



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Oct. 25-29, 2010

It's Time for Civic Participation: Students Learn How in School

By UCLA IDEA

To most people the principle of “majority rule” means that a few people should not exercise their power over the will of the general public. But to others, majority rule means that minorities can be disregarded—even oppressed—if one voter more than 50 percent says it's OK. So how, when, and where do Americans learn to blend and exercise their rights and protections?

Acquiring these democratic judgments does not come “naturally”; they must be learned. We can discuss issues with family and friends, read editorials, listen to talk radio, or read Internet blogs. A few might study works on political theory. But as adults in a democracy, we hope that everyone begins with a common base of understanding that we learn in school.

We want our schools to provide the young with a foundation of knowledge and experience to build a just, civil society. We want schools to inspire civic participation and nurture a respect for the democratic balance of minority rights and majority rule. That's what schools *should* do, but it doesn't always happen. In reviewing state standards earlier this decade, the Education Commission of the States found most state-sanctioned civic curriculum emphasized “encyclopedic coverage” of topics, such as government structures, that had little connection to a young person's “identity as a citizen.”

One of the more positive examples of civic education took place this week when more than 100,000 students statewide joined peers across the nation to cast ballots. In the mock election, students voted on who should be the next governor, U.S. senator and measures ranging from legalizing marijuana to congressional redistricting and budget process overhauls.

California Secretary of State Debra Bowen and Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell provided materials and resources to schools to help inform the students prior to the election. Bowen said “...we know that students who participate in this kind of program are much more likely to go on to be regular voters.” High school junior and mock voter Christine Bayon from Benicia High School in the Central Valley agreed that “if students become more knowledgeable, it's more likely they will vote.”

The most difficult voter issues—those that require a deep understanding of majority and minority rights—are not well informed by election-campaign sound bites or news headlines. Those running for political office may not want to highlight their positions on divisive issues. For example, elected leaders can affect policies that influence protections of the LGBT community. Suicide, harassment, and abuse related to sexual or gender identity attest to the need for policy makers' awareness and actions to assure that the young and their elders are informed and protected.

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Page 2

To this end, a federal Department of Education civil rights division memo, released this week, said that some Title IX protections against discrimination based on sex could be applied to protecting LGBT students. California has led in these protections, and since 2000, California law protects students from harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

However, protecting rights and individuals is not just a challenge of getting the correct laws in place. Civic learning—responsible citizenship building—demands that the most difficult topics for adults not be neglected by schools. As former California State Sen. Sheila Kuehl and UCLA Professor Stuart Biegel argue in a recent report on LGBT students, school officials need to foster safe learning environments that demonstrate regard for all students.

“In this area, educators are not required to change their personal values or religious beliefs. However, all students must be treated with equal dignity and equal respect by school officials, both under the law and as a matter of morality and common decency,” Biegel said.

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