

Campaign Drama, Classroom Lessons

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

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The hoopla surrounding the New Hampshire presidential primaries earlier this month stirred some students at Timberlane High School to watch the candidates' debates, read news coverage, attend rallies, and even volunteer in local campaign offices. That interest, in turn, stimulated discussions in Bob Dawson's government classes at the school, located in Plaistow, near the state's southeast border, and gave weight to lessons about democratic principles and the electoral process.

"There were some kids who became immersed in the culture of the campaigns," Mr. Dawson said.



Voting stations await voters in Traverse City on Michigan's primary day.

—Charles Dharapak/AP

Even as he's felt pressed to cover the required course content in his limited class time, the veteran teacher has been dedicating time and activities to the 2008 election since the fall. He wants to spark students' interest and bring relevance to the process and the issues.

Civic education advocates and curriculum experts say the attention given the presidential campaign season provides a prime opportunity to explain the importance of elections and the discourse they trigger.

The nature of this election—a wide-open field, the possibility of an African-American or a woman for the Democratic nominee, and the contentious issues of the war in Iraq, the economy, and the environment—is a particular draw for young people, observers say. A jam-packed primary season and the build-up to Super Tuesday next month have made for a particularly compelling hook for class discussions.

“There’s a lot of evidence that talking about current events in class is very beneficial to students ... for building their knowledge and their interest in issues, and it creates habits” that lead to greater civic participation throughout their lives, said Peter Levine, the director of the [Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement](#), or CIRCLE, at the University of Maryland College Park. The nonprofit center studies civic and political participation among American youths and young adults.

“Beyond the educational benefits,” he said, “here’s an opportunity for citizens who happen to be young to reflect together [in the classroom] in mixed groups on election events and the issues candidates are talking about.”

‘A Fighting Chance’

CIRCLE has been conducting an ongoing evaluation of [Kids Voting USA](#), a civic education program that provides classroom activities and mock-voting events for students in grades K-12. State and local affiliates of the program set up partnerships with schools, election officials, and businesses “to help students understand that there are obligations that come with the ownership of our representative republic,” according to Jack Barse, the executive director of the national organization in Silver Spring, Md.

Classroom Resources

[Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Classroom Fact Check](#)

Offers materials to teach students to “see through the spin” of the presidential elections,

including lessons to analyze political advertisements and claims made by candidates during the debates.

CNN's Election Center 2008

The cable news channel's Web site features maps, summaries of the key issues, tallies of campaign contributions, blogs, podcasts, and video coverage.

C-SPAN Classroom

The classroom resource of the nonprofit public-affairs channel provides explanatory guides, lesson plans, student activities, and video clips.

Kids Voting USA

Information on state and local affiliates for a program that provides curriculum and mock-election events designed to engage students in the democratic process.

The Constitutional Rights Foundation

"Election Central" offers historical resources related to democracy and elections.

Pearson's Election Kit

Free materials from the publisher include an online catalog of classroom activities, free printable posters and maps, and links to Internet resources on the presidential candidates.

Countdown to Election 2008

Web site sponsored by Scholastic includes interactive election map, news coverage from student reporters, lesson plans, puzzles, and online discussions of the campaign.

Source: *Education Week*

At the Providence Day School in Charlotte, N.C., a K-12 private school, those lessons have been integrated into high-school-level classes and extracurricular programs, according to Ted Dickson, the history department chairman.

Students in 9th grade and Advanced Placement government courses, for example, first completed a research and writing assignment on a major issue in the campaign, such as the war in Iraq or the economy, to figure out their own positions. They then studied where each candidate stood on the issue to determine which one most closely reflected their own views. Later, they held caucuses throughout the classroom, inspired by the Iowa system, before taking a vote.

Classes at Providence Day are analyzing the rhetoric in candidates' victory and concession speeches, looking at polling data, and tackling extra-credit assignments that require them to follow the debates. Attendance in an after-school club, the Society for the Political Advancement of Mankind, or SPAM, has spiked in recent weeks, Mr. Dickson said.

"We are ultimately trying to get young people to vote," he said. "If you look at the general voting percentage of people overall, it's not just kids [who opt out], but if you can get them somehow connected to the issues and the process, ... we have a fighting chance of getting them to participate."

'Unparalleled Opportunity'



Joy Greenberg had little interest in politics until she was drawn into the fervor of the current campaign in her 9th grade government class at Providence Day. Now, she brings those lessons home as she discusses the candidates with her parents.

"We've talked in our class a lot about why we have presidents, the checks-and-balances system, and a lot about who the different candidates are," Ms. Greenberg said. "It's been kind of fun to know what's going on and to be able to have a conversation with my dad about who would be a good candidate."

Students in schools taking part in the Kids Voting program, like Providence Day, and who have the chance to discuss current events and controversial issues in class are more likely to have such discussions at home and influence their parents' civic participation, according to several research studies.

The Candidates on Education

Our [updated interactive guide](#) provides side-by-side comparisons of the education positions of the Democratic and Republican contenders for president.

That impact makes such lessons all the more important, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged students and those from groups that historically have had low voting rates, according to Joseph Kahne, the dean of the education school at Mills College in Oakland, Calif. Mr. Kahne is tracking young people in Chicago during their

high school years and after they leave school to determine what school-based factors might influence their civic participation in adulthood.

“The school provides a really unparalleled opportunity to reach all kids and to help them learn how to thoughtfully and respectfully deal with controversial questions,” he said.

Experts recommend a more substantive approach to teaching about the democratic process than simply following the latest polls or primary results.

“The horse-race stuff can be engaging, and it’s one reason so many adults are tuned in,” said Diana Hess, an associate professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “The horse race is a good hook, but the meat of the lesson is focusing on the issues and the process. You want to use [current events] as an opportunity to help students begin to understand the complexity of the issues,” she said.

Too many teachers are at a loss for just when and how to do that, given the time constraints of the school day and requirements many must meet for covering content, according to Mr. Levine of CIRCLE.



Supporters of former Sen. John Edwards, D-N.C., rally in Manchester, N.H.

—Eric Thayer/Getty Images

Teaching about the electoral process “is not in the standards [adopted by most states] and it’s not covered in accountability measures at all,” he said. “I think we have a policy problem in that we are not supporting teachers or encouraging them in any way to do it.”

When teachers do fit the topic into their overpacked lessons, they must then find ways to engage students who have trouble understanding the relevance of elections that most are ineligible to vote in.

Even with the famed first-in-the-nation primary happening in New Hampshire students' proverbial backyards, Timberlane High's Mr. Dawson found it difficult getting many students—9th graders and seniors alike—interested in the content.

"Some of the seniors had the opportunity to vote in the primary, but even though they had the day off from school, they didn't bother," he said. "They still don't see the connection yet" to their own lives.

Participation on Rise

Students around the country, meanwhile, have participated on various levels in educational and political activities related to the 2008 presidential election. Some 1.5 million students are expected to vote in mock elections sponsored by Kids Voting. Teenagers in many states have organized voter-registration drives at school, including one at Nova High School in Davie, Fla., that netted 300 new voters who could cast their primary ballots next week.

Some experts say such programs are signs that young people as a whole are not apathetic or uninterested, but perhaps just at a loss for how and why they should get involved.



A voter casts a ballot in Seabrook, N.H., during the nation's first presidential primary.

—Eric Thayer/Getty Images

"My research shows that students really are interested in the issues, and they want school to be authentic to the political world outside of school," Ms. Hess said. The

participation of young voters in the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primaries this month may reflect that interest. According to surveys by CIRCLE, voter turnout among New Hampshire residents younger than 30 rose 43 percent over the 2004 presidential primary contest, and participation in Iowa tripled.

"They respond to teachers who are genuinely enthusiastic about the content," Ms. Hess said of students. "It's just fundamentally not true that kids don't care about this."