees**: City boards and commissions can become more attuned to the needs of youth and their families with the appointment of young people as voting members. Most cities have dozens of appointed groups, from arts commissions to zoning boards, addressing topics of youth interest. Both youth and adult

members receive training on communication and roles, and new youth members are often paired with a long-time adult member as a "buddy" to help acclimate them to board work.

8. **Social Networks and Media**: Communication is a major aspect of engaging youth in government — to reach out to youth as well as provide a vehicle for them to share issues with their peers. A growing number of cities use social networking sites and other interactive Web-based services to inform youth about activities and receive their input on social and civic issues. This technology, as well as the city's public access television channel, are excellent vehicles for youth activism, allowing young people to identify issues of concern and creatively communicate them to the public.

9. **Training**: Skilled and experienced youth can be invaluable resources for local government as trainers. Youth insight into the interests, needs and behaviors of their own generation helps adults relate to and serve the youth population. Police academies, neighborhood planning teams, information technology and communication departments, and human services agencies are just some of the places where youth can assist in orientation and staff development.

10. **Voting and Electoral Participation**: Voter education/registration drives and candidate forums are successful strategies to engage youth in the electoral process. As with other strategies, it is important to go beyond the common expectation of teen volunteering (i.e., handing out campaign literature) to truly authentic participation. When youth identify current community issues, prepare questions for candidates, educate others about the voting process, conduct mock elections and sponsor candidate debates they are learning valuable civic lessons and widening the civic landscape of their city.

"Authentic Youth Civic Engagement: A Guide for Municipal Leaders". Published by NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) with support from the Surdna Foundation

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Title: Youth Civic Engagement: Is it Critical to Our Democracy?

As you can tell from the information provided, youth civic engagement is a major issue and is being discussed at all levels—local, state, and national; research indicates that youth want to be involved— if asked. In the past that rarely happened but there are indications that adult attitudes might be changing regarding youth civic engagement. Furthermore, there is a huge civic engagement gap between whites and minorities and/or low-income youth. Why has this happened? Why is there such a gap in civic engagement among our young people? What can be done to make the youth voice an important one in local, state, and national affairs? This Issue Paper is an invitation to discuss this problem and consider possible courses of action. The following are three (3) different approaches to talk through this problem and try to solve this important issue of engaging youth:

Approach One: Raising the awareness of the values and importance of becoming an engaged citizen.

What Can Be Done?
- Schools can incorporate discussions, examples, and opportunities for civic engagement or participation into their curriculum and school culture.
- High schools can continue the civic dialogue in all core subjects and make civics a required course for all high school students.
- Service Learning hours can be required for all middle and high school students and be a requirement for high school graduation
- Move cities and states beyond token levels of youth participation and toward efforts that prepare and empower youth to become active, engaged citizens.

Trade-Offs:
- If more emphasis is placed on civics in schools, will other subjects such as science & math suffer?
- Requiring service learning means students might opt out of other activities such as sports & theater
- Local governments would add another, important voice to their public dialogues, and would be grooming future employees for a career in government
- As youths develop a voice, more government officials will listen and take them seriously.

What Critics Say:
- Some people feel it is the parents NOT the school's responsibility to teach civic virtues and responsibility—this is the home's responsibility.
- There is no clear cut evidence that "volunteering" leads to more civic involvement.

Approach Two: Closing The Gap Between Minority &/or Low Income Groups.

What Can Be Done?
- Talk to and/or survey students and find out why they aren't engaged, i.e., don't vote, join clubs, get involved in service learning, run for student council, etc..
- Require that students in urban/rural schools take a civics course
- Work with parent groups in urban/rural schools to promote civic learning and civic participation
- Provide opportunities & incentives in urban/rural schools for minority students to participate in student government
- Work with outside groups to help set up student councils in urban/rural school districts
- Encourage minorities to get involved in outside groups such as 4-H and make sure they know about different club/organization opportunities
- Set up a mentorship program with civic groups who can work with students and help teach them the value of civic participation

Trade-Offs:
- There is only so much time in the school day—emphasis on civics would take time away from the more important subjects of reading, math, and science.
- Having more knowledge might create more trust in government and government leaders

What Critics Say:
- There are those that believe that only educated, informed individuals should be active, engaged citizens—we don't need or want everyone involved.
- Some people believe that it is not the school's responsibility to get students engaged but it is a personal or individual choice
- There is no guarantee that more programs for minority or low income youth would produce more engaged youth/citizens.
- Emphasis should be on lowering the drop-out rates and working on getting kids to learn how to read and write

Approach Three: Address the Root Causes

What Can Be Done?
- School officials can move away from high stakes testing and develop strategies to bring civics education back into the core curriculum and focus
- Help parents understand that they are civic role models for their children
- Bring local and state government officials into dialogues with students to begin building trust in government rather than distrust and skeptics.
- Schools and communities could develop "civic health" screenings when students begin 5th grade.
- Schools & communities need to develop more innovative civic programs that help students stay in school, get high school diplomas, and go to college.

Trade-Offs:
- Other core subjects such as science and math might suffer
- Taking on this issue diverts time and energy away from other more pressing local issues
- Parents might get upset that the government is telling them how to raise their children.

What Critics Say:
- More time on bridging the gap could create more political participation; some feel this is not necessarily good.
- There is no guarantee that more civic education will create more engaged citizens.
- There are more worthy issues that deserve a community's time and attention.