

The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind.  
-- Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

What happens in the classroom will, in the final analysis,  
reveal how deep are the roots of our democratic commitment.  
-- H. G. Hullfish

It's common sense. If we see we can change something at  
school, maybe we'll try to change something else later in life.  
-- Meredith Robson, Senior, Morrisville High School, Morrisville, PA

## Common Sense

Explaining low voter turnout:  
More key reforms to reverse the increase in voter apathy

A report from 2003 International Democratic Education Conference  
Russell Sage College, Troy NY

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## Introduction: *Common Sense* yesterday and today

"Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not *yet* sufficiently fashionable to procure them particular favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason."

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

*This quote from the first paragraph of the introduction to Commons Sense is just as relevant today as it was in July of 1776. The sentiments in the following pages of this pamphlet are also not yet fashionable to procure them general favor. Suggesting that democratic classrooms and schools will lead to an increase in voter turn out is not now in vogue. We have acquired a bad habit of ignoring or in a lax manner not giving the proper emphasis to an authentic citizenship education. Influenced by the fact that many of us take our freedom for granted, we have avoided our responsibility to provide the kind of realistic and active civic education for our youth that will encourage them to vote. Not seeing the obvious common sense connection to teaching democracy by doing it, has made not doing it and so our civic laziness appear to be the custom.*

*As in 1776, when pushed into to the arena of public debate there will be a formidable outcry by educators and leaders in defense of this regressive and debilitating non-democratic schooling custom in the form of responses similar to those used by totalitarian governments whose citizens press hard for democracy: our citizens (students) are not that educated; they're (students) too immature; they (the students) can't handle freedom--they need discipline not freedom, order, not choices; there'll be chaos in the streets (schools)! We as new citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the unfortunate circumstances of a very low voter turn out nationally and locally, must create our own "tumult," yet for opposite reasons. It's been over 227 years since Thomas Paine wrote these words. Time has passed; so, there are many converts now. It is the hope that this pamphlet will encourage these converts to speak to power and appeal to our collective reasoning in a way that will draw out what is a matter of common sense.*

## A summary of the issues presented

"If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have the opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led. Although common sense alone tells us this is a true statement, **there is perhaps no more problematic concept in education than that of democratic schools**, a concept that some consider almost an oxymoron. How can this be so? Simply put, many people believe that democracy is nothing more than a form of federal government and thus does not apply to schools and other social institutions. Many also believe that democracy is a right of adults, not of young people. And some believe that democracy simply cannot work in schools.

Others are committed to the idea that the democratic way of life is built upon opportunities to learn what it is about and how to lead it. They believe that the schools, as a common experience of virtually all young people, have a moral obligation to introduce them to the democratic way of life. They know, as well, that such a life is learned by experience. It is not a status to be attained only after other things are learned. Moreover, they believe that democracy extends to all people, including the young. Finally, they believe that democracy is neither cumbersome nor dangerous, that it can work in societies and it can work in schools. As Maxine Greene (1985, p. 4) writes, 'Surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate, and play articulate roles in the public space'" (Apple and Beane, 1995).

"We must remove the contradictions in our culture that embrace democratic ends for its schools, but resists the actual practice in schools of democratic means from which the ends cannot be separated."

The Institute for Democracy in Education

## **10 Recommendations: How democratic schools can increase voter turnout**

**1** Launch a campaign to democratize our public schools and classrooms. Students should not only be trained in to live in a democracy; they should have the chance to live in one today in their schools and classrooms (Kohn, 1993). Democracy cannot exist without the leadership of educators who provide students with real-life/hands-on learning experiences that promote the democratic way of life. As we promote democratic values and institutions around the world, let us also teach our children and youth the same lesson--the development of participatory citizens who have cultivated democratic habits of heart and mind. If we can create a campaign to establish democracy in Iraq, we can do it for the future voters—our children and youth. This will fulfill the hope of the *Indianapolis Star*: Making the world's most participatory government truly participatory again.

**2** In each Marion County school/township district, create a Student School Board from a wide-range of students from all grade levels and grades point averages. These boards will form committees and make recommendations to the district.

**3** Put at least one high school student, elected by the students, in a non-voting, yet influential position on each of the public school boards in Marion County.

**4** Create a Student Alliance in each Marion County school/township district, bringing together students from all the schools, especially the high schools. A county-wide alliance could result.

**5** Create a bicameral student council or student government, through school-wide elections, in each school. Empower the group with the role of making sure the school follows First Amendment rights and responsibilities.

**6** Also begin training students in these elected groups to share in the real decisions that effect the students they represent at their school—from alternative lunch menus to learning alternatives, and from school rules to school events. Have them work with the adults to create the right balance between structure and freedom in the school.

**7** Encourage service learning/"action civics" in all classes from gym to math to shop classes. Having students actually use what they are learning to help others, the neighborhood and community--and not just to pass an exam--will promote the intrinsic value of democracy.

**8** Promote small schools and/or small learning communities/schools-within-schools inside larger schools. Many necessary democratic practices will be difficult to put into place in many of Marion County's super-large middle and high schools. This will take planning. Initially many students and school adults may misunderstand. In non-democratic countries, citizens who were used to being told what to do and who were suddenly given the opportunity to share in decisions reacted negatively and unenthusiastically to democracy. Many wanted to return to the previous system. Likewise, here in Marion County, the student body and school faculty may also see democratization as promoting a "mild anarchy"--creating more problems than it solves. Yet, youth and adults must be challenged and given the opportunity to realize exercising democracy involves tensions and contradictions. Thus, educators and school leaders must be trained in how to create democratic schools and classrooms (Hackney & Henderson, 1999).

**9** Create a small oversight agency, under the auspices the mayor and working with all county school districts, that would be responsible for insuring democracy's "training grounds," grades K-8, and democracy's "finishing school" grades 9-12 are used effectively to promote civic-mindedness. The agency will have two purposes. One is to create democratic structures and processes by which life in the school is carried out. The other is to create a curriculum that will give young people democratic experiences. Collaboration is necessary. Initially, it may take more than just the school system's efforts to make sure schools are/stay democratic and do their part to increase voter turnout through modeling the democratic process.

### **Final recommendation: What's good for the Iraqis is good for our children**

In his recent publication, *The Future of Freedom: Liberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, author Fareed Zakaria's suggestions for democracy in Iraq are outlined and made simple:

1. Democracy will take hard work.
2. There will be opposition to democracy.
3. Above all, don't rush it.
4. Elections do not produce democracy.

*"It is strange that the schooling system which was created to ensure democracy is the most undemocratic institution in America—except for the prisons which you can avoid by behaving or the military which is avoided by not enlisting."*

Dr. Don Glines Learning Alternatives Educator

"Democracy is like a life raft—it bounces around a lot, your feet are always wet, you're not sure where you are going. But, you never sink."

General Colin Powell

### **97.9% of registered voters did not vote in May's primary election**

Recently, in Indianapolis, only 2.1% of Center Township voters turned out to mark ballots in the May primary. Only 9.9% of Marion County's registered voters or 8.5% of eligible voters turned out (Tully, 2003). In November 2003, only 25.2% of the registered voters cast ballots, down from the 37% who voted in 1999 (Tully & Fritze, 2003). Marion County records show only 15.9% of people ages 18-21 voted in the 2000 general election. In fact, voters under 34 had the lowest turnouts compared to a 58.3% of all voting age citizens (Schneider, 2003). Nationally, during the 1952 presidential race, 73 % of the US voting age population voted. In 1996, the turnout was 45%, a 16 year low. This low voter turnout rate has brought the familiar cry from local officials: What can we do to increase civic involvement?

### **Are there answers?**

The *Indianapolis Star*, a week after the 2003 primary issued a strong and involved editorial, "Key reforms will reverse decline in voter turnout." Patriotic-like suggestions, such as ending the gerrymandering that produces safe non-competitive elections insuring the incumbents win, were outlined. The *Star* must have reasoned: if we make elections like heavyweight championship fights, people will suddenly become citizens. Then they reasoned technology could solve our problem—not realizing in some countries with high voter turnout rates, voting technology dates back to the ballot box. Yes, on-line voting; that's what our founders had in mind—voting as shopping. And, seemingly desperate, the *Star* staff even suggested the old stand-by, "Encourage third parties."

The last reform, "Promote education," suggested the responsibility was on the news media, political parties, and other civic institutions to better inform voters about elections, candidates, and issues, as well as to encourage debate, citizen participation, and general civic responsibilities all year long.

"Although we teach about democracy we rarely practice it in most classrooms and schools."

H. Jerome Freidberg, Professor of Education, University of Houston

### **Yes, democracy's own training grounds**

Surprisingly, and certainly a metaphor for this entire discussion, is the fact that the *Star* did not recommend using democracy's own "training grounds," the public schools—especially our high schools—as an opportunity. This was not mentioned; yet, it is an obvious fundamental solution. Producing involved self-governing citizens was to be an integral part of American schooling. The newspaper's suggested reforms overlooked this historic purpose of public education. Most adults, (including the so-called college educated professionals or the local politicians the *Star* recommends be more responsible), have not been "raised" in the spirit of democracy in schools and classrooms where, through shared decision-making, students help determine school climate. From a young age, they were never taught how democracy works and is practiced--so they would be civic-minded as adults.

### **So, let's just use our common sense!**

It is common sense that *we must teach democracy by doing it* (Gerzon, (1997). It is common sense that students who are introduced to democratic practices and actively learn and take part

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in school shared decision-making will more likely carry over this democratic learning and activism into adulthood than if they only studied democratic ideals. It is common sense that for children school is the first sustained, daily experience of public life. With their diverse populations and social and academic problems, schools are unique arenas for learning how to thrive in a civilized society. If tolerance, respect for debate and deliberation, and the willingness to learn from each other are the values on which democratic nations thrive, it is common sense that these values must be practiced in schools, not just taught. ***It is common sense that an increase in voter turnout will occur when public schools, especially our high schools, model and actually practice in schools what is going on in the larger community.***

"We need to treat students like citizens now, not citizens in the future."

Sheldon Berman, Superintendent of Hudson Public Schools

### **More common sense: *Just Communities***

High school students' involvement in decision making is effective in fostering moral growth as well as active post-high school citizenship. *Just Communities*—an approach to student self-governance proposed and developed by Kohlberg—offers students hands-on practice in democratic governance. In a study of "just communities" (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989), small groups of about 100 students practiced democracy during weekly town meetings in which each person, including staff, had one vote. In these meetings students made decisions about management, care, and direction of the school. Because the issues were meaningful to students and their decisions had direct consequences for the school, each student developed a sense of responsibility to the school-community and learned to argue issues with an increasingly sophisticated level of political and moral reasoning (Berman, 2003). It's common sense that these types of experiences can lead to "an increasingly sophisticated level of political and moral" behavior by students after high school--manifesting in increased civic involvement and voter turnout.

### **Democracy, the United States, and a global democratic movement**

Many local residents and Indiana citizens are pushing for and supporting pro-democracy movements worldwide. President Bush in an early November 2003 foreign policy speech noted, "The advance of freedom is the calling our time," and "It is no accident that the rise of democracy took place in a time when the world's most influential nation was itself a democracy."

Educator Gary Howard, speaking at the October IPS Infusion Conference noted that there is a **third revolution** now taking place in America. The first was the American Revolution. The second was the civil rights movement and legislation. Under the influence of the US, the third wave of change is the growing global interest in democracy and democratic ideals.

"Around the world the 'Democracy' has shattered  
tyranny's silence and caused the most stubborn dictators to lose  
their confidence in the politics of fear. Walls are coming down and iron  
curtains are being drawn for the last time. The Statue of Liberty is an icon for young  
men and women who have never known freedom in lands that have never been democratic..."

Benjamin Barber

Popularized by the rise democratic governments in the former Soviet Union and South Africa, and the events surrounding the failed democracy movement in China, citizens around the world are

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more than ever looking to democratic ideals and democratic governments to replace non-elected ones. This is illustrated by the pro-democracy in Myanmar (Burma), the drafting of a constitution in Afghanistan, the debate about the best way to bring democracy to post-war Iraq, or the controversy over the so-called "direct" democracy gubernatorial election in California. Recent articles in the *Star* such as, "Bush to pressure Cuba for democratic reforms," "Bush calls for democracy in the Middle East," and "Bush urges democracy in African nations," provide evidence of this American influenced "third revolution" concept.

"The cause of America is, in a great measure, the cause of  
all mankind. Many circumstances have, and will arise, which are  
not local, but universal, and through which principles of all lovers of  
mankind are affected, and in the event of which, their affections are interested."

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

### **Globally: A third wave—democratic education**

This same sense of a new wave of global change comes from the world-class Institute for Democratic Education, and illustrates the international presence of democratic schools. Touting the theme, "**Democratic Schools—the educational answer to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**," this group of alternative education advocates promotes: "Educational innovativeness from a democratic point of view." See [www.democratic-edu.org](http://www.democratic-edu.org).

This institute finds it is very important to compare the present situation in the educational system with past phenomena in order to draw our lessons with regards to the future. There have been three distinct waves in alternative education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The first wave occurred during the twenties and the thirties and was called "new education" or "progressive education." The second wave took place during the seventies and was called "open and free education. The present wave, which started in the nineties, and was given the name "**democratic education**," is spreading throughout the world (Hecht, 2002).

### **The vision: A democratic culture**

The first two waves took place when The Wave of Traditional Schooling, which started in the middle of the industrial revolution, was at its peak. Today, the educational system is facing a severe crisis all over the world. **The world we live in becomes more and more democratic yet the schools, which prepare our children to life, operate in a non- democratic way and thus create a growing estrangement between school life and real life situations.** This brings about the emergence of the third wave of democratic education that may transform a society based on democratic procedure into one that cultivates a democratic culture (Hecht, 2002).

### **Evidence of the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave: England's national democratic education curriculum**

"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, School Inspector, United Kingdom

In England, as in America, people are concerned about low graduation rates and low voter turnout rates. Over the last 10 years a handful of British educational researchers have been listening to students' opinions about schools and the curriculum. This brought the realization that



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students had insights into what would make schooling work. Following the implications of the researchers, the national Education Ministry created a Children's and Young Peoples Unit and funded a more elaborate study. As a result of this extensive study, as of the fall of 2002, all English secondary schools were ordered to have students "participate" in important school and community decisions. For the full report see [www.csv.org.uk/csv/hannamreport.pdr](http://www.csv.org.uk/csv/hannamreport.pdr). The "Student Participation Report" showed how shared school and community decision-making with **all** students improved academics, behavior, attendance, school climate, and lowered suspension and expulsion rates. The report concluded these positive factors were, "...a consequence of higher self-esteem and a greater sense of ownership and empowerment of students leading to a greater motivation to engage with learning across the curriculum" (Hannam, 2001).

#### **"Student Participation" as defined in Section 176 of the Education Act 2002**

Now that citizenship education is a part of the national curriculum, the Education Ministry's working definition of student participation can be a help to us. It refers to student participation as 'learning to collaborate with others (peers/adults), in the identification of needs, tasks, problems within the school or the wider community, to ask appropriate questions and gather appropriate information, to discuss and negotiate possible courses of action, to share in the planning and decision making, to share the responsibility for implementing the plan, to evaluate/review/reflect upon the outcomes and to communicate these to others' (Hannam, 2001).

To insure the success of this national mandate, Wolverhampton Grammar School headmaster Bernard Trafford and others wrote, *School Councils, School Democracy, School improvement: Why, What, How*, to help school personnel implement democracy in the classroom and in school decisions. Also see, *Active Citizenship in Schools: A Good Practice Guide to Developing a Whole-School Policy* (Potter, 2002), which uses the UK report in its approach.

#### **The 11<sup>th</sup> International Democratic Education Conference—IDEC 2003**

From July 16-24, 2003 the International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) met in the United States for the first time in the 11-year history of the event. The city was Troy, NY. IDEC is one of the most significant international conferences concerning democratic education. School personnel, students, and families from 85 schools located in 25 countries and 27 U.S. states, attended. See [www.idenetwork.org](http://www.idenetwork.org) or [www.idec2003.com](http://www.idec2003.com). See p. 24 for list of the 85 schools.

According to IDEC, this is a critical time for education in the United States and in the world at large. Today's education systems in many countries are becoming more and more focused on standardization and a one-size-fits-all approach, creating a situation which only works for a small minority of students. In the United States, No Child Left Behind legislation specifies high-stakes testing for students in grades 3 through 8. Schools are becoming testing factories, as teachers must teach to the test to insure the security of their jobs. The goal of IDEC 2003 was to gather a critical mass of people determined to push this momentum in a different direction, towards an educational approach based on respect, equality and democracy. That is the approach chosen by the numerous democratic schools around the world. At these schools, the realization of human rights for all members is the standard of achievement. Staff work with each student individually,

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and students and teachers have the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process of the school. Sizes vary around the globe, yet democratic schools are usually no more than 200 students in size to insure that each student's voice is heard.

Although there is much focus on standardization, there is also good reason for hope. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Annenberg Institute have provided funds for the creation of small, innovative schools. The number of democratic schools in the US is growing each year. Furthermore, research from the US, UK, and Japan shows that students from democratic schools are academically and socially as well off or more so than conventional schools (IDEC, 2003).

### **Facadocracy\*: Too much hypocrisy, too little democracy--Not practicing what we preach**

Indeed, people everywhere are now realizing that democracy is a birthright. Yet, in spite of the president's policies, the average American citizen is not that enthusiastic about democratic civic participating. Although the *Star* continued to push people to the polls for the 2003 mayor and city council races with its daily pre-election editorial page "Why Vote" paragraphs, it was too little too late. Only 25% of eligible voters turned out--down, not up, from the previous mayoral election.

**This raises the questions: How can we advocate for democracy is Cuba or Iran, when our own citizens do not vote in elections, and when we fail to practice it in our own classrooms and schools?** How can we be attempting to spread the potential of democratic ideals when we cannot model the democratic process? How can Indianapolis be an example to the world when only 2.2% of our Center Township's registered voters vote in the county primary? And, this does not take into account those citizens who are not registered. Registered or not, local citizens are evidently disillusioned. We give excuses, but the fact is we are a poor example to others around the world, and particularly to our own young. Our public schools teach democracy, but do not practice it. **Plainly this is hypocritical. Herein lies the problem, and another solution to the decline in voter turnout.**

### **Report: U.S. youth fail civics basics**

According to a troubling report released by the Representative Democracy in America Project, teenagers and young adults are less likely than older adults to value voting or the way government works, and the reason is that the nation is failing to teach the basics for taking part in democracy (Associated Press, 2003b). The report, "Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations," (See the full report at [www.ncsl.org/public/trust/citizenship.pdf](http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/citizenship.pdf)) co-sponsored by the National Council of State Legislators, found that younger people "do not understand the ideals of citizenship, they are disengaged from the political process, they lack the knowledge necessary for effective self-government, and their appreciation and support of American democracy is limited." Does this sound like a nation that supposedly exemplifies the democratic spirit and has the legitimacy, due to the full participation of its citizens in self-government, to promote this form of government to other nations?

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

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“Sandbox” student governments, overly controlled and under-represented student councils that are only allowed to “play” democracy and have no real power/responsibility are not examples of the pro-democracy ideals we promote in other countries. Along with ability grouping, grade retention, college pressures, working alone, denial of strengths and focus on weaknesses, learning that is information rich and experience poor, and a irrelevant curriculum that students must endure and frequently ignore (De La Rosa, 1998, p. 28), no wonder it’s no coincidence that the IPS high school graduation rate and the Marion County voter turnout rate for 18-24 year olds are about the same: 32% (Associated Press, 2003a).

Like apathetic voters, students who do not have a chance to experience the spirit, potential, and sense of personal power of democracy in action may see no need to become active citizens as adults. **To prevent this possibility, an increasing number of educators and groups are urging U.S. schools to reinvigorate their mission to nurture democracy.** Gary Howard suggested the public schools in the U.S. must begin to re-establish their role as the creators of citizens who are practiced and ready for the responsibilities of democracy and citizenship--all through participatory democratic education in the classroom, school, and community. *Is this a good idea? Is this practical?*

“What does a democracy require of its schools?”  
Roger Soder Editor *Democracy Education, and the Schools*

If we want public schools to continue our great experiment in American democracy, we are stuck with depending on students who know very little of democracy. And if schools believe students are not enlightened enough to share in school decisions, as Thomas Jefferson would say, the remedy is not to keep them out of the process, but to inform them by education so they may be involved.

**Helping to start the conversation: A common terminology**

Recently, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development developed and published *A Lexicon of Learning: What Educators Mean When They Say. . .* (ASCD, 2002). Since the ASCD is a respected organization, its definitions can be proposed as useful in creating a common language for this discussion.

**Democratic education**

Advocates of democratic education believe that students, if they are to acquire the skills, knowledge, and values they need to perform their roles as citizens in a democracy, should receive a type of education that actively engages them as citizens in their own schools and communities. For example, they believe that students should participate in the governance of the school and engage in service-learning activities in their local communities.

**Democratic purposes of education**

Historically, one of the primary missions of the public schools in the United States has been to prepare children to perpetuate American democracy. Schools are expected to ensure that all children, regardless of family economic status or future occupation, acquire the skills, knowledge, and civic values they need to perform their roles as citizens in a democracy.

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The International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC, 2003) suggests these two additional concepts. **Democratic classrooms**--There are many classrooms around the country where students are highly involved in classroom decisions concerning class rules, curriculum, or assessment rubrics. Morning meetings, weekly class meetings, classroom constitutions, a bill of rights and responsibilities are examples.

**Democratic schools**--Democratic schools are now a worldwide phenomenon. See *democraticschools@educationrevolution.com*. Involvement of students in democratic schools goes far beyond traditional student councils or student government where participation in school decisions was limited to academic status and decisions concerning picnic menus or school dances. Presently, in many democratic schools students help with school climate, school rules, scheduling, curriculum, budgeting, and hiring decisions.

"If we all agreed about everything, we wouldn't need democracy."

Deborah Meier

### **Democratic education defined internationally: IDEC 2003--Educational Innovativeness from a Democratic Point of View** (Hecht, 2002)

At IDEC 2003, the following concepts concerning democratic education were given:

**Democratic education** views the purpose of learning as creating a developmental process, which accompanies people throughout their lifetime. Such a process promotes the multi-facet development of one's personality, encourages independence and authenticity, fosters respect to human rights and increases social and environmental responsibility.

**Democratic education** views the declaration of human rights, and its pertinence to individual, social and environmental rights as the basis for the development of a true democratic culture.

**Democratic education** views life in a democratic community culture within the school system as the basis for promoting a global democratic culture.

**Democratic education** views the right of every human being to be recognized as a unique individual, and to express his uniqueness, as the basis for educational interaction centered on respect, tolerance, and love.

**Democratic education** views the right of every human being to direct his life in general, and his life within the school system in particular, as a preliminary condition for the promotion of independent, responsible, creative, and authentic individuals.

**Democratic education** views the educational field as comprised of all aspects of life, such as family, play, work, school, culture, and the environment.

**Democratic education** views every democratic educational system as a "laboratory", and every person involved in implementing democratic education as an "education researcher" who aims at creating new methods and breakthroughs in the fields of learning and education.

### **The power of voices in schools: Bringing democratic ideals to life**

Schools that encourage students to help govern are democratic. **Democracy is not only a topic that is covered in these schools—it's a way of life**; students perform many of the roles they will play as citizens. In these schools that are democratic, where shared power and shared decision-making are the norm, mutual respect, opportunities for every voice to be heard, choice, and an atmosphere of dignity and non-judgment are also the norm. (Aust & Vine, 2003).

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### **A democratic high school**

A high school in Ohio is a democratic school. Principal George Wood of Federal Hocking High School argues we don't let kids have control of their lives in school. Delegating decision-making power in a democratic fashion, he says, will help to increase student achievement and teacher satisfaction. This is the case because Wood sees public high schools as democracy's finishing school—the last shared experience that all Americans will enjoy; the place where skills and dispositions, citizens in a democracy must have, need to be secured and nurtured in our youth. Hocking students help run the school by doing everything from helping determine school and classroom rules to hiring teachers. The school's staff realizes that students are less likely to break rules they helped create and are less likely to disrespect authority they helped give authority to. These are basic American democratic principles.

Hocking students/staff run a community of democratic practice and offer these tips:

1. **Find as many ways as possible for students to take responsibility for the daily life of the school.** At Hocking, through a bicameral legislature of 20 student trustees and a student council of 60, students help determine class scheduling, curriculum, students activities and others school related decisions.
2. **Find ways for students to apply the critical thinking skills that are essential to citizenship.** Voting, when thoughtfully done, requires gathering information from many sources, reflecting on it, and then making decision based on the data.
3. **Practice the rights/responsibilities of the Constitution within the school** (Quindlen, 2003).

School adults should question and provide an open debate on issues of free press, student decent, and whether students can elect their own leaders. These are constitutionally guaranteed freedoms the U.S. has gone to war over. If students don't get to practice and test constitutional issues in high school before they become potential voters, where will they?

*"And while the work of preparing citizens for a democracy must include more than the schools, the schools are the public institution best positioned to affect the vast majority of young people."*

Westheimer & Kahne

### **Another high school: Democracy 101**

*"What does a democratic process look like in a large urban school?"*

Mark Koester, Jefferson Open School

This April 30, in "Hall Pass to the Voting Booth," newspaper person Laura Stepp (2003) reported on a Pennsylvania high school that gave students a voice, and a lesson in grassroots politics. School leaders, under Principal Frank Kawtowski, reacted to low test scores and high detention rates. There was mutual distrust between students and teachers. Morale at the school was low. Morrisville Middle/High School was viewed in the community as a "juvenile jail."

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Changes were needed and they came in the form of shared decision-making through student participation when the administration gathered the students and asked them what they would like to change about their school and how such changes would be accomplished.

Students were slow to take the challenge seriously. " They had gotten used to being told what they could not do, rather than what they could do." Soon, however, the classroom became a "young people's public square." Discussions revealed how much the students had been left out of decisions that affected their life in the school. Zero tolerance, low morale, mutual distrust had limited the leadership roles of all students in school decisions.

The student identified 6 problems in their school and community, mapped put solutions and presented their suggestions at a public meeting. Months later, problems such as smoking on campus, leaving campus for lunch, a drivers ed. course, neglected neighborhood playgrounds and streets were being solved.

Stepp notes when student participation in public school activities are limited to deciding what color crepe paper to use at the school dance, "...why should they suddenly feel moved when they turn 18 to sort through conflicting opinions on Medicare or prescriptions drugs in order to vote?" Silencing 9-12 grade students, cutting them out of everything important at school, such as school/classroom rules, budget decisions, proposing new electives or learning alternatives, and school activities--by the time they can vote they may not care; they won't think it will matter.

But Morrisville passed Democracy 101. Reporter Steep suggests listening to the students. Senior Meredith Robson gives us all hope: It's common sense. If we see we can change something at school, maybe we'll try to change something else later in life.

*"Implementing democratic governance and small democratic groups in a large public school is not only doable; it brings schools closer to their historic mission."*

Sheldon Berman, Superintendent of Hudson Public

Schools

### **And another democratic high school...**

Since 1993, in Hudson, MA, Hudson High School has implemented reforms that build participatory democracy and give students direct ways to effect change in their community and school. Hudson combines citizenship instruction in the academic curriculum with practicing citizenship in the classroom and community. The school's 1000 plus students are broken up into 8 interest-based clusters. Each week for 1 hour individual clusters of students and teachers meet to discuss whole-school governance issues, and clusters-based issues, programs or projects. These groups had input into a school constitution that includes a community council of teachers and students reps from each cluster. This council replaced the traditional student council and votes on decision that affect the entire school.

Hudson High administrators proclaim these democratic clusters build:

- a rich relationships between faculty and students,
- a meaningful instructional program,
- a stimulating professional culture for staff, and
- a respectful and responsible student body.

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But most important, participating in a democratic community, enable young people to enter the adult world with skills, values, and commitment to actively participate in their civic community (Berman, 2003).

### **Student-led class meetings: Learning self-government**

Other benefits of democratic schools arise in the classroom through student-led class meetings which: a. involve pupils in planning and decision making; b. has the potential to increase the intrinsic motivation to learn; and, c. can provide the greatest opportunity to foster sympathy and responsibility in students. Student-led meetings teach students how to listen to someone else's point of view, sort through possible options and outcomes, or decide what is best for all concerned through revisiting ideas and solutions that didn't work out.

"Students learn responsibility as they make  
decisions about how their classroom and school are run."

Michelle G. Zachlod, Teacher

Educators Leachman and Victor (2003) argue student-led class meetings give ownership of the process to students. Because they facilitate the meeting and struggle with solving issues important to them, they are more likely to accept the results of their decisions. By simply tapping into their interests and goals, democratic classrooms also promote self-reliance, critical thinking, risk taking, trusting others, and a sense of community.

Meetings open the door for students to become motivated, autonomous learners who are empathetic, cooperative, and responsible for their own growth (p. 67).

Roxanne Kriete (2003) in her guidebook, *The Morning Meeting Book*, shows how having students involved in running the classroom becomes a powerful tool for building community, increasing student investment, and improving academic and social skills. She suggests the morning meeting can be a microcosm for the way we wish our schools be—safe, respectful, and challenging.

*Rules in Schools*, (Brady, et al. 2003) is filled with specific instructions and examples of how to set up democratic yet self-disciplined classrooms. By having the class create and live by their own classroom rules, students become invested in democracy.

Democratic classrooms and schools offer the best hope for public support of schools.

Institute for Democracy in Education

In *Classroom Management that Works*, Robert Marsano emphasizes the importance of student input when establishing classroom rules and procedures, and limit setting.

Carl Glickman in his book,  *Holding Sacred Ground*, believes democratic schools will reclaim the purpose of public education: being a part of a greater good and contributing to the betterment of society. Instead of holding schools captive with high-stakes testing, he urges schools be required to provide students with opportunities to put their learning to work in the school neighborhood, and/or larger community. As well as its academic purposes, he says schools can be a part of a

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larger objective: To improve society and allow justice and equality to flourish.

This fits with what other educators are doing to keep kids in school. "Sit still, be quiet, and listen," are being replaced by learning, talking, and doing. Active learning and service learning are engaging students (Keller, 1995). Some schools, seeing the possibilities of having students do something with what they are learning while serving the school and community, **are creating mini-democratic societies where traditional learning becomes civics**. The curriculum becomes a balance between content and practice giving students a deeper understanding of what it means to live in a democratic society.

### **An elementary school democratic classroom in Indiana**

"Giving children the sense of ownership in the classroom can lead to the kind of open and cooperative learning environment that most teachers just dream about

Michelle G Zachlod, 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, California City, CA

High school is not the only place to practice and apply democratic values. Here in Indiana, at Amelia Earhart Elementary in Lafayette, teacher Nadine Roush's 5<sup>th</sup> grade class is a laboratory of daily democratic practice (Quindlen, 2003). The students create a class constitution, with an outline of student rights as citizens of the class, and help run the class through a variety of committees and meetings.

### **The public high school: Democracy's "finishing school"**

Indeed, as educator and non-hypocritical adult George Wood noted in *Curriculum Update* (Quindlen, 2003), our high schools are 'democracy's finishing school.' Where else will youth, our future citizens, learn about democracy? Where will they learn that if they form with other like-minded students over particular issues and organize, they can be influential, can change and improve school and society for themselves and others? Where do they get to feel the power and sense the spirit of the democratic potential? Where will they be able to experiment with the rights and responsibilities of human liberty spelled out in the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment? Where will future voters learn about running a very large and powerful nation when they turn 18?

### **What is the best way to prepare children and youth to be responsible citizens in a democratic society?**

It is at home where families vote on a desert for supper or where to vacation? Is it in religious institutions, children and youth may attend, where they could help decide on the social events? No, none are like the potential of high school. Society cannot miss the chance high school offers to initiate youth into the "holy grail" of democracy and the freedom/responsibility inter-relationship. We owe this to these soon to be 18 year old voter/citizens. Where else can youth learn to make and deal with decisions and mistakes made, as adults do daily in local, state, and national legislative groups? Where will students learn the "democratic faith," the fundamental belief that democracy has a powerful meaning, that it can work, and that it is necessary if we are to maintain freedom and human dignity in our social affairs...but in our public (high) schools? Yet, we do not. **Why?**



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### **Adults and teachers as barriers to democratic education**

Is it because it has been very hard to convince adults, especially, that creating democratic classrooms and schools is beneficial? In fact, the benefits multiply on down the line. We worry about voter turnout and the lack of involvement in politics by the populace. Groups debate and suggest ways to do this—none of which suggest democratic schools and classrooms.

We wanted democracy in Russia, the Balkans, South Africa. Now we want it in North Korea, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. We fought a war to bring it to the Iraqis. Yes, we want democracy in China; we just don't want it in our schools. Youth know this—and see this as another act of adult insincerity: do as we say, not as we do

### **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 local school detention/suspension rooms are a daily confirmation of the failure of punishment. So, who is really being penalized? Who's really in distress here? **It is the teachers—they are burning out from trying to coerce students into obedience.**

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.

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 with students in creating classroom climate (AERO-GRAMME, 1998; Barr & Parrett, 1995, 1997; Beadi, 1996; Bolmeier, 1995; California Department of Education, 1996; Changing Schools, 1995; Douglas, 1995; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Duke & Ganseder, 1990; Fiemming, 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.

Shared decision making with children and youth takes time—time to listen to what they have to

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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).

Everyday ought to include one block of time in which students can decide what to do (Kohn, 1993).

**PART B: Why we don't have it, or "A list of 6 excuses used by teachers."**

What do many teachers think kids will want when asked to help make school rules: "No homework and recess all day."

Jerry Mintz

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 "What they really need is a return 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.

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**England's experiences: Addressing the fears of school staff** (Trafford, 2003)

What have England's educators learned from their experiences with democratic schools?

- **Criticism of teachers**
- In practice, empowered students do not set out to be vindictive. In fact, the more students are empowered, the less they get personal about teaching styles and the better they get at expressing themselves courteously and sensibly.
- **Rights without responsibilities**  
It is not empowered young people who are likely to seek confrontation or "stand up for their rights," but those who feel powerless. Besides, a harsh and mean "demanding" of rights is not a part of the democratic process.
- **Complaints about teachers**  
In a democratic climate of mutual respect there is less likelihood of malicious complaints.
- **Unreasonable demands**  
These types of assertions have not been a feature of democratic schools. If anything, empowered students tend to be conservative and to expect too much of themselves, not their schools. Students become "over punitive" of their peers.
- **Isn't it just more work for teachers?**  
It should not be. Empowered students help teachers find and implement solutions, rather than create more work for them. In fact student are very good at pointing out things that schools waste time on.
- **Two things that democratic schools are not**  
Democracy in schools is not a free-for-all or "Lord of the Flies," nor is it anti-uniforms or against giving teachers respect.

**Escape from freedom: Eric Fromm revisited**

Oddly surrounding the implementation of democratic education is the phenomenon of resistance to it. As has been the case in many instances in the former Soviet Union, citizens used to communism continue to oppose freedom and desire to return to a state controlled society. Around the globe, those used to a dictatorship are made uneasy with choices and responsibility. Fromm predicted this over 60 years ago in his book *Escape from Freedom*.

**Actual resistance from students**

So, 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.

In general, most resistance from students comes in these forms:

- a. They refuse—it'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)

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The key question here is how teachers and other adults respond to these maneuvers and how they face themselves 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), **educators must realize it is not naive or Utopian to think that students can make responsible decisions about 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, never question authority, or never desire to be a part of the decision-making process that affects their lives. Our society does not want to create adults who never vote or who are not responsible citizens due to the fact that in the classroom and school they were treated in such a way as to feel powerless, burned out, compliant, controlled, and silenced (Kohn, 1993).

### **Student apathy: The IPS Student Alliance 1992 & 1993**

Actually, during the 1991 and 1993 school years, two IPS high school students tried, were successful, and then failed in their attempt to create a system-wide student organization. The Indianapolis Student Alliance was formed in early 1992 by Broad Ripple High School students Chad Priest and Luttrell Livingston to give IPS students a voice in the district decision-making process, with an eventual goal of creating a non-voting student seat on the school board.

Although the group was given a room at the education center and a small budget, eventually "backbiting, bureaucracy, funding, and cooperation issues" took its toll. The plan for a student seat on the school board was stalled indefinitely. The group accused the administration of resisting Alliance activities; this discouraged the group's leaders (Priest, 1992). However, it was student apathy that caused the group to break up. Over time, the original 150 members become only 20. Student response was not as strong as the organizers expected: 'Students have been told for so long that their ideas are worthless. Why bother coming out and talking about them?' (Jesse, 1993).

"A lot of educators sort of lose sight of the actions that they take. Student board members help the board become aware of issues students really care about. You can't understand what you don't see."

Bernard Holloway, Student school board member 2001-2002, Prince George County, MD.

### **The IPS Student Alliance proposal revisited: An idea whose time has come**

In time some things change. In retrospect, the ideas of former IPS students Priest and Livingston were merely ahead of their time. Insightfully and courageously, the National School Board Association now sponsors the National Caucus of Young School Board Members that provides a forum for the unique problems young board member can face.

"The mind once enlightened cannot again become dark."

Thomas Paine

### **No longer are school boards missing a representative of the very people their policies affect.**

Today, approximately 200 students sit on school boards across the nation. Vermont now requires its local school boards have a seat for students. Although some states allow partial voting power for local student members, liability issues prevent this in some districts (Joiner, 2003). See *The Power of an Untapped Resource: Exploring Youth Representation on Your Board*

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*or Committee* (Benard, 2003). See the full document at [www.aasb.org/PDF/HansB\\_bklt.pdf](http://www.aasb.org/PDF/HansB_bklt.pdf).

## **Authentic citizenship through whole-school democracy: Teachers as models**

How do we empower teachers in the process  
of creating democratic classrooms and schools?

Institute for Democracy in Education

Whole school democracy means a consistent message about the value of democracy to everyone. It should not be a practice reserved for just students. Teachers, foremost, must “speak to power” in a way Quakers practiced and taught about how to confront authority (Quindlen, 2003). Restructuring for democratic education must come from those at the heart of education—the teacher.

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 both the educators and their pupils are left out of the decision making process (Beck, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Scherer, 1994).

### **Until teachers work in a democratic atmosphere, schools cannot be democratic for kids.**

School climate is directly associated with teaching methods. Some principals encourage teachers to dictate to students. This inhibits democracy. This also inhibits teachers from questioning authority, even that of the principal, superintendent and the school board. A democratic school encourages teachers to collaborate on curriculum, speak the truth, and ask questions. The school climate, through its teachers, must model for students the reasoning, willingness and the proper way to practice democratic ideals—showing students that it takes courage since exercising democracy involves tensions and contradictions.

## **School violence: Can democratic classrooms and schools have an effect?**

*“Violence is not the child of power, but powerlessness.”*

Dr. Rollo May

According to Maslow, we all have a need for recognition--a sense of significance, and if it cannot be obtained legitimately, it will be obtained...somehow. When our need for recognition is blocked, we become assertive. If our assertiveness is blocked and we still do not get the recognition we are searching for, we may become aggressive. If others continue to ignore us no matter what we do, the soil is made ready for the seeds of hopelessness and apathy, and we may be inclined to violence. We can only imagine the complete lack of significance, of influence, and the feelings of nothingness that are inside the mind and heart of society's most violent.

Students have a voice. And they want to be heard. They want to be involved. They want to feel important, to have a sense of power that is more a personal, psychological or social power—the power to be able to assert oneself, to exercise influence on the world...to make a difference.

*“Those who feel more control over what happens  
to them rarely become ill despite high levels of stress.”*

Alfie Kohn

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The problem is: In order to decrease the potential of violence, **we must recognize the underlying causes of the social disease of impotence.** Apathy is the stage before violence. Power corrupts, but so does powerlessness. By trusting and then welcoming students to share in significant classroom and school decisions, schools meet the psycho-social needs of students for recognition, and assertiveness, while eliminating the situations that lead to aggressiveness or even violence.

**Democracy as deliberation as self-affirmation**

Democracy teaches deliberation. Democracy is a way, a system of talking things over. The system is made up of reasoning, consideration, reflection, compromise, fair discussions, and working things out. Tolerance, respect, a willingness to learn from each other—these are the values on which democratic nations thrive. They are the values that schools must teach and practice. Democracy provides a system to allow individual voices and ideas to be heard, considered, respected, recognized, and used. **Democracy is self-affirmation.** When these basic needs for recognition are met, aggression is unnecessary.

Democracy as deliberation not only produces better, more fully supported decisions; but, the process also builds community and provides a model of civic society for students (Beck, 1998). Violence and communication are mutually exclusive. Simply put, it is hard to talk to your enemy—and if we can talk with that person, that person ceases to be your enemy. Divisive issues do not have to paralyze schools: Teachers, parents, students, and community members can turn conflicts into educational experiences for students (Gerzon, 1997).

As well, a significant part of moral development comes through democratic dialogue, reflecting on experience, and looking at how our behavior affects others (Schneider, 1996). Each student may not get what they want; but democracy is also about compromise, building consensus, thinking about the other student's needs and views, and the commitment to the larger community (Meier, 2003).

The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.  
The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.  
The opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

Elie Weisel

Let's add:

The opposite of violence is not non-violence, its indifference.

To reiterate, in *The Face of Violence*, Jacob Bronowski asserted, "*Violence is the expression of impotence.*" Thus, not being indifferent...and empowering students by giving them a voice in classroom and school deliberations and the decisions and responsibilities that follow, school staff will meet the need for recognition and provide a sense of personal power--that one can make a difference--at such a basic psychological and community level, seeking significance negatively or anti-socially will be less likely.

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### **Current democratic schools**

According to the Alternative Education Resource Organization's (AERO) list, internationally there are 90 democratic schools in 29 countries. Interestingly, Russia has 3. Moscow's School of Self-Determination is the more renowned. In America, there are 69 democratic schools. See [democraticschools@educationrevolution.com](mailto:democraticschools@educationrevolution.com). Currently, there are over 1250 websites containing the words, "democratic schools."

Four more examples of democracy brought to life in schools are: Central Park East Secondary School in New York City, the Rindge School of Technical Arts in the Boston area, La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, and a particular program within Marquette Middle School (now called Georgia O'Keefe Middle School) in Madison, Wisconsin. Each represents the creative response of educators to the realities of poverty, injustice, and dislocation. And all show the rich learning experiences that result from people's determination to make their classrooms centers of democratic practice and to remove wall between the school and the larger society (Apple and Beane, 1995).

*"The school made me self-sufficient."*

Sudbury Valley student

No pamphlet on democratic education can leave out the Sudbury Valley School concept. See [www.sudval.org](http://www.sudval.org). Opened in 1968 in Farmington, MA, Sudbury is a private school and is the best example of "The School as a Democratic Community." The school governs itself on the model of a traditional New England Town Meeting. Weekly school meetings help manage the school, at which each adult or student has one vote. Thus, students share full responsibility for effective school operations and for quality of life at the school.

### **Indiana democratic schools**

Bloomington, IN has the Harmony School. A private alternative school of choice since it started in 1974, the K-12 program has had democratic school meetings. Staff go to other schools to teach about democratic process. They have recently won an award for their process of empowering students democratically (Mintz, 2003). Renaissance II, the Warren Township alternative public school of choice located at the Washington Square Mall holds weekly school meetings. The IPS Key School also involves students in important school decisions beyond the traditional student council format. Many teachers at IPS Cold Springs School hold morning classroom "town meetings." General assemblies are held in accordance with the School Ethos and Bill of Rights.

*If civic life is eroding, reinvigorating traditional civic education is not enough. We need to make education itself more democratic by involving students in meaningful deliberation of the purposes and goals of public schools.*

The Institute for Democracy in Education

### **Current democratic education organizations, projects, and articles**

#### **ASCD'S First Amendment schools**

Currently, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) is promoting democratic schools. Eleven First Amendment project schools around the country are exploring ways students can understand their roles as citizens in a democracy as they learn a deeper practical application of the five freedoms of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. Projects at these schools, funded through the collaboration of the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center and ASCD,

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will serve as models that other schools can adopt to their own communities. Go to [www.firstamendmentschools.org](http://www.firstamendmentschools.org).

*"Freedom and justice, however important, can never be enough; learning about educating for democratic citizenship must be more than an academic exercise."*

*First Amendment Schools, p. 21*

In *First Amendment in Schools* (Haynes, et al., 2003) the following four principles for creating and sustaining a First Amendment School are listed:

- I. Create Laboratories of Democratic Education** Educate for freedom by providing students and all member of the school community with substantial opportunities to practice democracy. Knowing of the Bill of Right and the Constitution are necessary, but preparation for citizenship requires virtues and skills acquired through participation.
- II. Commit to Inalienable Rights and Civic Responsibility** Schools provide all members of school community opportunities to exercise, with responsibility, their constitutional rights to freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly and petition.
- III. Include All Stakeholders** Since schools must model the democratic process, school and classroom decision are made only after appropriate involvement of those affected by the decision with respect for those holding dissenting views.
- IV. Translate Civic Education into Community Engagement** Rights and responsibilities are best guarded and civic responsibilities are best appreciated when student are actively engaged in actually building a more just and free society.

**Project 540**

Project 540 is a revolutionary new approach to civic education using democratic dialogue to give students a chance to speak out and take action. During the 2002-03 school years 140,000 students in more than 230 high schools nationwide participated, bridging the gap between the way schools function now and the way they might if students' input was taken seriously into consideration. Students are asked what they care about, what proposal they have for school and community change, and, in cooperation with adults, what action can be taken to implement their ideas for change.

*"Students need to speak up right now and show that they have power. A lot of kids think they don't, but they do, they do have power."*

Project 540 student

Any school can use Project 540 to develop practical skills and incorporate, in a structured way, student voice into school planning and decision-making. By participating in this project, high schools will be at the forefront of a national effort to encourage the active citizenship of youth. See [www.project540.org](http://www.project540.org) or call toll free 1.866.212.2581.

**The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Participation (CIRCLE)**

In 2002, CIRCLE, Carnegie Corporation, and the Corporation for National and Community Service held several meetings. Written by national-class scholars and practitioners, a thorough report, "The Civic Mission of Schools," was published promoting a reawakening of the democratic



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mission of our public schools. Noting the decline of youth voter turnout and their increasing disinterest in politics and civic affairs, the report points out what schools can do to combat these problems: increased classroom discussions about local, national, and global issues and events; encouraging shared decisions with students in classroom and school governance; providing students chances to do something with what they are learning in school through student created community service projects; and, offering extracurricular activities that involve the school and the community. The study also recommends what can be done at the national level: more federal funding for enriched civic education; establish a new federal agency to encouraging research and development of model programs, or a national clearing house for civic education for teachers and schools; provide financial reward for schools and educators; funding for school community partnerships; and, promote standards--hold schools accountable for their ability to involve student in school governance, and to instill civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes. See [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org) or [www.carneige.org](http://www.carneige.org)

***Phi Delta Kappan: We are living in a teachable moment, will we be responsible adults?***

Perhaps the more powerful initiative to promote democratic education is in the September 2003 *Phi Delta Kappan*: "Democracy and Civic Engagement." Discussing what is the best means to develop democratic citizens the edition discusses the issues around the emphasis on patriotism and community service vs. the importance of debate, dialogue, critique, social analysis, and citizen participation in the affairs of the state.

"It is up to educators, then, to reconnect the heart of the educational process  
to the democratic mission of schooling — to reconnect education to democracy."

Westheimer & Kahne

**Reconnecting education to democracy: Democratic school communities**

The article, "Teaching Democracy: What Schools Can Do," draws on our study of 10 educational efforts that have successfully promoted democratic values and capacities. This research highlights the importance of developing students' civic commitments, capacities, and connections and how to foster these outcomes. If students are to be prepared to work thoughtfully and effectively to improve society, schools will need to integrate academic work with its civic and social meaning. Thus the key question is not whether schools can support the development of democratic citizens, but whether they choose to make this a reality and not just talk about.

The article, "So What Does It Take to Build a School for Democracy?" (Meier, 2003) details the kind of school culture that is essential for promoting democratic habits of heart and mind. The writer argues that, rather than accept the top-down imposition of academic goals inherent in the standards movement/NCLB legislation, schools must develop their own mission internally through dialogue involving teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders; that they must make time for democracy to be enacted and lived; that they must be governed thoughtfully, conscientiously, and transparently; and that assessments must clearly reflect these values. The value of opportunities to participate in democratic dialogues and to experience democracy as a way of life cannot be overstated.

Historian Charles Payne, in "More Than a Symbol of Freedom: Education for Liberation and Democracy," discusses how fundamentally important an understanding of one's past can be. Unlike those who emphasize study of our nation's traditional heroes, however, Payne argues that African American young people need to know the full story of those "heroes" not primarily

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characterized as patriots--at least not in the sense put forward in the recent efforts to promote patriotism--who resisted injustice even when the cause of injustice was embedded in the laws, practices, and traditions of a democratic society in need of repair.

Youth is the seed-time of good habits, as well in nations as in individuals."

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

During "Civic Education and Political Participation," William Galston reminds us that attending to diversity and culture, developing civic skills, and creating a vision for what democratic action can accomplish must be combined with attention to academic knowledge in order for students to become effective democratic citizens: "informed engagement" should be the goal of civic education. He details in his article, research that has identified important links between civic knowledge and commitments to democratic values, to political participation, and to a host of other civic outcomes. Galston's article concludes by discussing strategies for effective civic education that have been identified through research.

The goal of democratic education is the 'development of participatory citizens who have cultivated the democratic habits of hearts and mind.'

Institute for Democracy in Education

**The point remains**

The point remains: After all the years since 1776, if democratic schools are just an anomaly, some sentimental ideal we pay lip service to, in light of the U.S. pro-democracy foreign policy, a very strange situation is created which will only lead to bad faith, impotency, and eventually to apathy. And indifference is what we do not want.

As was the case with Federal Hocking High School, local school districts can educate students, who as adult citizens, will make sure their children's public schools have shared decision-making—breaking the present cycle where democratic ideals were taught, but not practiced.

"Make no mistake about it, the stakes are high, as James Mursell (1955, p. 3) pointed out 40 years ago:

If the schools of a democratic society do not exist for and work for the support and extension of democracy, then they are either socially useless or socially dangerous. At the best they will educate people who will go their way and earn their living indifferent to the obligations of citizenship in particular and of the democratic way of life in general. . . . But quite likely they will educate people to be enemies of democracy—people who will fall prey to demagogues, and who back movements and rally round leaders hostile to the democratic way of life. Such schools are either futile or subversive. They have no legitimate reason for existence" (Apple and Beane, 1995).

\***Facadocracy:** A false democracy. A system of government Americans teach the world about, but rarely practice in their very own schools and classrooms with their children and youth due to the excuses adults come up with because they feel so powerless themselves.

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**The 85 schools represented  
at the IDEC 2003 meeting**

Abacus Montessori School (India)  
Albany Free School (New York)  
ALPHA Alternative (Canada)  
Alternative Community School (New York)  
Antioch College (Ohio)  
Antioch New England Graduate School (New Hamp)  
Ark Community Charter School (New York)  
ASSA School (Poland)  
Aventurijn School (Netherlands)  
Barn Suan Dek (Thailand)  
Bennington College (Vermont)  
Berlin Sudbury School Start-Up (Germany)  
Blue Mountain School (Oregon)  
Boorobin Sudbury School (Australia)  
Carl Rogers School (Hungary)  
Catalysta (New York)  
Charles A. Tindley Accelerated School (Indiana)  
Clonlara School (Michigan, National & Int'l)  
Currambena Primary School & Preschool (Australia)  
Democratic School of Hadera (Israel)  
Diablo Valley School (California)  
Ecole PEACE (Canada)  
Fairhaven School (Maryland)  
Full Circle Community School (Florida)  
Global Friends School (California)  
Global Village School (California, Nat'l and Int'l)  
Goddard College (Vermont)  
Greenwood Sudbury School (Connecticut)  
Heartlight Chicago (Illinois)  
Highland School (West Virginia)  
Holistic Education Elementary School (Oregon)  
Holistic Education School (Taiwan)  
Hope Flowers School (West Bank)  
Hudson Valley Community College (New York)  
Hudson Valley Sudbury School (New York)  
Kids To The Country (Tennessee)  
Kauai Democratic Start-Up School (Hawaii)  
Liberty School (Maine)  
Little River Community School (New York)  
Living Routes (Massachusetts)

Lumiar School (Brazil)  
Mirkwood School (Vermont)  
Nahoon Learning Community (South Africa)  
Naleb School (Guatemala)  
New York University (New York)  
Ohio University (Ohio)  
Pacifica Community Charter School (California)  
Philadelphia start-up school (Philadelphia)  
Play Mountain Place (California)  
Prairie Sage Sudbury School (Illinois)  
Purple Thistle Center (Canada)  
Renaissance Charter School (New York)  
Ridgefield High School (Connecticut)  
River Mist Learning Community (Colorado)  
Robert C. Parker School (New York)  
Sage Graduate School (New York)  
Sands School (England)  
School Around Us (Maine)  
School of Self-determination (Russia)  
Skidmore College (New York)  
Sri Aurobindo Yoga Mandir (Nepal)  
St. John's College (Maryland)  
Stork School (Ukraine)  
Sudbury Valley School (Massachusetts)  
Summerhill School (England)  
Shure University (Japan)  
Taipei Autonomous Secondary School (Taiwan)  
Tamariki School (New Zealand)  
TASH Foundation (India)  
Tehleme School (France)  
The Community School (Maine)  
The Community School (New Hampshire)  
The King George School (Vermont)  
The Living School (Colorado)  
The Modern School (New Jersey)  
The Nature School (Thailand)  
The New School (Delaware)  
The Tutorial School (New Mexico)  
The Village School of Northfield (Minnesota)  
Tokyo Shure (Japan)  
Upattinas School (Pennsylvania)  
Vermont College of Union Institute & Univ. (Vermont)  
Whispering Seed (Thailand)  
Windsor House School (Canada)  
Wingra School (Wisconsin)

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**A Guide to Organizations, Programs, and Resources** (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003)

**Agenda for Education in a Democracy.** Seeks to support young people's participation in a social and political democracy through research and programs that promote democratic citizenship. Includes Institute for Educational Inquiry and the Center for Educational Renewal. <http://depts.washington.edu/cedren/AED.htm>

**American Political Science Association - Civic Education Organizations.**

Extensive online list of civic education organizations, [www.apsanet.org/cennet/organizations/index.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/cennet/organizations/index.cfm)

**America's Promise.** National coalition of organizations committed to five "promises" for young people: caring adults, safe places, healthy start, marketable skills, and opportunities to serve. Founded by Colin Powell. [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)

**Campus Compact.** Organization representing 900 college and university presidents committed to the civic purposes of higher education, [www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)

**Center for Civic Education.** Specializes in civic/citizenship education and participation, law-related education, and international educational exchange programs for developing democracies, [www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

**Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).** Funds and disseminates research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

**The Center for Learning & Citizenship.** This is a project of the Education Commission of the States and runs several citizenship and civics education programs, <http://www.ecs.org/html/projectsPartners/clc/CLCCivicMissionSchools.htm>.

**Choices for the 21st Century Education Program.** Choices, based at Brown University, Providence, RI, develops curriculum materials and holds workshops for high school social studies teachers on civic education. <http://www.choices.edu>

**Citizenship Education and Research Network.** Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners interested in citizenship education and research in Canada, [www.canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/cern-pub/overview.html](http://www.canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/cern-pub/overview.html)

**The Civic Mind.** This web site features directories and other online resources on civic education. <http://www.civicmind.com>.

**CIVNET.** Online resource and service that promotes civic education all over the world, [www.civnet.org](http://www.civnet.org)

**Close-Up Foundation.** Works to promote responsible and informed participation in the democratic process through a variety of educational programs for middle and high school students, teachers, and adults. The website describes programs and provides a range of links to resources and organizations, [www.closeup.org](http://www.closeup.org)

**Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF) and the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago (CRFC).** Both offer civic education curricula, activities for students, and professional development for teachers, [www.crfusa.org](http://www.crfusa.org) and [www.crfc.org](http://www.crfc.org)

**Corporation for National and Community Service.** Provides opportunities for community service through three programs: Senior Corps, Ameri-Corps, and Learn and Serve America. They are part of USA Freedom Corps, a White House initiative to foster a culture of citizenship, service, and responsibility. [www.nationalservice.org](http://www.nationalservice.org)

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**Democratic Dialogue at the University of Ottawa.** International, collaborative inquiry into democracy, education, and society. For educators, political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, teachers, policy makers, artists, critics, and the broader public concerned with ideals, tensions, policies, and practices of education for democracy, [www.democraticdialogue.com](http://www.democraticdialogue.com)

**Democracy.org.** This is a clearinghouse of information on civics and character education. <http://www.democracy.org>.

**Educators for Social Responsibility.** Helps educators create safe, caring, respectful, and productive learning environments that foster democratic participation and change, [www.esnational.org](http://www.esnational.org)

**The Education Revolution.** The website of The Alternative Education Resource Center (AERO), this group helps sponsor the International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) and is the main national resource for what is going on internationally with democratic schools. <http://www.educationrevolution.org> Click on "Democratic Schools and IDEC."

**e.thePeople.** Digital town hall that "promotes intelligent and diverse discussion and political action." [www.e-people.org](http://www.e-people.org)

**First Amendment Schools.** Sponsored by the First Amendment Center and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), provides resources for teaching about the First Amendment, as well as strategies to promote active citizenship in students. The grant program will provide money for schools working on teaching and modeling democratic citizenship, <http://webserver2.ascd.org/web/firstamendment/FIASHINTRO.cfm>.

**Highlander Research and Education Center.** Highlander sponsors educational programs and research into community problems, as well as a residential Workshop Center for social change organizations and workers active in the South and internationally. Over the course of its history, Highlander has played important roles in many major political movements, including the Southern labor movements of the 1930s, the civil rights movement of the 1940s-60s, and the Appalachian people's movements of the 1970s-80s. [www.highlandercenter.org](http://www.highlandercenter.org)

**IEA Civic Education Study.** Survey research report of nearly 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries on democracy, national identity, social cohesion, and diversity, [www.wam.umd.edu/~iea](http://www.wam.umd.edu/~iea)

**Institute for Civic Leadership.** A semester long program in civic leadership for democratic change open to undergraduate women from colleges and universities across the country The Institute also undertakes research into strategies for increasing civic engagement among students in K-12 and higher education. [www.mills.edu/ICL](http://www.mills.edu/ICL)

**Institute for Democracy and Education at Ohio University.** Provides teachers, administrators, parents, and students committed to democratic education with a forum for sharing ideas, with a support network of people holding similar values, and with opportunities for professional development, [www.ohiou.edu/ide](http://www.ohiou.edu/ide)

Indiana Regional Office contact: Terry O'Conner, Indiana State University, Center for Teaching and Learning, 812-237-3053, [ctlocon@ruby.indstate.edu](mailto:ctlocon@ruby.indstate.edu)

**The Institute for Democratic Education.** Established in 1995 and influencing the creation of democratic school around the world, this Israeli group headed by Yaacov Hecht is at the forefront of democratic educational change. This organization supports 22 Israeli democratic schools and operates democratization programs in more than 100 of that country's state schools. [www.democratic-edu.org](http://www.democratic-edu.org)

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**International Democratic Education Net.** Located at 4 Dene Cottage, South Brent, TQ10 9JE U.K.  
Email: davidgribble@onetel.net.uk    www.idenetwork.org

**Kids Can Make A Difference.** School program and detailed curriculum to inspire young people to realize that it is within their power to help eliminate hunger and poverty in their communities, their country, and their world, [www.kidscanmakeadifference.org](http://www.kidscanmakeadifference.org)

**National Alliance for Civic Education.** Selected resources and guidelines for civic education, [www.cived.net](http://www.cived.net)

**PEW Charitable Trust.** This organization encourage youth voter turnout. Go to [www.pewtrusts.com](http://www.pewtrusts.com).

**The Political Engagement Project - Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.** A collaborative study of 21 college and university based programs that strengthen students' political understanding and engagement. The website includes curriculum resources, [www.carnegiefoundation.org/PEP](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/PEP)

**Project 540.** Gives students nationwide the opportunity to talk about issues that matter to them and to turn these conversations into real school and community change, [www.project540.org](http://www.project540.org)

**Project Vote Smart.** Project Vote Smart (PVS) is dedicated to providing all Americans with accurate and unbiased information for electoral decision making, [www.votesmart.org/index.htm](http://www.votesmart.org/index.htm)

**Public Achievement.** People of all ages work with others, meet challenges, and solve problems, learning from one another the meaning of citizenship and democracy, <http://publicachievement.org>

**Rethinking Schools.** Writing, resources, and advocacy for public education reform in the pursuit of equity and social justice, [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)

**Rouge Forum.** Meetings and resources for educators, students, and parents interested in teaching and learning for a democratic society, [www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/rouge\\_forum](http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/rouge_forum)

**Street Law Inc.** Practical, participatory education about law, democracy and human rights. Street Law features the curriculum Street Law and many other curricular resources for teachers and students, [www.streetlaw.org](http://www.streetlaw.org)

**Teaching Tolerance.** Founded by the Southern Poverty Law Center, Teaching Tolerance supports the efforts of K-12 teachers and other educators to promote respect for differences and appreciation of diversity, [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)

