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Civics classes can inspire young voters but study finds many lack access to basic lessons

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CHICAGO: Her neighborhood, with its police cameras and abandoned buildings, isn't known for inspiring hope. Yet, 18-year-old Ariel Williams feels empowered.

She's lobbied her state lawmakers to increase education funding. She and other students traveled to Iowa in December to campaign for presidential candidates. And now she can't wait to vote in November's election.

They are the sort of results that happen when civics education is creative and engaging, according to a new study.

"I've always been a real cynic when it comes to politics. At first, we didn't think we had a say," Williams says of herself and other students in her Advanced Placement government class at North Lawndale College Prep Charter High School on Chicago's impoverished West Side. She's also part of the Mikva Challenge, an organization that works to engage students politically. "Now I finally realize that I have a voice."

Too often, however, those kinds of opportunities aren't available to students, say researchers at Mills College and the University of California, Berkeley, who compiled the findings. They determined that white, college-bound students most often at wealthier high schools have the greatest access to civics lessons that can strongly influence interest in voting.

"It's a stark illustration of how unequal political participation is in America," says Peter Levine, director of the University of Maryland's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, also known as CIRCLE. "We need to have a discussion in this country about our priorities and make sure democracy is one of them."

CIRCLE released the findings Thursday on behalf of the researchers, who used data from the International Civic and Citizenship Study and their own surveys to compile a national sample of 5,548 students at 142 high schools. The surveys were done from 2005-2007.

Among other things, their analysis determined that students in wealthier districts were twice as likely to study how laws are made, and about as likely to participate in school-sanctioned community service activities.

While youth voting is surging in some sectors, study co-author Joseph Kahne worries that many young people remain disengaged, especially those with less education.

Exit polls from the Super Tuesday primaries found that nearly 80 percent of voters in the 18- to 29-year-old bracket had attended at least some college. Overall, about half the general population in that age group has attended college.

"It's a big part of why high school is so important," says Kahne, dean of the school of education at Mills College.

While the lack of civics opportunities for low-income students is indicative of larger social ills, he says teachers can do some basic things.

They can, for instance, find local issues that interest students and teach them how to address those issues with their community and elected officials.

At North Lawndale High, students have gone to Chicago Board of Education meetings to voice

concerns about the access military recruiters have to their personal information.

Providing a forum for political discussion that isn't highly polarized also is key, says Katy Harriger, head of the political science department at Wake Forest University.

"There's this hunger for opportunities to have authentic dialogues about issues without it being a battle," says Harriger, co-author of "Speaking of Politics: Preparing Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue."

She noted efforts in her home state of North Carolina and elsewhere to get more students involved in the political process. In California, for instance, officials are staging mock presidential elections this year.

And in Illinois, the Chicago Board of Elections Commissioners plans to take voting machines into classrooms to show students how they work.

In some ways, Harriger says it's simply a matter of demystifying the process. "One of the things that keeps them from participating is not understanding how the system works," she says.

At North Lawndale High, government teacher Jill Bass has tried to get students from all walks of life involved in a Student Political Action Committee that deals with school and community issues.

"They're not all athletes; they're not necessarily scholars," Bass says.

Many students at the school, including sophomore Darlisa Scott, come from families that don't vote.

"To me, they don't really care," Scott says of her family. "They say it won't make a difference if you vote."

But now that she's been to Iowa to work on a presidential campaign, she wonders if some of her newfound enthusiasm for politics might just rub off.

"Maybe," she says, "I can influence them to change."

On the Net:

North Lawndale High: <http://www.nlcphs.org/>

Mikva Challenge: <http://www.mikvachallenge.org/>

CIRCLE: <http://www.civicyouth.org>

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