

Landscapes

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- All photos for cover, pages 2 & 3 by Jennifer Kroepfl

✓ KIDS VOTING

BRINGING THE CLASSROOM TO POLITICS



years ago who, having seen the Costa Rican experience, wanted to emulate it in the United States. In many American cities, the mayor is elected by less than 10% of those eligible to vote and less than 20% of eligible voters in the 18 to 24 range bother going to the voting booth.

"I probably wouldn't have come here today if it hadn't been for my kids."

program culminates with students accompanying their parents to polling sites and casting ballots. The results of the children's ballots are transmitted to the media along with official voting

results. Districts implementing the program show on average an increase of 5% in adult voter turnout.

Each participating community creates a local board of directors of leaders from business, the public service, and school districts. Curriculum packages are provided at no cost by the national office, and can be modified to reflect

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In Costa Rica, 90% of the voters come out to vote, the highest percentage turnout in the Western Hemisphere. Costa Ricans attribute this high voter turnout to the national tradition whereby parents take their children to the voting booth on Election Day.

The concept of having children actively participate in political processes can generate lively debate. Here in British Columbia, many believe that politics has no place in the classroom in any way, shape, or form. On the other side, a report by the BC Teachers' Federation on citizenship education states, "To be effective citizens in a democracy, students should be knowledgeable about...and understand democratic values and processes." But can classroom experience alone give students sufficient understanding of democratic processes they will need as citizens?

These were the kinds of questions that challenged a group of Americans 10

Inspired by the Costa Rican experience, in 1988 an organization called *Kids Voting USA* was started in Phoenix, Arizona. The idea was to have students visit an official polling site on Election Day, accompanied by a parent or guardian, and cast a ballot similar in content to the ballot being cast by their parents. The creators had the idea that by educating and involving youth in the voting process today, democracy might be strengthened tomorrow.

In 10 years, *Kids Voting USA* has grown to involve five million students annually. Over 200,000 teachers in 6,000 schools are using its curriculum resources to raise voter awareness; and, in 40 states some 100,000 volunteers are helping parents bring their children to 16,000 voter precincts.

How it Works

Kids Voting USA provides a grade-specific curriculum package from Grades K-12 equating to six to 12 hours of instruction and designed to enhance citizenship education which students receive in school. The package encourages critical thinking, creativity, and parental involvement, and helps students develop skills to obtain information for making critical decisions. The

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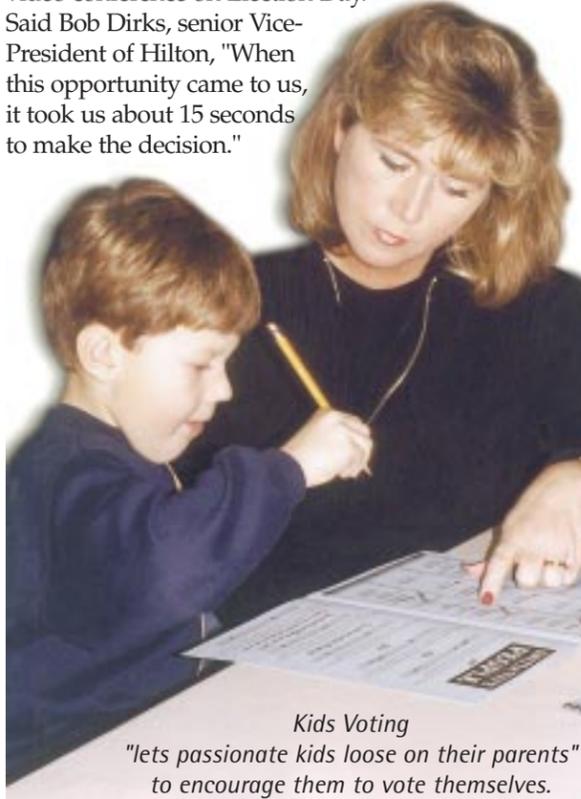
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local issues. National sponsors help to provide the financial resources for common materials. One corporate sponsor, Hilton Hotels, offers free use of its facilities in nine cities to allow students to have a video conference on Election Day.

Said Bob Dirks, senior Vice-President of Hilton, "When this opportunity came to us, it took us about 15 seconds to make the decision."



*Kids Voting
"lets passionate kids loose on their parents"
to encourage them to vote themselves.*

A Community Story

The small town of Enumclaw, Washington, three hours south of Vancouver, shows how the *Kids Voting* concept can take off at the community level. Bobbie May, the volunteer Executive Director of *Kids Voting* Washington, launched the Enumclaw program after being in the community for only two weeks. It took less than six months to establish a local board of directors and infrastructure that now has 5,000 local students participating in every level of the election process. District school Superintendent Dr. Arthur Jarvis says district teachers are "100% committed to the program" because it gives them the flexibility to talk about issues in the classroom in a way that meets the curriculum. Another measure of teacher support is found in teachers who volunteer to work with kids who can't make it to the polling booth, by providing them with ballots and making sure that they are counted.

The only real measurement of success for programs intended to involve kids is the degree to which kids are willing to be involved. In Enumclaw, high school students travel to junior schools with skits in order

to inspire younger students to be interested in the program. Local high school students also developed a computer software program that can count all local ballots, evaluate results, break them down by school and publish a voters' report for all students.

The enthusiasm of the students isn't limited to the classroom. Superintendent Jarvis says that *Kids Voting* "lets passionate kids loose on their parents" to encourage them to vote themselves. Adds Jack Darnton, publisher of the local newspaper, "We adults never used to use seatbelts until our kids got that buckle-up message. Now you can't get into your car without your child saying, 'Where's your seat-belt?' The kids are going to do the same thing to adults when it comes to voting."



Perhaps more importantly, the *Kids Voting* concept is having a positive impact on people in the lower economic status. May says that *Kids Voting* is reaching these people because "those kids are going home and telling their folks that they can vote and that it can make a difference." One parent interviewed at the voting booth said, "I probably wouldn't have come here today if it hadn't been for my kids."

The *Kids Voting* board in Enumclaw is sensitive to any suggestion that this is an exercise in shallow patriotism. Darnton responds, "We're not just making red, white, and blue noise. We think there will be a huge payoff." To put substance to his claim, he produces evidence that in the first year *Kids Voting* was introduced in Enumclaw, adult voting increased by 9%. His sentiments are echoed by his peers at the *Seattle Times*. In

DEALING WITH

If it's on the news it will be in the classroom. The BC Teachers' Federation has developed a guide for the discussion of controversial issues in the classroom. The guide defines a controversial topic as one that contains one or more issues that have no clear resolution as well as issues that have received public prominence and media attention over a period of time.

The Federation proposes some ground rules including:

an editorial devoted to the *Kids Voting* concept, the *Times* said, "Spending time and money to train tomorrow's voters is not an educational frill. It's an educational investment in the future."

The curriculum package, which has components for different grade levels, comes with a teachers' reference guide, a glossary of terms, and a local people resource list teachers can draw upon for classroom speakers. There is no charge to participating schools as local fundraising committees developed the budget to purchase materials.

Volunteer involvement is critical to success. In this town of 25,000, there are close to 200 volunteers involved including bank executives, First Nations leaders and homemakers. They do everything from classroom presentations to staffing polling booths and driving parents and children to the polls. Said May, "In how many projects can you get PTA moms, corporate executives, and newspaper publishers sitting down at the same table counting kids' ballots?"

"We're not just making red, white, and blue noise. We think there will be a huge payoff."

Interviews at the voting booth on the November 3, 1998 American Election Day provided a grassroots endorsement. Parent Dena Saunders said she supports the program because it gives her an opportunity to talk about issues with her children. She added that as long as parents take the time to explain the issues fairly, "children can make informed choices." Her daughter Katie, in Grade 3, who was there voting said she voted for Senator Murray. When asked why, she replied, "Because (he said) we should give back some of our land to the animals." Amber Southworth, a high school student volunteering at the voting booth said, "I think it's really important that we get kids participating at the elementary school level. When they're older they will know they can't complain if they're not involved."

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From The Readers

Since the Fall 1998 edition of *Landscapes*, we've received a number of responses from our readers. Here are excerpts from some of these letters:

"Thank you very much for sending us Landscapes. It is full of interesting reports and information. It certainly stimulates my thinking about how this school can help students learn about the forest and their present and future roles as caretakers of these forests."

– John Vanderhoek, Principal, Penticton Community Christian School, Penticton

I have just finished reading the most recent edition of Landscapes and wanted to pass on my congratulations on a very strong edition of your magazine.

I was particularly interested in the article, The Media and Education, which echoed some of my concerns about education coverage in our provincial media. Because so few reporters are given the opportunity to specialize in one area of coverage, they can't develop the depth of knowledge required to do really first-rate reporting.

The current issues in education are complex, and the multiple pressures being brought to bear upon public educators are intensifying. That means now, more than ever, we need educated reportage to inform a meaningful public dialogue. Thanks for your contribution.

– Kit Krieger, President, BC Teachers' Federation

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Education Exchange

SENSITIVE ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM

- A classroom is not a platform.
- Controversy is best taught through discussion rather than instruction.
- Discussion should protect divergence of view among participants.
- A teacher has responsibility for ensuring exploration of the issue so the discussion promotes understanding and is not merely an exchange of intolerance.
- Students can be encouraged to analyze any controversial issue by asking the following questions:
 - What is the issue about?
 - What are the arguments?
 - What is assumed?
 - How are the arguments manipulated?



In the first year Kids Voting was introduced..., adult voting increased by 9%.

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National surveys taken among students and teachers who participate in *Kids Voting* bear out these endorsements. Fully 82% of participating students from Grades K - 12 reported that they wanted *Kids Voting* continued in their schools. They were supported by 89% of their teachers. In addition, 81% of teachers said they saw an increase of parental involvement in the school system as a result of participation in *Kids Voting*.

In 1645, one vote gave Oliver Cromwell control of England. In 1875, one vote changed France from a monarchy to a republic, and in 1876, one vote gave Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency of the United States. Teaching children that their one vote counts and might count a lot may be an important investment in citizenship education.



CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN BC

The 1998 public education conference sponsored by the BC Teachers' Federation was held under the theme of citizenship education. The theme was adopted based on a view of BCTF that "citizenship education was no longer a central purpose of public education."

The BCTF published a paper on the conference containing findings that "generally reflect the views and interests expressed by the participants." Among these were the following:

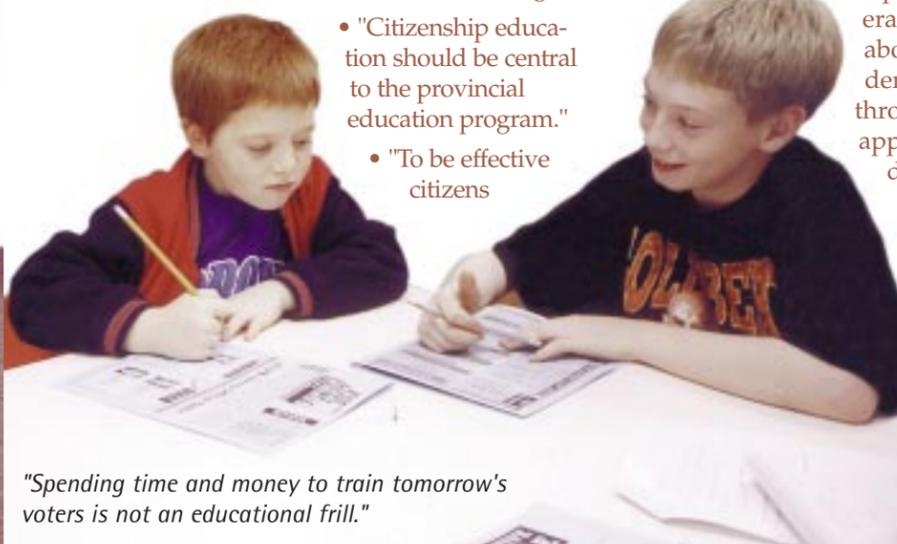
- "Citizenship education should be central to the provincial education program."
- "To be effective citizens"

in a democracy, students should be knowledgeable about...and understand democratic values and processes."

- "Citizenship education should be made relevant to students' interests."

- "Citizenship education involves active engagement through simulations, role-plays, and real-life deliberations with decision-makers."

Participants also felt it was important "for each new generation to be mentored about the principles of democracy," achieved through "an active learning approach." Among the skills deemed essential in citizenship education were "media literacy and the ability to access information." It was also agreed that students should have opportunities to "convey their views to politicians and government officials at all levels."



"Spending time and money to train tomorrow's voters is not an educational frill."