

Democratic Education: Education for democracy: Keeping urban students in school and keeping the American democratic republic experiment going

As adult U.S. citizens, we are expected to be experts in the ideals of democracy and the democratic process. Yet, May's 2003 primary elections only 2.1% of eligible voters in Marion County's Center Township turned out. In major elections, turn out has been under 50%.

In 2015, the lowest voter turnout rate in 20 years occurred in November for mayor. <http://fox59.com/2015/11/04/marion-county-sees-lowest-voter-turnout-in-over-two-decades/> Could there be a link among public schools, civics curricula, student-participation in school governance, civic responsibility and voter/citizen participation in the civic process?

And many other educators agree. Presently, representing the educational mainstream is the Association for Curriculum and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and its "**First Amendment Schools**" initiative. Eleven 1st Amendment schools around the country are exploring ways for students to better understand their roles as citizens in a democracy as they learn a deeper practical appreciation of the five freedoms of the 1st Amendment. Schools need to reclaim the purpose of public education and the notion that one's education is part of a larger good and so can contribute to the betterment of society. Here are ASCD's "The Basics for creating democratic schools."

- 1. Find as many ways as possible for students to take responsibility for the daily life of the/their school.**
- 2. Find ways for students to apply the critical thinking skills that are essential to citizenship.**
- 3. Practice the rights and the responsibilities of the U.S. Constitution with the school.**

"Teaching students to share responsibility for the learning and school governance while also teaching and learning with them the ways to resolve issues and conflicts is to experience life in a democracy." ~ Institute for Democracy in Education

In the Winter 2003 issue of *Curriculum Update*, "Civic Virtue in the Schools: Engaging a New Generation of Citizens," ASCD continues its push for democratic schools. At Federal Hocking High School it is just as import to create good citizens as getting kids jobs. The have kids develop their "democratic muscle" by give students a real voice in school matters. Why? Elementary and Middle Schools are democracy's "training grounds" or laboratory, and "**High school is democracy's finishing school**—the last shared experience that all Americans will enjoy; the place where the skills and dispositions that citizens in a democracy need should be secured and nurtured in all our youth" (p. 2).

Also, this year, the International Democratic Schools Conference will meet in the United States for the first time in its 11-year history. Previous meetings were held in such countries as Japan, Ukraine, Israel, England, Austria, New Zealand, and involved as many as 500 people from 25 countries. This year's IDEC session intends to raise questions and make recommendations regarding the education systems in several countries that are becoming more focused in standardization and one-size-fits-all approach, creating a situation that only works for a small number of students.

All of these examples mean **action** and the circumstances to slowly learn to share in real school and classroom decisions: curriculum, scheduling, discipline, and school climate. This will give students the opportunity to begin, to learn, to have the same opportunity to make

mistakes like adults make daily in our local, state, and federal legislatures. As well as in school, civic virtue suggests students be involved in local, state, and federal elections—working or volunteering for the candidate/party of their choice, for individual or group community service learning projects, assessment opportunities, career exploration, completing course requirements, extra credit, or for its own sake.

“Listen, create an environment where students feel that their voice is taken seriously and acted upon, and then involve them in school decision making. The positive action and school improvement follows as sure as night follows day.” ~ Derry Hannam, UK School Inspector

As is reflected in the principles of the United States, students are *less likely* to break school and classroom rules they helped create. Students are also more likely to respect authority, if they have some say as to that authority. These are notions that American 5th graders easily understand. The point is the adults have never “practiced what they preached.” We want democracy in China; we just don’t want it in the public schools, especially the high schools.

However, some public school staff may not feel comfortable with democratic schools demands that encourage a climate where adults share power and responsibility with students because they have had no experience of genuine power sharing themselves in school. As adults, we must stop and then reverse this negative cycle that is argued contributes to a lack of citizen/civic involvement and low voter turnout and model (provide genuine power sharing opportunities at school—i.e., input into classroom and school rules) for students about how to be citizens in a democracy so that they will model for their children and students...and so on.

Shared Decision Making In the Classroom

Part A Why we need it

Most teachers are aware of the phenomenon known as burnout—there are days when it seems that all of our normally bright enthusiastic light bulbs have gone out. Many times, dealing with student behavior is an issue. Most behavioral interventions involve some sort of punishment or negative consequences or some manipulation designed to correct disruptive actions (Gathercoal, 1991). Yet, *experience tells us that punishment does not work at all with many students, particularly those with low self-esteem* (Kohn, 1993). The repeat "offenders" in IPS detention/suspension rooms are a daily confirmation of the failure of punishment. So, who is really being penalized? Who's really in distress here? I think it is the teachers—they are burning out from trying to coerce students into obedience.

Burnout and aggressive behavior

What about students? Does burnout lead to disengagement, apathy, or conversely, thoughtlessness or aggression? The fact is, students often act this way (Kohn, 1993). But, now let us ask what we have learned from the workplace about what causes burnout: *the best predictor, it turns out, is not too much work or overtime, bad supervisors, too little pay or problems with co-workers—rather it is powerlessness—a lack of control over what one is doing* (Kohn, 1993). *Even an amateur psychologist knows: feelings of impotence lead to stress.*

Aggressive behavior, powerlessness and shared decision-making

Powerlessness is our inability to affect change. Aggressive behavior is not the child of power, but of powerlessness. Violence arises not out off excessive power, but out of powerlessness. Bronowski notes, “Violence is the expression of impotence.” Involve students proportionally,

patiently and with wisdom and care in the decision that directly affect them in school and aggressive school behavior will decrease.

Rewards and punishments vs. shared decision-making

Instead of writing names on the board, using group punishments and rewards, corporeal exercises, escalating detention time, or threatening suspension why not use something that will strengthen student empowerment and responsibility while affecting the factors that contribute to stress and burnout? Many educators suggest a proven strategy: **shared decision-making** (AERO-GRAMME, 1998; Barr & Parrett, 1995, 1997; Beadi, 1996; Bolmeier, 1995; California Dept. of Education, 1996; Changing Schools, 1995; Douglas, 1995; Dugger & Dugger, 1998;. Duke & Ganseder, 1990; Flemming, 1996; Freiberg, 1996; Gathercoal, 1991; Gerzon, 1997; Gregory, 1993; Griffin, 1995; Kellmayer, 1998; King, Silvey, Holliday & Johnston, 1998; Kohn, 1993; MAEO, 1995; Panico, 1998; Parker, 1997; Schneider, 1996; Slater, 1994; Smink, 1997; Tyack, 1997; Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985; Wood, 1989; Zachlod, 1996).

Consider Glasser's, "The needs that drive us all." Sharing in decisions/having choices may be ontological, a part of the human spirit.

Those who feel more control over what happens to them rarely become ill despite high levels of stress (Kohn, 1993).

The key to transforming student apathy into student engagement, may be as simple as allowing students to make decisions about their learning (Kohn, 1993).

Children learn about responsibility as they make decisions about how their classroom is run (Zachlod, 1996).

Shared decision making with children and youth takes time--time to listen to what they have to say and to thoughtfully respond to student's ideas, suggestions, and especially their questions (Zachlod, 1996).

Creating caring classrooms and supportive schools through shared decision-making with students gives students opportunities to become citizens in the classroom rather than tourists (Frieberg, 1996).

Giving students a sense of ownership in their classrooms can lead to the open and cooperative learning environment that most teachers dream about (Zachlod, 1996).

Everyday ought to include a block of time where students can decide what to do (Kohn, 1993).

Although we teach the world about democracy, we rarely practice it in our schools and classrooms (Frieberg, 1996).

Is there a relationship between the IPS high school drop out rate and less than half of the registered city voters going the polls?

Part B Why we don't have it or "A list of excuses used by teachers."

1. The absolute freedom excuse: If we let kids decide chaos will follow or "We run this school, the student's don't." (Kohn, 1993).
2. The time excuse: If students were entitled to make decisions about school and had to agree on everything they did, there wouldn't be time to do anything else (Kohn, 1993).
3. The children need limits and structure excuse: This issue is a red herring. The real issue is however, not whether limits and rules are needed, but rather who sets them—the adults alone or the adults and students together (Kohn, 1993).

4. The administration won't let me excuse: But, what else is a teacher to do when school districts pay poorly, their union is weak, and while society blames everything on the schools, highly controlling districts/administrations leave teachers very little discretion about either curricular or disciplinary issues. Thus, are powerless teachers feeling, "If I am not a part of important decisions that affect me, why should I let kids decide anything?" (Duke & Gansneder, 1990; Kohn, 1993).

5. Not an excuse, but a reality: Teachers like what power they do have. Teachers only see control or chaos. They like control. Thus, teachers often simply lack the gumption to give kids choices. Parting with power is not easy, if only the results are less predictable than in a situation where they have complete control. Asking students to decide even about the simplest thing can be scary. Unfortunately, teachers do not realize that shared decision-making with students is a gradual process with tremendous opportunities to teach students authentic responsibility and skills in respect, listening, deliberation, and compromise (Beck, 1998; Kohn, 1993; Parker, 1997).

6. The vote for me and I'll return (Russia) to a paternal dictatorship excuse—or they are not mature enough, they can't handle freedom, they don't understand democracy yet, they can't handle these kinds of decisions/responsibilities, and listen for yourself, they want us to make the decisions for them...which leads to the last factor...

7. Actual resistance from students: This is not surprising, given that most students have been conditioned to accept a posture of passivity at school. It is disconcerting to be asked (by adults)—much less be expected—to take responsibility for the way things are in schools and classrooms. Most resistance from students comes in these forms:

- a. They refuse—that's your job as adults to decide. This is another great teachable moment teachers miss to discuss power/control and what make school/learning exciting.
- b. They test adults—if given the chance to help make decisions, students will make outlandish suggestion to see if the adults really mean what they say.
- c. They parrot—students say what they think adults want to hear (Kohn, 1993).

The key question is how we, as adults/teachers and examples, respond to these maneuvers and how we face ourselves in the mirror as citizens in the land of the free and the home of the brave. In attempting to conclude that students are unable to handle the responsibility of making and sharing decisions or being unworthy of having it, or that they can't think for themselves (we must think for them), we must realize it is not naive or Utopian to think students can make responsible decisions about how their school, classroom and their own learning. In fact it is quite "American," if you will, to wish that our students/future citizens are not parrots, or are people who never take risks, question authority, or desire to be a part of the decision making process that affects their lives. We teachers do not want to create adults who do not vote or who are not responsible citizens because in the classroom/school they were treated in such a way as to feel powerless, burned out, compliant, controlled, and silenced (Kohn, 1993).

For many years, teachers have offered ideas to enhance student achievement and motivation, but these thoughts are unlikely to make a difference in helping students reach their potential as learners and citizens when they are left out of the decision making process (Beck, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Scherer, 1994).

Perhaps urban schools, through the above reasoning, suggestions, and the latest ASCD initiatives can be an example to other districts: at-risk youth are empowered to be better

students and citizens of the classroom, school and community when given the opportunity to share in classroom and school decisions. One would do well to wager that expanding real (that means practical or practiced) civic virtue in the public schools will also get more students involved in the democratic and elective/voting processes after they become 18.

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