

## Citizenship and social responsibility

One purpose of schools is to socialize children to be productive and socially responsible, to be citizens in a democratic society. Most schools promote community service (volunteerism and charity) and character education (honesty, integrity, kindness, hardwork) but not the political aspects of citizenship (social movements, social change, causes of inequity). While it is important for schools to teach good character and community service, these emphases alone are not enough to educate a democratic citizenry. Research on citizenship education shows that other skills are needed: the ability to work in a group, public speaking, creating coalitions with individuals with different interests, analysis of social issues, and protest and petition for change. Students need to learn not only to help out (collecting for the food bank), but also to ask questions about what conditions create the need to help out (what creates the need for the food bank) and to work to alleviate those root, structural causes (how can poverty and disadvantage be eliminated).

Research demonstrates that learning activities that require researching and analyzing real and controversial community issues (like homelessness or environmental pollution) have the most lasting impression on students. Programs that successfully promote democratic citizenship: 1) show students that society needs to be improved by examining social problems and controversial issues, 2) provide positive experiences with civic participation, 3) engage students in real civics projects, 4) create a caring community that includes students, and 5) connect students to compelling role models.

Practically speaking, schools can easily expose students to compelling civic role models and integrate into the curriculum the study of social problems, current events, and controversial issues of interest to students. Internships and partnerships with civic organizations require more effort. Language arts, social studies and science are natural curricular contexts. Programs that successfully focus on democratic citizenry are seldom resource intensive, but they require an educational commitment to democracy.

The Democratic Dialogue project at the University of Ottawa is a great resource on research and school practices that promote democratic citizenry.

<http://www.democraticdialogue.com>

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