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**Equitable Schools for a New Democracy**  
Responses from the CES Network

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How do we define democracy and equity in schooling? Why is it important for schools to strive for democracy and equity? How can we teach to promote democracy and how can democracy be the core of what we teach? What are the connections among diversity, democracy, and equity? What are the connections between democratic schooling and a democratic society?

# Voting for Homecoming Queen Does Not Prepare Students for Democracy

by Dennis Littky with  
Samantha Grabelle

Essay

# 21



**C**IRCLE, an organization focused on the political participation of young Americans, found that in the presidential election year of 2000, only 42% of all 18-24 year-old citizens voted, and in the non-presidential election years of 1998 and 2002, just over half as many voted in local and state elections. CIRCLE cites that nationally, youth voting declined by 13 percentage points from 1972 to 2000.

*Why don't young people vote?* I'll tell you. By the time traditional high school students turn eighteen, they have had minimal contact with democracy. They have not experienced, as it is defined by Webster's, an "equality of rights, opportunity, and treatment," nor participated in any form of "a government by the people." In school – the place where young people spend so much of their lives – they have virtually no say in the real decisions that affect their lives. Okay, sure, they may get to decide what play the theater troupe will put on this year, or what the theme will be for the Spring dance. But by the time they are old enough to cast their first political vote, most kids have had absolutely no say in the kind of political and policy decisions that are made every day by principals, superintendents and boards of education. They have had no say in how the school budget is spent, no say in the school's rules, no say in the way they're treated. And, more importantly, they have very little say in anything to do with the reason they spend all those hours in school in the first place – *their own learning*. When it comes to democracy in schools, student council elections and homecoming queen ballots are not enough to prepare our youth to become active citizens of a true democratic system. We are failing our students when we give them these "fake" exercises in

democracy. We are failing our future when we graduate millions of young people who have so little understanding of what it means to take control of their own lives that they don't even bother to show up at the voting booth when important decisions are being made about how they will live those lives.

So how do we bring real democracy into our schools? The most important way is by giving kids an equal voice in determining the education they will receive there. Students must be given the opportunity to help determine their own curricula. All students must participate in the development of their own individualized learning plans. With the support of teachers and others, students must be allowed to decide how they will reach the learning goals set by the school and how they will reach their own personal learning goals. At The Met schools in Providence (and our similarly-modeled Big Picture Schools around the country), every student sits down with his/her teacher and family and develops a learning plan based around the school's formal set of learning goals – goals encompassing social, empirical and quantitative reasoning, as well as personal qualities and communication – that have been determined to be the student's best route to success in college and the real world. These learning plans form the basis of a personalized curriculum that allows students to identify and work on their academic weaknesses, while developing and participating in real world learning experiences that match their strengths and interests.

Notice that I said the family is there too, contributing to the development of their child's learning plan. While we believe

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and respect that the child's own voice must be the loudest because it is their life and their future, we also respect the parent's right to participate in determining their child's learning. If we truly believe that the parent is the child's first teacher, then we must respect them enough to allow them to continue that role throughout their child's schooling. Their right to help decide what happens to their child should not be taken away once their child climbs aboard their first school bus. And it goes further. When The Met opened in 1996, it was our first group of parents who decided (within the confines of state and local policies, of course) many of the structures we now take for granted. They were the ones who voted that school should start for their children at 9:00am. They were even the ones who decided that they and their children should be on a first-name basis with all school staff. That is what the majority of them wanted, and in a democratic school, that is what they got.

Every Met school operates as a democracy, not just in its relations with parents and in the development of each child's curriculum, but in the very day-to-day structures and cultural practices. This year, one Met school made it clear to the students on the very first day that this was *their* school, and it would be run only with their *full and committed participation*. By the end of that August day, committees had been formed to focus on everything from school spirit to discipline. From that point forward, these students will know what it means to live, and vote, in a democracy. They will be asked to make real decisions about the issues that affect them and their fellow students. They will vote for change, and they will decide when things are working well just the way they are. And they will see the results of their decisions (including some repercussions they may not have anticipated). What better learning experience to prepare students for what it means to live in a democracy, and more importantly, *participate* in one?

To create a democracy within a school, those in power must be willing to turn some of that power over to those for whom the school was built in the first place, and this must not be viewed as a loss. Teachers and principals who witness students taking control over their own learning have always spoken of these times as some of their greatest achievements. A school dedicated to creating a system of democracy is a school that will graduate eighteen-year olds who will not only understand the value of voting, but will believe in the power of their own voices to determine the course of their own lives, the health of their community, and the future of society.

The most important attitude that can be formed is that of the desire to go on learning. —John Dewey

### Dennis Littky

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