

# Civics education, engagement needn't wait until high school years

By Linda Charmaraman  
and Diane Gruber

When envisioning how to engage young citizens in our after-school programs in acts of civic pride and service, images of teens picking up trash in public parks or older youth organizing voting drives might come to mind. Developing an engagement with one's community traditionally has been the domain of the civics or U.S. government classroom, typically taught in the high school years, though cash- and time-strapped schools are dedicating fewer instructional resources to these topics (Gibson, 2001). Civic engagement in the childhood years (5 to 10) is often overlooked as a potential goal, because of misperceptions of what constitutes meaningful engagement with one's community.

Some civic education researchers disagree about whether to introduce explicit civic education in the elementary school years, citing that the content knowledge of civics is not age-appropriate. Fifth graders cannot vote so why trouble them with this now, they argue. By expanding civic engagement beyond content knowledge of how government functions and including the development of civic-oriented skills and dispositions, educators can design more comprehensive frameworks that increase opportunities for children's active involvement and understanding of how a community can pull together. To promote a foundation for an orientation toward democratic participation, schools and after-school programs must start at a younger age to cultivate these prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Studies have shown that even young children demonstrate awareness of democratic principles such as fairness, rights and freedoms (Berman, 1997; Helwig, 1998; Hess & Torney, 1967). According to Chi, Jastrzab and Melchior (2006), civic education in the elementary years maps on to similar school-based and after-school program missions traditionally considered developmentally appropriate for the childhood years, such as character development, conflict resolution and social and emotional development. In their study



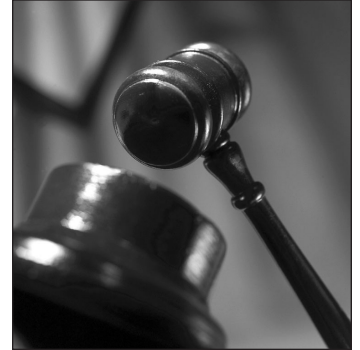
of a school-wide civic literacy program, their program goals for K-5th grade included

- accepting responsibility for one's own behavior;
- identifying needs and solutions for their community;
- taking the initiative to make a positive difference at their school; and

- understanding likeness and difference in a pluralistic society.

Although many civic-engagement-focused programs are geared toward adolescents, several programs and organizations across the country have centered on the childhood years to foster civic mindedness. These programs are rather diverse in that they range widely in how they are implemented, such as through school-wide initiatives or nonprofit community-based activities or online networks.

By partnering with elementary schools, families, young adult volunteers, organizations and businesses, Peace Games is multicity project empowering young children with the conflict resolution skills and opportunities to be peacemakers. Students are taught a weekly K-8 curriculum that incorporates civic-responsibility projects while staff members are provided a professional-development series. Programs interested in one-time training sessions or partnering with



this group can go to the Resources section of the Peace Games Web site ([www.peacegames.org/Resources.shtml](http://www.peacegames.org/Resources.shtml)). On this site, there is also a sample lesson plan on team building as well as recommended readings on various civic engagement topics (for example, social justice) that are divided up by age-appropriateness.

The Museum of Tolerance developed activities for fifth- and sixth-graders that include service learning, arts-based activities and guest speakers designed to provide insight on the damaging effects of discrimination. During a three-hour program in the Youth Action Lab, students receive a journal to record their thoughts while they view a documentary film for children on the Holocaust and Darfur. This type of activity fosters discussions on contemporary issues of prejudice and bullying, in hopes of fostering a climate of respect and protection of human rights. Lesson plans can be downloaded from their Web site ([www.museumoftolerance.com/](http://www.museumoftolerance.com/)) and can be used as a pre-field trip activity to a

local multicultural organization within your community.

Sponsored by such organizations as the National Geographic Educational Foundation and Zerofootprint, PBS developed a child-friendly site appropriate for kindergarten through fifth grade that teaches about sustainability, ecology and social equity. The Greens Activity Guide (which can be downloaded at [www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/6476/preview/](http://www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/6476/preview/)), features lesson plans and a carbon footprint interactive calculator. For lessons on democracy, there is a Sticker Race project where kids can log on to their site ([www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/6686/preview/](http://www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/6686/preview/)) and vote for the top issues that concern them the most, from



**Developing an engagement with one's community traditionally has been the domain of the civics or U.S. government classroom. But numerous organizations and Web sites promote ways for children to become active in their communities before high school, often the age at which civics education begins.**

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animal rights to poverty and hunger.

One civic-empowerment activity that has worked very successfully in youth programs is the use of "photovoice" (Wilson et al., 2007). Youth are given disposable cameras to take pictures capturing the assets and issues in their communities that they care about. The first session involves teaching youth about the mechanics of photography, privacy and the ethics of photographing others. The next sessions involve photo assignments that focus youth attention on showing and talking about social issues with each other. The final sessions can incorporate a public showcase or a social action project, such as speaking at a school committee meeting about the poor conditions of a school environment.

For detailed guidelines, go to <http://cchealth.org/topics/community/photovoice/>.

### Implications

Civic engagement is an important vehicle for promoting positive youth development by enabling young people to attain common community goals through communication and collaboration. By becoming involved with meaningful activities that support community service at a very young age, youth are more

likely to become responsible, considerate members of their communities (Lerner, 2004).

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## SERVICE

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One way to do that is the following:

- Divide the program into two or three groups (6–10 children per group).
- Have each group choose a president (to lead the group), a vice president (to support the president), a scribe (to keep a record of the group's discussions), and a reporter (to speak to the others about the project his or her group has chosen). The remaining group members are researchers. It is important to get every child involved.
- Have each group research the needs in the community and pick a service-learning project that addresses one of those needs.
- Have each group's reporter give a five-minute description about the project they chose.
- Have the children select one of the projects to perform as a class. Older youth may undertake individual or small-group projects.

### Examples of service-learning projects

Following are some ideas to help stimulate your thinking and planning for service-learning projects.

#### Elementary and middle school:

- Peer-to-peer mentoring and tutoring; once a week have older children meet one-on-one with younger children to help them with reading, writing, math and other subjects.
- Have the children interview senior citizens about the history of their community and about their lives. Have the students then design a book, video or a recording of the oral history that they can give to the senior citizens, who in turn can share it with their children and grand children and pass it on to their families.
- Test the community's drinking water using a local university laboratory or a health laboratory and research ways to improve the water quality.

## Today there are more than 4 million children and youth who are improving their lives and the lives of people in their community through service learning.

Keep an annual record of the tests and compare the results of past years with those of the current year to evaluate changes in the water quality. Have the students report their findings to the local media, EPA and water board.

- Compile a list of names and birthdates of children who are enduring extended stays in the local hospital. Design personalized get well cards for them, have a gift drive and put on birthday parties for them. If possible, have the children choose and invite a sports star, a celebrity or a clown to attend the party.

#### High school

- Have the youth research the environmental and economic benefits of converting the school bus fleet to buses that run on clean bio-diesel fuel. Then have them present their findings and a plan of implementation to the superintendent and the school board. If the plan is approved, have the youth participate in implementation of the plan.
- Have the youth create a service-learning Web site for the school district where any class may post photographs and descriptions of their projects. Have them compose and edit a monthly service-learning e-newsletter that highlights the best service-learning projects. The e-newsletter

can be sent to parents.

### Conclusion

Every educator knows that children learn better when the knowledge presented is stimulating, relevant, meaningful and experiential. Service learning offers educators a teaching tool that encompasses all of this and more. Service learning gives you the vehicle to use your teaching expertise and enthusiasm, engage families in their child's learning, and stimulate your student's creativity, joy of learning and desire to accomplish something meaningful.

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