

Encouraging Political Participation in the Next Generation: Kids Voting USA

by Marilyn Evans

Several years ago in Arizona, desperation created a new program dedicated to increasing voter turnout entitled "Kids Voting." In 1988, the state ranked 42nd in the nation in voter turnout. The same year, in a three-way race, Ev Mecham was elected Arizona's governor, receiving his mandate from a paltry 14% of eligible voters. Two years later, Mecham was impeached.

Civic activists in Arizona were determined to alter this record of low voter turnout, with its consequences of poor state leadership and negative national media attention. This was the impetus that led to the founding of Kids Voting USA.

The program, essentially, is a call to adults and children alike to participate in the election process and vote on election day. In the classroom, the grade K-12 curriculum prepares students for election day. In the community, leadership of Kids Voting projects is supplied by volunteer boards comprising local business and civic leaders, and projects receive nearly all funding from the private sector. Additionally, high school students are allowed to enter their neighborhood precinct independently on election day; however, elementary school

“*This year the project's scope will include 5 million students within communities totaling 25 million people. The Kids Voting USA curriculum will be taught by 200,000 teachers in approximately 40 states.*”

children are required to be accompanied by an adult. On average, within Kids Voting communities, voter turnout has increased by 3%, and as high as 9% in some communities. The beauty of Kids Voting is real; children effectively encourage additional adults to vote.

The first Kids Voting project occurred in 1988 for 30,000 children in suburban Phoenix, and created a 3% increase in voter turnout, according to Dr. Bruce Merrill, director of the Media Research Program at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism & Telecommunication, Arizona State University. In addition, teachers, parents, school district administrators and the corporate sponsors were quite pleased with the pilot project. Two years later, Kids Voting expanded to nearly every Arizona community, involving 95% of the student population, and was overwhelmingly endorsed as a project deserving

continued support. In 1992, the national organization of Kids Voting USA was launched, and now serves projects in 38 states and the District of Columbia.

Although the concept of Kids Voting is simple, implementation through the private sector is complex. The following is a description of project implementation:

A Huge Volunteer Effort

A Kids Voting project begins with a board of directors. This nonpartisan board, representing the community, provides the critical leadership, raises the necessary funding (approximately \$2 per student within a community), recruits an executive director, gains the involvement of school districts and the cooperation of election officials. Currently, most projects are chaired by newspaper publishers, corporate executives or high-profile civic activists. The board executes a licensing agreement with Kids Voting USA, centered around 10 project standards, and the national organization provides the technical assistance for project implementation. For example, one of the 10 standards establishes that elected officials cannot serve on policy and planning boards except in a honorary capacity associated with their office.

Since 1992, the reception to Kids Voting across the nation has been tremendous, a well-timed project in light of citizens' concerns of being disconnected from government. This year the project's scope will include 5 million students within communities totaling 25 million people. The Kids Voting USA curriculum will be taught by 200,000 teachers in approximately 40 states. Kids Voting will be conducted in 15,000 precincts on election day. Together, the Kids Voting projects will raise approximately \$12 million in cash and in-kind from the private sector. The John S. & James L. Knight Foundation has been the principal sponsor of Kids Voting USA. Additionally, several major corporations—Ford Motor Company, J.C. Penney Company, Inc., Knight-Ridder Inc., America West Airlines, Hilton Hotels Corporation and others—are providing major resources and have enlisted executives to provide leadership nationally and within communities.

According to S. Martin Taylor, Chair, Kids Voting Michigan, and also Vice President of Detroit Edison, a state title sponsor: "Support of Kids Voting is one of the few things that a company can do in a community where, I dare say, that there will be not one negative view to come from this. Who is opposed to the elective process that we have in this country? Who is opposed to kids and parents becoming closer? Who is opposed to kids learning the election process so that they can be responsible adults? Who can be opposed to kids relating what they are learning in school to the real world? It's one of the best gifts to a community that a company can give."

The Next Generation...

Showing Free Elections in Their Positive Light

A central component of the Kids Voting experience is that school districts commit to facilitating 6 to 12 hours of Kids Voting lessons in grades K-12 prior to the election. The curriculum was written to strengthen our democracy by assisting students in discovering the value and responsibility of participating in the voting process. It is composed of a series of upbeat, exciting activities which encourage self-discovery and involvement of parents and guardians at home. Students are involved in gathering information, discussing and debating, reaching consensus, registering and voting, solving problems, making decisions and more.

“ *On November 5 this year, we expect 200,000 volunteers to assist more than two million children as they enter 15,000 precinct polling areas.* ”

Through participation in these activities, students are given the opportunity to develop skills beyond those necessary to cast an informed ballot. Among them: thinking imaginatively, looking for alternatives, explaining, predicting, judging credibility, taking a position, identifying assumptions, thinking abstractly, etc. As students learn about the voting process, they practice the very skills that are necessary for good citizenship in a democracy. As students are allowed to experience these situations, as opposed to being lectured about them, ownership of the concepts occurs. When ownership occurs, empowerment follows.

A first lesson in the kindergarten curriculum involves the importance of a single vote in an election. The teacher chooses an issue on which to vote (e.g., snack for the day). Each child receives a strip of paper as a ballot and marks a choice. After tabulation, two “paper chains” of ballots are formed represent-

ing the two choices. The children can see their own ballot among the chains and visualize the entire election. The teacher asks, “Did cookies or crackers receive the most votes? Can you see your individual vote? Would the chain have looked different if you had not voted? What would happen if you could vote more than once?”

Teaching Democracy

A second kindergarten lesson is about leadership. The teacher asks the children to imagine being led through a blizzard or a dust storm by a fellow student. One student closes his/her eyes while another, the “leader,” is encouraged to thoughtfully, and with care, lead the “blind” student around snowdrifts, boulders, and frozen streams. Discussion ensues: “Why was it important to be a good leader? What did you do that made you a good leader? How did it feel to be the one following? What qualities do you need to be a good leader?” A subsequent lesson involves the concepts of elections and leadership.

Another lesson involves voting rights. The class is divided randomly into two groups. One group has voting rights and the other does not. An election is conducted (e.g., what game to play) but only one group is allowed to vote, making the decision for the whole class. (Then the roles are reversed.) The teacher asks, “How did it feel when you didn’t get to vote? How did it feel when you did vote? Did you know that there have been groups of people in our country who have not had the right to vote? Who do you think these people might have been? How do you think they felt? Do you think it was fair? Can everyone vote today?”

A third-grade lesson demonstrates the necessity of being completely informed of ballot propositions. Each child is given Ballot A, a series of topics and choices to vote “yes” or “no.” The topics include school, recess, homework, ice cream, etc. The teacher states that the topics provide incomplete information about ballot propositions but re-

quests the children to “vote” anyway. Then, Ballot B is given, involving the same topics but with complete ballot proposition language. Specific to each topic, Ballot A states “school” but Ballot B states, “school will be year-round.” Ballot A states, “recess,” but the complete proposition states “recess will be replaced by 20 minutes of sit-ups.” The children conclude that before casting a ballot, the propositions must be completely understood.

A high-school lesson requests that teenagers keep a 24-hour log in fifteen minute intervals of their daily activities, with the instruction that during the following day’s class, they will discuss the impact of government on their lives. The next day the students discuss the role of government in everyday tasks such as brushing their teeth, e.g., delivery of water, local taxation, EPA standards, etc.

In addition, the children and teenagers are taught the mechanics of registering and voting, and review the history of voting and associated federal and local laws. Of course, students also analyze issues and critique candidates related to the national, state or local election they will be participating in. Using the media and other sources, children take a position and present their findings to their peers, thus fostering discussion. Homework assignments are part of the Kids Voting curriculum, purposely engaging children and their parents in discussion about candidates, races and issues related to elections.

Teacher support for “Kids” is excellent. The 1995 Arizona State University research indicated that 90% of teachers felt “very favorably” or “favorably” about the Kids Voting program. An example of the high level of appreciation of the Kids Voting curriculum comes from Jan McNelly, curriculum director, Fairbanks, Alaska: “It is the most exciting program in American education I’ve ever experienced.”

While students are receiving the curriculum lessons, the local Kids Vot-

ing organizations are sponsoring special events to increase the profile of elections, encourage adults to register and to increase the level of debate. More than 100 events will occur this fall, ranging from floats in city parades, to booths at county fairs, to open-house events at schools and a third annual National Kids Voting Day celebration.

Celebrating Democracy

Election day in a Kids Voting community is a grand celebration. On November 5 this year, we expect 200,000 volunteers to assist more than two million children as they enter 15,000 precinct polling areas. Within a Kids Voting precinct, the official election occurs on one side of the room and Kids Voting is within another area. The children and teenagers are greeted by Kids Voting volunteers and asked to write their name and that of their school on a roster. Then the students are given the ballot, a sample of which was shown in their classroom, and they proceed to their voting booth. Although we expect high school students to "vote" on all of the candidates and issues on their community's ballot, the younger children vote only on a few selected races and issues. Because it would be unfair to expect the younger children to be adequately literate, their ballot has photos of candidates and logos to represent issue choices. Each "Kids Voter" fills the ballot out and drops it in the ballot box. The volunteer congratulates the child and gives the child an "I voted" sticker. As soon as the polls close, the Kids Voting ballots are tabulated and results relayed to the media. Project leaders often are intrigued that the younger generations' balloting does not parallel official balloting.

The anecdotal information derived from observers within the precinct is extremely gratifying and enriching. Craig Wells, a Knight-Ridder newspaper publisher, stated that his experience of observing the children in the precincts is what convinced him to chair the Kids Voting South Dakota board. "The expression on the children's faces as they entered the polls was as if they were coming to Disneyland." Consistently, parents report that their children were very excited, sometimes rather sleepless the previous night, because of their opportunity to vote. Although election officials prior to experiencing Kids Voting in their polling sites are often leery, there is overwhelming support of Kids Voting after an election. Similarly, although the children are extremely pleased and rather anxious about voting, they proceed with reverence—an attitude which cannot be taught. Overall, the atmosphere within precincts changes, while all observe the vibrancy of the next generation in action. Finally, watching the results of the official and Kids Voting election results on an election night becomes a family affair.

Assessing the Impact

The effectiveness of Kids Voting USA has been measured since the program began in 1988. A study of the San Jose,

California, program in the fall of 1994, conducted by Dr. Steven H. Chaffee, professor of International Communication at Stanford University, in collaboration with Zhongdang Pan of the University of Pennsylvania, found: "Students who participated in Kids Voting last fall developed knowledge and habits of communication that predict strong interest in what is occurring in Washington, DC, this week. Compared to their

“ *Kids Voting is connecting current and future generations together with ‘a habit of the heart,’ an exercise aimed at increasing voter turnout, within the short term. However, more importantly, Kids Voting is a long-term solution to involvement in our democratic government.* ”

peers, these students know and care a lot about political events, as an ideal citizen should. They have become active and attentive citizens, and the skills they learned then are unlikely to be reversed as they continue to grow.”

What's more, Chaffee reported, "Kids Voting had a powerful effect in stimulating communication in students from lower SES backgrounds, bringing them up to par with those who otherwise would have been more active communicators." Additionally, he stated, "The curriculum taught to the students led to their parents becoming more knowledgeable about current politics, more opinionated on current issues and candidates, more likely to discuss the election, and more attentive to news about the campaign." In short, Kids Voting succeeded not only in building citizen competencies in the students who were taught directly, it had the same kinds of effects, indirectly, on their parents.

More than 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville described the American phenomenon of belonging to civic organizations as "a habit of the heart." Kids Voting is connecting current and future generations together with "a habit of the heart," an exercise aimed at increasing voter turnout, within the short term. However, more importantly, Kids Voting is a long-term solution to involvement in our democratic government—first as voters.



*Marilyn Evans is president and CEO,
Kids Voting USA*