WHAT’S UP?
A Year of Civics in Action

OHIO

School Funding (statewide)
Tracey Smith’s sociology students at Van Wert High School have been busy this year! Guided by the “Our Schools, Our Voices” curriculum, her classes have researched and analyzed the range of state and local school funding issues in preparation for discussions with their local community and state legislators. This spring, students testified twice before House and Senate legislative committees. According to an article in the Lima News, Smith says, “They’ve [students] been inspired by people like [State Senator] C.J. Prentiss, and really challenged by conservative legislators. But they’ve learned they can be heard on issues.”

Following an organizing training retreat for students from four rural high schools and three urban Cleveland schools last December, an “Urban/Rural Student Network to Reform School Funding” was created to keep students connected on their common agendas. In February, 25 Van Wert students visited Success Tech Academy in Cleveland to develop their message to legislators. In May, a number of newspapers recognized the students for their press conference at the Statehouse in Columbus. Debbie Phillips, Executive Director of the Ohio Fair Schools Campaign, found that in some cases, “Van Wert students know more about school funding than many reporters and state representatives in the legislature.”

Closer to home, students have taken on the issues of community local tax abatements and phantom revenue, and their impact on school district funding. Even after passing a levy this spring, Van Wert schools were forced to cut $400,000 from their annual budget. “The program has changed the way the students think about issues in their community and country. That sounds cliché, I know, but these kids are going to be voting in a year or so. We know that elections around here are close, so these kids, being informed, educated voters, can change the election,” says Smith.

Students in Berlin-Milan, West Clemont, and Federal Hocking High School also worked on funding issues using “Our Schools, Our Voices” curriculum.

The students also produced a student newspaper devoted solely to school funding issues, Our Voices, Students Speak Out. It includes articles, poems, and personal stories from both rural and urban students around the state. Some 25,000 copies have been distributed statewide to teachers, students, and parents.
Students Reach Out to the Elderly (Frederic High School, WI)

After surveying to find out what major issues are facing Frederic's schools and community, students designed a number of projects to address the need for better relationships between students and elders in the community. Throughout the year, 25-30 students visited a local nursing home once a week and launched a “community outreach program” to help elderly residents with household tasks they are unable to handle. Most recently, students converted a downtown vacant lot into a park by planting a community garden, building benches, and painting a mural on an adjacent building. The vacant lot is adjacent to an assisted living complex. Students negotiated with the lot's owner (Comforts of Home, an elderly housing organization) to tear down an abandoned building, and worked with town officials to acquire the necessary permission to make a park area for seniors in the community. The theme for the garden is “the four seasons,” which students will depict in the mural by painting a different generation of woman for each season.

Phelps’ Student Team Raises Awareness of Statewide Rural Issues (Phelps High School, WI)

Chris Meier and his students the Phelps High School students have been instrumental in bringing statewide awareness to the special issues that face rural education. As a result, Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has formed an Advisory Committee on Rural Education to work on an "Advancing Rural Wisconsin" Initiative. This past February, the Phelps High School Rural Civic Engagement Project Team (RCE Team) hosted a meeting with representatives from the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to explore ways to improve the quality of life in rural communities across Wisconsin. Phelps students shared the community asset mapping process they learned at last summer’s Georgia retreat and then used to identify important stakeholders in their community. They also shared the questions they used with community stakeholders including: What are the challenges facing our rural school and community? What are the elements that need to be present in order to make our community viable and an attractive place for people of all ages to live? What can the school and community do together to address the challenges and build a viable school and community? The Phelps team is in the process of identifying the most salient community concern and will conduct a community dialogue around this issue in the fall.

In addition, students and Mr. Meier gave a joint presentation with Matt Calvert and Cynthia Taines of UW-Extension and Margaret Ellibee of DPI to the State Superintendent’s Advisory Council on Rural Schools, Communities, and Libraries in Ashland, Wisconsin on June 10, 2005.

The group provided an update of their Phelps Community Dialogue work. It was very well received. Wisconsin State Superintendent, Elizabeth Burmaster, her Deputy Tony Evers, and State Representative Gary Sherman were among those in attendance. Libby’s response was particularly enthusiastic. She indicated that she would be

“Youth Speak Out” on what makes a good education and learning environment at the April REWG Conference

Eight students and their peers from Wisconsin had a lively dialogue with activists and educators on what works and what is missing in their education. Students attributed their positive school experiences to the extensive support base available in their smaller rural schools.
contacting the group in the near future to possibly share their experiences with the Education Commission of the States (ECS)’ National Center for Learning and Citizenship, which she chairs.

**A Youth Gathering Place (Webster High School, WI)**

Results from a survey of over 100 local community members representing all age groups identified the need for a place for students to gather outside of school to address the growing loitering problem. Students formed a committee composed of community members, student “loiterers,” and others to research the issue and present a proposal to the Webster School and Village Boards. The Village Board has agreed to match funds raised up to $10,000 for a skate park. Several students, community members, and businesses are donating their time and money to build the park. Murals will be painted on each of the ramps representing sponsors’ themes.

**SOUTH CAROLINA**

**St. Johns High School**

St. Johns students and their community partners, Reverend Michael Ray Mack and Reverend Calvin Morris from Wadmalaw Island Citizens Improvement Committee (WICIC) held a “Kick-Off Day” this spring to promote the development of a full service Civic Center on the Johns and Wadmalaw Sea Islands. The Civic Center will provide a location where the youth can go for recreation, learning, enrichment programs, and interaction with adults in the community. Prior to the event, students helped write letters to local, state, and national officials that represent the area informing them of the need and soliciting their help in launching the Center. Barbara Moss, the lead teacher for the project, helped students prepare presentations and write persuasive letters in preparation for the Kick-Off Day. She has incorporated initiatives from the civic project into her English/Writing and Drama classes this year.

**Baptist Hill High School**

Fifteen students, supported by teacher Barbara Jubel and community leader, LeRoy Seabrook, launched a Teen Awareness Project to address the high dropout rates due to teen pregnancy, AIDS, and drug abuse. They will lead awareness seminars the first weeks of the new school year for the incoming 9th graders. Several group members participated in the Save Our Youth Weekend held in the community.

A second issue students are learning about is property tax relief. Students are interested in changing the tax laws, to allow taxpayers to pay their annual tax bill in increments instead of making one large payment. Mrs. Jubel and Mr. Seabrook took the students to the State Capital in Columbia recently to see how laws are changed and voted on. The House and Senate members recognized the club members from the floor. Senator Clementa Pinckney met with the students and provided them with valuable information. She has invited the students to return to the Senate in the fall.
Community Outreach Works (COW) Focuses on Issues (Twinfield High School, VT)

Thirty-two Twinfield student COW members have focused part of this year on developing facilitation skills and team building. COW membership represents a cross-section of grades and social groups. In February, they used their new skills to lead a Dialogue Day for the entire student body (120 students). “It was one of the most incredible experiences I’ve ever had, with not a single adult in the high school wing. The halls were empty and in every classroom students were engaged with each other in discussion,” commented Tracey Witherspoon, COW’s advisor and social studies teacher. Issues of concern for students included: how to improve relationships between the community and the school, the need for healthier food in schools, and the need for a better process for deciding the school budget with the town. Surrounded by farms, the students wonder why the school cafeteria can’t offer organic food grown locally. In conversation with students from other schools, COW realizes this is a hot issue for many schools in the state.

Over the summer, Mary Whelan, teacher architect of Twinfield’s “Rights in Action” course will be thinking about how to tie students’ concerns to the larger issue of poverty in the region. Ms. Witherspoon has taken a new position in a high school nearby, and hopes to involve her students in similar civic activism projects.

NEW COURSES BEING ADDED TO CURRICULUM OFFERINGS NEXT FALL

“Youth Making A Difference,” Thetford Academy, VT. Grades 9-12

This new social studies course, designed primarily by students, focuses on "raising their voices" as citizens and participating in democratic processes. In the course, students will work on a social issue outside of the community. Students designing the course have consulted Carlen Finn from the Vermont Children’s Forum, community members, and their peers to help identify a list of important statewide issues including: affordable housing, instant-runoff balloting, racism in Vermont schools, the impact of NCLB on rural schools, drug use in schools, and child poverty. From this list, they have will focus on one or two child poverty issues that are being addressed by pending or potential legislation in Montpelier and possibly instant-runoff balloting.

Some students will use filmmaking as a way to communicate the results and findings of their research to interested viewers and legislators. Students will evaluate and predict how current trends (e.g., environmental, economic, social, political, technological) affect their lives and their future. They will also model high-level civic engagement. Steve Niederhauser will teach the course with support from the student design team.

“Civics in Action,” Webster High School, Webster, WI

Students in this course will engage in dialogues with community members and school/community leaders in order to learn how to recognize the intricacies of local politics, procedures, and other government policies that impact the local community. They will learn the elements needed to make the community viable and an attractive place for people of all ages to live, and also gain an understanding of the challenges facing their rural school and communities. Finally, they will
identify a community need and develop a project to meet it. In the second semester, students will continue to work on the community-based project developed by the students in the first semester.

“Entrepreneurship” Loup County (Taylor, NE) and Anselmo-Merna Public Schools
Next year's class curriculum will build on the partnership students have developed this year with the Taylor Area Builders and other local organizations and boards. Students at both schools joined forces in an effort called Students Together Improving Community (STIC). In Loup County, students in Loren Sandoz’s “Current Issues” class are regular attendees at the various town board meetings, securing permits for their work. Some of the projects completed include: creating “welcome” signs for the community, putting in new windows for the school, beautifying school grounds, planning and coordinating a local track resurfacing project, and helping organize a community clean-up. Future projects include helping launch a visitor information center. In Anselmo-Merna, students have sanded and repainted a town fire truck, sponsored a community blood drive, and started a card business among other projects. Next year, STIC will become the student governing body in the school. “The most important skill our team acquired this year has been how to work with other town groups and the red tape of working with government agencies,” says Santoz.

Save the Date.....
Youth Directing Change
The Second Rural Civic Engagement Institute
September 22-25, 2005
The Penn Center, St Helena Island, South Carolina

Teams of students, teachers and community partners will gather at the historic Penn Center next fall to share their work, learn new skills, and outline our “civic action” plans for the year. While there we will have an opportunity to learn about the rich African-American history and culture of the Sea Islands. The Penn Center is one of our country's most significant historic and cultural institutions - a strategic planning site for leaders of the Civil Rights movement. It is also the site of the first academic school for newly freed slaves in the 1860's. Check out the Center's website: www.penncenter.com

More information on the September Institute will be available this summer.