

# democracy in action

## Experiential Civics Learning in Afterschool Advocacy Days

by Susan Blank with Lucy N. Friedman and  
Kathleen Carlson

I didn't think that many people would think afterschool was so important. There were so many people there, it kind of took my breath away... Advocacy Day teaches kids to stand up for something. If you don't stand for something, you can fall for anything. —Randy Wilson, participant in a New York City afterschool program<sup>1</sup>

About 20 of us met with the [state] senator and we asked questions. A lot of kids got to speak up... My advice? If you have the chance, get involved. —Sara Cusumano, participant in a Hudson, New York, afterschool program

Last winter, Randy Wilson and Sara Cusumano were among over 1,000 youth from around New York State who converged on its capital, Albany, for After-School Advocacy Day. The annual event, which includes over 100 scheduled meetings with legislators and their aides, is designed to help young people convince legislators to continue and expand afterschool programming. The young people who attend are between the ages of 8 and 18, typically 10 to 13. By design, they far outnumber the adults—parents and program staff members—who travel with them to Albany. Wearing T-shirts with quotations and statements about the importance of afterschool programs, the youth spend



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## Advocacy Day Sponsors

The After-School Corporation (TASC) was established in 1998 with a \$125 million challenge grant (which is matched by other funders on a 3:1 basis) from the Open Society Institute. The organization's overall purpose is to make high-quality afterschool programs universally available and publicly funded in New York City, New York State, and across the nation. To further this mission, TASC gathers and disseminates information on best practices and outcomes, as well as making grants to a wide variety of nonprofit groups, including many community-based organizations, to manage school-based afterschool programs. Today over 300 programs, most in New York City, collectively serve 55,000 students in grades K–12. These programs, led by fulltime, year-round directors, offer educational enrichment, technological skills development, and homework help, as well as arts, sports, and community service activities.

Founded in 2000 with the help of TASC, Coalition for After-School Funding (CASF), part of the group Citizen Action of New York, is an afterschool advocacy campaign with more than 350 member organizations throughout New York State. CASF's mission is to promote the availability of high-quality afterschool services in New York State. Advocacy Days are an important focus of CASF/TASC joint efforts to further this goal.

Executive director of Citizen Action of New York, CASF's parent organization, noted that legislators are presumed to respond most readily to "money or votes—and kids have neither." Nevertheless, she believes, young people "change these dynamics. They are our most effective voice." Politicians agree. "These are not Gucci-clad professional lobbyists," said New York State Senator Sam Hoyt,

the morning at a rally that features speakers, performances by afterschool groups, awards to outstanding young leaders, and role-plays to prepare the young people for their sessions with legislators.

Following a brief march to the capitol building, delegations from the different localities meet with their legislators or with staffers. In addition to the role-plays immediately preceding the meetings, students have had training in their home programs to prepare them to talk to legislators. Once the day is over, staff of participating afterschool programs plan follow-up activities such as site visits by legislators and letter-writing campaigns.

Cosponsored by Coalition for After-School Funding (CASF) and The After-School Corporation (TASC; see box), After-School Advocacy Days have been held annually in Albany since 2000. These events are enormously helpful to the two sponsors' efforts to influence officials who make decisions about funding afterschool programs. Karen Scharff, execu-

"but they can be a breath of fresh air. If they say to me, 'I need your help,' I will listen."

However, besides the role that a strong youth presence plays in delivering the Advocacy Day message to lawmakers, the day's organizers cite equally important educational and youth development purposes for the event. Advocacy Day exposes young people to an experiential civics lesson that gives them a feel for participating in democratic processes. The event's active and participatory nature also offers youth opportunities to exercise leadership and speaking skills that contribute to social and emotional growth.

### Youth and Government: Not Enough Connection

Advocacy Day takes place against a backdrop of concern about whether today's youth will be ready and willing to participate in civic affairs when they become adults. Admittedly, the conventional wisdom that the younger generation "doesn't care" about anything except its own well-being is losing currency. Pointing to rates of youth volunteerism in community activities that exceed participation levels for past generations of young people, a 2001 report from the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service argued that "...portraying youth as disengaged ... fails to acknowledge ... [their] direct one-on-one service in and on behalf of their communities" (Gibson, 2001, p.4).

However, the report immediately goes on to cite an opinion that this heartening trend does not tell the whole story:

Charity and/or volunteerism may not be enough, Delli Carpini notes ... The problem, he writes, is that 'civic engagement has become *defined* as the one-on-one experience ... What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated problems these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy.' (Gibson, 2001, p. 4)

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Compared to their willingness to be involved in one sphere of civic engagement—good works—young people seem to be less attracted to political involvement. While the proportion of young people who voted in the 2004 presidential election rose significantly over the previous election,

the youth voting rate was still considerably lower than the participation rate for the overall electorate (Faler, 2005; CIRCLE, 2005). Furthermore, although next year's National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in the area of civics could show a significant upturn in students' knowledge of this subject, the climb to what most people would consider acceptable levels of mastery will need to be steep. The NAEP's last civics assessment, conducted in 1998, revealed that only around a quarter of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 had a proficient or better knowledge of civics (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Analyzing results from its study of civic engagement among U.S. youth, the National Association of Secretaries of State (1999) concluded that many young people feel distanced from democratic institutions:

In theory, most American youth believe that government has a legitimate role to play in people's lives and acknowledge that government has at least some impact in their own lives. In reality, they ... see few connections between government's problem-solving role and the concerns they currently face in their daily lives.

TASC and CASF have found that Advocacy Days help students make those connections.

### How Advocacy Days Foster Learning

By giving young people a chance to meet with public officials, Advocacy Days put a human face on democratic institutions and bring the concept of political participation to life. This hands-on connection is especially important because TASC has found that finding good ways to translate the concept of political participation into program activities can be a challenge. Staff of TASC-sponsored programs have little or no trouble conceiving of a wealth of specific activities—a chess club, a theatrical performance, or a team, for instance—to help students build mathematical, artistic, or physical skills. Projects that involve the charitable-volunteering side of civic engagement are also a staple of TASC programming.

For the “democracy-in-action” side of civic engagement, some TASC programs have successfully operated mock trials and student government projects. Advocacy

Days are a welcome addition to the repertoire of program ideas that help young people understand democratic processes while offering them the same quotient of fun and engagement as other active projects. Many youth discover that, like performing in a play or being a member

of a sports team, acting politically is an experience they and their friends can enjoy. Shaneisha Payne, who came to the 2004 Advocacy Day as a seventh grader from Niagara Falls, recalled that what she liked most about the day was “meeting different people from different places.” She said that she would tell friends to attend because “it's a great experience to look at places besides Niagara

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Falls.” “It was fun to see lots of people in one place for one cause,” said Michelle Vicsama, who attends a program at New York City's Martin Luther King, Jr., High School that is managed by the Lincoln Square Business Improvement District. Attending meetings with legislators where students were expected to speak “brought out some of my shyness,” she acknowledged, but she said that she was able to become more comfortable “because I was around other kids and it was for a good cause.”

As these recollections suggest, the political experience of Advocacy Days can go hand in hand with opportunities for personal growth. Indeed, many staff members of participating afterschool programs value the way in which the experience can help young people feel efficacious and experience themselves as part of a larger social network—two of the ingredients that experts see as building blocks of positive youth development (National Research Council, 2002; see Executive Summary, p. 7). “Even though studies—including the five-year PSA [Policy Studies Associates] evaluation of TASC-sponsored programs—show that participating in afterschool programs can make a difference in academic outcomes,” said TASC President Lucy Friedman, “it's becoming increasingly clear that we should care at least as much about the capacity of these programs to round out the educational experience of the classroom. And one way to do that is to help young people feel stronger connections to their communities and to society.”<sup>2</sup> In one respect, Advocacy Days are particularly well-positioned to promote such connections: Because they place youth and adults on the same “team,” they model cross-generational efforts to improve community and societal conditions.

Like many kinds of experiential learning, Advocacy Days can also reinforce classroom education. Anastasia Brown, an eleventh grader from the Martin Luther King, Jr., High School program, has attended two Advocacy Days. She said that she learned about the First Amendment and free speech in school, but the trip to Albany was different: “You’re learning it, but you’re not realizing it, because you’re doing it.”

### Some Challenges in Organizing Advocacy Days

Programs or coalitions that consider organizing their own advocacy days are likely to face two initial questions, one legal and ethical and the other practical.

#### Legal and Ethical Concerns

Nonprofit organizations that, like TASC, manage or oversee after-school programs should make sure that sponsoring an advocacy day will not jeopardize their tax-exempt status. They should obtain legal counsel to be certain that they understand any requirements about reporting lobbying activities. However, TASC, CASF, and many other groups that organize events to advocate for their causes find that keeping track of expenses is not particularly burdensome.

Aside from legal concerns about lobbying, another question is whether it is right to involve young people in this activity. That concern would be justified if youth were brought to these events as passive participants. The case is different if they help to shape what happens. When young people are encouraged to own the experience, the dual goals of these kinds of events—to help secure funding and to educate youth about democracy in action—are complementary. The educational component is enhanced, in this case, because participants who value their afterschool programs see the need to keep them alive as the kind of close-to-home issue that gives advocates a sense of genuine connection to political participation.

#### Logistics

Orchestrating Advocacy Days requires close attention to detail, but the tasks are manageable when an organization develops a system for pulling those details together. If staff time is tight, the event need not be large-scale. The experience can be as meaningful for

delegations of one or two dozen students as it is for the some 1,000 young people who travel to Albany.

The two elements of planning that require the most attention are the arrangements for visits to political leaders and for transportation. For the visits, programs should start contacting the officials they wish to meet far in advance of their target dates, often through the legislators’ office schedulers. Programs should be prepared, and prepare the youth, to meet with policy aides as well as elected officials. These aides are often key to moving legislation, and youth who do meet with them are learning that the political process is not limited to elected officials.

For TASC and CASF, transportation—buses to Albany—is by far the biggest expense of state Advocacy Days. (Other expenses include lunches and T-shirts.)

Especially for programs operating smaller events, getting parents and staff to volunteer to drive vans and cars is a way to save on this cost.

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#### Maximizing the Educational Value of Advocacy Days

As in many areas of afterschool programming, mastery of the logistical details of Advocacy Days is necessary but not sufficient for success. Running good Advocacy Days also depends on knowing how to structure them into rich, exciting learning experiences. Over the years, TASC and CASF have developed insights about strategies that help turn Advocacy Days into meaningful educational events.

#### Preparatory and Follow-Up Activities

The paramount guideline for turning single events into true learning experiences is to surround the events with preparatory and follow-up activities. TASC-sponsored programs typically brief young Advocacy Day participants on topics such as the structure of the legislature, legislative perspectives, and the funding situation for afterschool services.

A number of programs also engage youth in role-plays, which are then reinforced by the ones staged at the Albany rally. In these role-plays, youth learn of the range of reactions they may encounter from legislators. CASF’s scripts of suggested role-plays feature Senator I’m Late, who tells students, “It’s a shame I don’t have time to meet with you”; Assembly Member Whatever U Say, who greets students with “Welcome, welcome





to Albany! It's cold out there, isn't it?" and Senator Stayon Topic, who, contrary to his name, tries to divert the conversation into a more general discussion of the education crisis. During the role-plays, youth learn how to respond to these scenarios, for example, by pointing out that the group has traveled all the way to Albany and will take only a few minutes to make its presentation or by pressing for specifics from a politician who wanders from the topic.

Jenny Seaquist, a teacher-artist in a TASC-sponsored New York City program operated by the Educational Alliance, said that students in her program's role-play practiced politely refocusing the conversation from generalities to the funding needs of their programs.

In fact, most legislators and aides engage well with youth.

Jenny Seaquist recalled her students' meeting with a top aide of Senator Liz Krueger. "When they asked, 'Why doesn't the funding get through?' she told them, 'Some people want one thing, some another, and there's a need to compromise.' She was very respectful." But Jennique Sanford, who is now 17 and has attended two Advocacy Days, said that some legislators have looked less interested than others. "You can see

on their face—'whatever.' They're listening with closed ears." She added that she has learned not to be overly frustrated by such reactions: "I would do it again, as long as I got a chance to speak."

Adults who accompany program participants to meetings with legislators, as well as the lawmakers themselves, have described the youth as engaged, confident, and well spoken. "They were very well prepared,"

recalled Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples, "and they were able to articulate the importance of after-school services."

Once Advocacy Day has ended, programs try to keep its issues and spirit alive. Many follow up with postcards or notes to the officials who hosted their delegations, thanking them for the visits and making follow-up requests for sup-

port of afterschool services. Some staff and students invite elected officials who have met students in their offices to visit the afterschool programs. For youth who have traveled to Advocacy Day, a second meeting reinforces the initial experience. For example, young people in a Brooklyn program operated by Project Reach Youth, which had in past years lost important funding, saw a visiting legislator honor their request to publicly sign a

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pledge to try to do his utmost to sustain their program. Youth who have already met with a legislator in Albany and then written a follow-up postcard or met with a legislator a second time are learning that advocacy is a process, not a one-time event.

### Youth Control

Over and above the value of making Advocacy Days part of a continuous educational experience, adult planners should give youth as much control of the events as possible. Organizers counsel that it is important to let young people take the lead in talking to elected officials. “Ultimately the meetings are between them and the legislator,” said State CASF Director Davia Gaddy-Collington, articulating the organizers’ view of the mindset they recommend for adult leaders. “A lot of teenagers don’t realize they have a voice,” said Anastasia Brown, who participates in the Martin Luther King, Jr., High School program. “In the program we learned that we’re the employers of the people in the senate, and if they’re not helping us, we can fire them.” Brown said her delegation generally had positive responses from legislators: “Some people were taking down what we said and how we felt.” One legislator, however, who Brown said was “hard to read,” remarked that he was not “the only one” making the decision about afterschool funding. “One person can make a difference,” Brown recalled a student answering. “If you speak up for us, someone else can understand.”

Allison Fleminger, a coordinator for the afterschool program operated by Project Reach Youth (PRY) at New York City’s P. S. 230, asserted that Advocacy Days help youth know that “their opinions hold weight.” She speculated that this affirmation may be particularly important for the many youngsters from immigrant backgrounds who come to the PRY program from its highly diverse Brooklyn neighborhood. These youth, Fleminger said, may hesitate to question authority, but Advocacy Days help them find positive ways for voicing their opinions.

Any educational opportunity that aims to give young people a voice must balance the needs for adult guidance and for free expression. Illustrating that creative tension, staff who are involved in organizing Advocacy Days offer two different but complementary perspectives on preparing students for the meetings.

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Describing training sessions where youth are asked, “What do you want the legislator to do?” Karen Scharff of Citizen Action of New York emphasized the need to help youth anticipate how sessions might unfold. For example, she endorsed the CASF approach of walking young people through different scenarios to help them take charge of conversations. At the same time, a number of staff cautioned against over-preparing youth to speak about their experiences, noting that strong unrehearsed statements about the importance of afterschool programs in their lives are the most powerful messages.

### The Importance of Patience

Staff who have worked on Advocacy Days also stress the importance of exercising and inculcating patience. Staff members themselves need a high quotient of persistence to schedule meetings with busy elected officials. Hero Tamakloe, who directs a TASC-sponsored program operated by the YMCA of Greater New York in P. S. 95 in Queens, described the chain of events leading up to a follow-up visit by a local legislator. “He was supposed to be here by 3:30, and then at the last minute his schedule looked too crowded and he wanted to cancel. We told him it was fine to come for only ten minutes. He agreed to do that—and then he ended up staying for over an hour. And he said he’d make a return visit.” The legislator also promised funding for the program.

Part of encouraging young people to have the patience they need to successfully navigate Advocacy Day involves helping them understand that the event will be more challenging than a recreational field trip. Staff pointed out that young participants should be told that the day will be long, that often they must be quiet, and that they must be ready to cope both with delays in legislators’ schedules and with extended waits for security procedures. More fundamentally, young people can be helped to understand that—as Senator Krueger’s aide told the delegation she hosted—the democratic process itself requires compromise. “I think kids start to get a better idea of how much pressure the politicians can get,” said afterschool program participant Sara Cusumano, expressing her perspective on how Advocacy Day can educate youth about the patience it can take to seek and find consensus.

## Positive Spirit

While staff are careful not to characterize Advocacy Day as a purely social outing, they recommend making a concerted effort to infuse the event with a positive spirit. The rally, with its chants, performances, and awards, as well as the march to the capitol building, help to create that spirit. “Everybody was walking in a big line,” recalled tenth grader Erick Merchan from the Martin Luther King, Jr., High School program. “We had posters, there were cameras, and people wondering what we were doing. People were, like, ‘Ohmigod, what’s going on?’” As this memory suggests, the experience of civic engagement for youth who attend Advocacy Day can be emotional as well as intellectual.

## Beyond Good Works

Among the many goals that afterschool programs can pursue, promoting civic engagement—and especially the kind that goes beyond good works by engaging youth in the political process—can be particularly challenging. Democratic participation can feel like a remote experience even for adults. How much more so for youth who have never even had a chance to vote in public elections? TASC has found that Advocacy Days are one way of creating an enlivening situation in which an ideal that society tries to inculcate—civic engagement—makes sense to young people.

The idea of including young people in public policy efforts to support afterschool services is spreading. For example, the national nonprofit Afterschool Alliance now invites youth to join the state delegations that participate in its two-day Afterschool for All advocacy event, held in Washington, DC. While the Alliance’s first two annual Afterschool for All sessions were limited to adults, 80 youth attended the event in 2004; in 2005, the number of young participants rose to 120.

Like a number of other learning-by-doing ventures, Advocacy Day consists of a seemingly straightforward idea—inviting young people to travel with adults on buses to the capital to speak to lawmakers—that has the potential to become a rich educational experience. To make the most of that potential, planners should recognize that bringing youth to Advocacy Day involves much more than planning the logistics of a trip. Organizers must provide youth with enough guidance and information to help them make sense of the political process, while at the same time offering them the opportunity to claim the experience as their own.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this article come from telephone interviews conducted by Susan Blank in 2004 and 2005. Some quotations were also included in an entry on TASC Advocacy Day in Sherrod, Flanagan, Kassimir, & Bertelsen, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For the PSA five-year evaluation study, see Reisner, White, Russell, & Birmingham (2004).