



Report: Poor civics education hurts youth

Lower-income schools' students less likely to vote, researcher finds

By Sean Maher, CORRESPONDENT

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The surge in youth votes throughout 2008's presidential primaries has exposed a new critical gap between young people who have attended college and those who haven't, Oakland researchers reported Tuesday.

Because they lack equal access to civic education, students in lower-income public high schools are not only less likely to attend college but also less likely to vote, according to Oakland resident Joseph Kahne, dean of the school of education at Mills College and co-author of a new report, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School."

"Looking at important issues in this election, these youths, who aren't voting, are the same people who are likely to be most hurt by a downturn in the economy and more likely to be involved in the war," said Kahne, 43.

It's natural that college students will be exposed to politics more than most high school graduates who move straight into the work force, simply by virtue of their environment. But this has traditionally been offset by religious and community groups and unions encouraging youth involvement, Kahne said.

"Since the 1970s, we've seen a decline in the role those organizations are playing, and at the

same time we see an organized push to get college students involved," Kahne said. "That push is good, but it's been done in a way that exacerbates the inequality.

"High school, to a much greater degree than college, serves all youth, and teaching civics during high school can encourage voting," Kahne said. "We need policy changes to give equal access to high quality civics education to all students."

These programs would require funding, however, and California public schools are expected to face big cuts under Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed state budget.

Facing these pressures to their core curricula, schools need to re-adopt the concept of civic education as a core learning tool, Kahne said.

"None of the practices we're talking about are inconsistent with improving basic academic skills," Kahne said. "If kids are engaged in researching issues they care about, they're learning literacy skills, maybe science skills, certainly social studies. And by making the lessons about issues kids are facing in their own communities, we can make learning a more motivating experience."

Kahne cited the federal Teaching Traditional American History program as an example of ways the government is striving to fund the improvement of teaching in specific disciplines. He said it now falls to school district leaders and state legislators to fight for similar funding for civics.

Another way to engage younger voters and aid teachers in making the subject compelling is to lower the voting age, said Alex Koroknay-Palicz, executive director of the nonprofit National Youth Rights Association.

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"The key is getting students interested in the process early," said Koroknay-Palicz, 26. "By the time they get to age 18 we've waited too long."

Students leaving high school have a tendency to feel uprooted, and therefore less likely to feel impelled to vote, Koroknay-Palicz said.

"If you start voting when teachers are there to give you a direct link to civic education, to say, 'This is how you vote. Here are the registration forms. Here's how Congress works,' then it's easier to get started," Koroknay-Palicz said. "And once you vote for the first time, you're far more likely to continue voting. The earlier you get started on good or bad habits the more likely you are to stick with them."

Koroknay-Palicz said lowering the voting age to 16 is reasonable. He said the San Francisco Board of Supervisors last year passed an advisory measure saying it would like permission from the state to set its own voting age for local elections. Similar bills in Berkeley failed, but Koroknay-Palicz said he remains hopeful.

Kahne's report, co-authored with Ellen Middaugh of University of California, Berkeley, is available at <http://www.civicsurvey.org>.

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