

“Youth Engaged as Citizens: What Can Be Done?”

Youth Civic Leaders Summit – March 2-4, 2012
 Youth-Led Issues Forum – “Citizenship” Track

Youth civic engagement is a major issue being discussed at all levels—local, state, and national. Most youth do not know who their local government officials are or what they do, and local leaders tend to undervalue what youth can do. There is also a huge gap between how whites and minorities and/or low-income youth are engaged in their communities. Why has this happened? What can be done to make youth voice important in local, state, and national affairs? What ideas and opinions do youth have on this issue? How do they see it affecting their schools and communities? Below are three different views people have on this issue and how it can be solved:

Option #1	Option #2	Option #3
<p>Raise awareness of the value of all youth being engaged as citizens.</p>	<p>Help more minority and/or low-income youth become engaged as citizens.</p>	<p>Address the root causes of why more youth are not engaged as citizens.</p>
<p>What can be done?</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools can add discussions, examples, and opportunities for civic engagement or into their curriculum and culture • High schools can have civic discussions in all classes and make civics a required course for all high school students • Service-learning hours can be required for all middle and high school students for graduation • Move cities and states beyond “token” efforts to involve youth and prepare and empower youth to become active, engaged citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey students about why they aren’t engaged (don’t vote, join clubs, do service, 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 participation • Provide opportunities and incentives for more minority students to participate in student government • Work with outside groups to help set up student councils in all school districts • Encourage minorities to get involved in groups like 4-H and make sure they know about clubs/organizations • Set up a mentorship program for civic groups to help teach students the value of civic participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School officials can move away from high stakes testing and bring civics education back into the core curriculum • Help parents understand they are civic role models for their children • Bring local and state government officials into dialogues with students to build trust in government rather than distrust and skepticism • Schools and communities can develop “civic health” screenings when students begin 5th grade • Schools and communities can develop more innovative civic programs that help students stay in school, get high school diplomas, and go to college

Trade-offs (the “give and take”)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If more emphasis is placed on civics in schools, will other subjects such as science and math suffer? • Requiring service-learning means students might opt out of other activities such as sports and theater • Local governments adding youth could gain important voices for public dialogues, and groom future employees for careers in government • As youth develop voice, government leaders will listen and take them seriously 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 help youth have more trust in government and government leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other core subjects such as science and math might suffer • Taking on this issue takes away time and energy away from other more pressing community issues • Parents might get upset that the government is telling them how to raise their children.
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What the “critics” say

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is NOT the school’s responsibility to teach civic virtues and responsibility; parents should handle this in the home • There is no clear cut evidence that youth “volunteering” leads to more civic involvement as adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only educated, informed individuals should be active, engaged citizens—we don’t need or want everyone involved • It is not the school’s responsibility to get students engaged; this should remain a personal or individual choice • There is no guarantee that more programs for minority or low income youth will produce more engaged youth/citizens • Emphasis should be on lowering drop-out rates and kids learning how to read and write 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More emphasis on bridging the gap could create more political participation (voting, etc.); 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
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Let’s discuss!

- What do we like about this choice?
- What do we dislike about this choice? What would it take if we were to choose this route?
- Are there people or groups who would support or oppose this choice?
- Are there any other choices we did not discuss?

Time to reflect!

- What did you learn about the effects of this issue on your community?
- Has your thinking about the issue changed as a result of today's discussion?
- How can we use what we have learned today?
- What can you do to make a difference?

Wrapping it up...

- What aspects of this issue seemed the most difficult to you?
- What were some common concerns the group shared?
- Were there any trade-offs that most people would accept? Would not accept?
- Did the group identify any shared directions for actions to take?