



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Improving Civic Assets: The Civic Mission of Schools

By CED Guest Author

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Kelley O'Brien is the Director of the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, a program of the School of Government and one of the five North Carolina Civic Health Index partner organizations.

Several blog posts over the past year have addressed results of the North Carolina Civic Health Index. The 2010 study documented civic engagement disparities along generational, economic, ethnic, and educational lines. The report outlined strategies that schools, governments, and community organizations could employ to improve the civic engagement of all North Carolinians. Many of North Carolina's K-12 public schools went back into session last week, so it is timely to address the specific role that schools play in improving our communities' civic capital. Schools are uniquely poised to improve a communities' civic capital: Schools teach young people how our communities work and provide young people to practice civic skills, such as leadership and deliberation. Because schools reach all young people, they have the potential to close some of the civic gaps outlined in the North Carolina Civic Health Index. Preparing young people for civic life is not a new role for schools: Schools were founded with the intent of preparing students for participation in democracy and the workplace. Schools can improve students' civic capital by employing some or all of the six promising approaches to civic education. Promising approaches include:

- providing instruction on law, history, and government;
- engaging students in simulations of local, state, and federal government processes;
- discussing current events; and
- connecting students classroom learning to real world issues.

Making this "real world" connection is an opportunity for schools and communities to work together towards the common goal of preparing young people to participate in civic life. The Constitutional Rights Foundation's Civic Action Project (CAP) curriculum is one specific tool that connects classroom learning with real world community problem solving.

The CAP curriculum engages students in a process of addressing a specific problem, issue, or policy in their community. As they do this, they are engaged in the real world activity of trying to affect policy or solve problems. Students participating in the CAP curriculum initiate civic actions, including:

- getting informed about a public issue or problem
- thinking critically about the issue or problem
- discovering how government makes decisions
- developing a position
- engaging in civic dialogue
- building constituencies
- working together toward a common goal
- making presentations
- advocating for and defending positions
- meeting with officials
- making decisions



For the past 8 months, the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium has been training teachers, youth councils, and 4-H groups on the CAP curriculum. And, as a result, young people across the state are working to make their communities better places to live through local civic actions. For example, a group of students in Cabarrus County chose the school district budget as the topic of their “civic action.” They worked with their Board of County Commissioners and School Board to learn more about the district budget and made budget recommendations.

The students’ teacher, Daniel Helms, sees the long-term benefits of engaging students in projects like CAP. “Knowing that you can go and talk to the mayor, you can talk to county commissioners – if there’s a need that you see in your neighborhood, there are people who can address it,” he said. “That’s a skill students need for the rest of their lives.”

For more information on the NC Civic Education Consortium, visit www.civics.org. For more information on CAP, visit www.crfcap.org.