

People & Families

NEW JERSEY COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

FALL 2016

WE THE PEOPLE Preparing Students with Disabilities for Civic Engagement

Rianna J., a student at
Westbridge Academy in
Bloomfield, NJ





WE THE PEOPLE

At the Midland school, all students are encouraged to vote in their student government elections. Students as young as five can cast their ballots and have their voices heard

Preparing Students with Disabilities for Civic Engagement

By Brenda Considine

It is Friday afternoon and the class has earned an ice cream party. Will it be chocolate or vanilla? Lets take a vote!

Democracy can be expressed in ways that are simple and concrete, but no matter how it happens, hands-on civic education is essential to sustain our constitutional democracy. We are not born with a natural inclination for democracy—we learn it.

According to the Center for Civics Education, schools must go beyond teaching basic knowledge about democracy and the role of citizens in that democracy. Students must learn and use civics skills. They must learn how to participate in group discussions and decision-making. They must learn about and develop a ‘civics disposition’—character traits essential to building and improving democracy.

Researchers have looked at outcomes of recognized civics curriculums and found that students who take part score significantly higher than other students in six important measures:

- 1) respect for the rule of law;
- 2) political attentiveness;
- 3) civic duty;
- 4) community involvement;
- 5) commitment to government service; and
- 6) the norms of political efficacy and political tolerance.

Few studies have looked at citizenship skills among students with disabilities, but those that have show that students with disabilities do not do as well as general education peers on tests of basic civic competence. They need more.

Civic Education In Action

From small acts of kindness to community-wide projects, civics education through service learning teaches students to “pay it forward.”

In Haworth, NJ, the Bergen Center for Child Development was the nation’s first special education school to form a Rotary Interact Club. Sponsored by the Rotary Club of Northern Valley,

the Bergen Center’s Rotary Interact Club encourages students to give back to their communities as part of a worldwide network of students their own age. The school has focused its service on Pascack Valley Meals on Wheels, making emergency kits for seniors, and projects at local nursing homes.

“We know that civic engagement needs to start in our own back yard,” said

Susan Raymond, school principal.

“Through the Rotary Interact Club, our students—many of whom have received so much—learn that they have a lot to give to others,” she added.

“The program helps our students meet community leaders who see them as contributing citizens. This can lead to jobs,” she concluded.

The non-profit school, which serves students ages 5-21 with developmental and intellectual disabilities, also has an active Student Council, giving students a chance to learn about democracy in a hands-on way as they make decisions about school-wide issues.

Preparing Leaders for Tomorrow

For many students with disabilities, civic engagement can lay the foundation for self-advocacy skills.

From small acts of kindness to community-wide projects, civics education through service learning teaches students to “pay it forward.”



Sponsored by the Rotary Club of Northern Valley, the Bergen Center for Child Development's Rotary Interact Club encourages students to give back to their communities

Frank Latham is the founder and program director for the Youth Leadership Project, which has been offered by the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities for nearly a decade. Working with schools and community groups, the program teaches eight units designed to build transferrable leadership skills in young people with disabilities.

Latham sees civics education, civic engagement, and leadership skills as the foundation for self-advocacy. Whether through participation in formal student government or simply learning how to ask for a new menu item at school lunch, students with disabilities need to learn the character traits of good leaders and have the opportunity to model leadership skills.

“Young people need to get involved, either at school or in their own town. By taking action around something that matters to them, they develop their own beliefs as advocates, as citizens, and as voters,” said Latham.

Latham believes that the single best practice for educators is to provide ways for students to get directly involved in making change.

“Students learn by doing. Once you give students the foundation, not only are they better students of government, they understand the process and are more ready to make civic decisions,” he concluded.

The Peer Leadership Program at New Road School in Ocean County is preparing students for citizenship by training them to be young leaders.

Students apply to be part of the program and—like a candidate seeking to be on the ballot—must get signatures to support their application. Once selected, they meet with school staff monthly to plan events and activities.

“We focus on what it means to be a leader, qualities of leaders, and the importance of community service,” said Diane O’Donnell, Director of New Road of Ocean County.

Peer leaders are assigned as greeters at public events. Last year, they planned and managed a “Random Acts of Kindness” campaign—including an assembly—to encourage fellow students to show kindness and support.

“The Peer Leadership Program prepares them to be good citizens and good neighbors because it invites them to look outside of themselves at their own communities to see who needs their support,” concluded O’Donnell.

Student Government: “Of the people, by the people, for the people”

Student government plays a vital role in providing hands-on knowledge of and practice in the democratic process. At The Midland School in Branchburg, the student council functions like any student government. Participants are elected by the entire student body—children as young as 5 can vote. The voting process requires students to register, and there is a campaign complete with an assembly, speeches, and posters.

Those elected to serve on student council develop leadership skills while providing service



At the Midland School in Branchburg, candidates for student government give speeches and campaign to their fellow classmates.

Benefits of Joining Student Government

Networking: Meet other students with similar interests.

Social & Communication Skills: Learn how to talk to other people and solve problems.

Leadership Skills: Hands-on training will teach good leadership skills.

Community Connections: Student organizations are often connected to community leaders. This can help students with job searches and mentoring.

Friendships and Fun: meet people and build lasting friendships.

Adapted from the NASC

to the school and the larger community.

Comprised of about a dozen representatives from each high school homeroom, the council meets once a month to discuss student concerns, determine themes for dances and events, organize school spirit days, and plan service projects.

Student council has been part of The Midland School for more than two decades.

Francine Giorello, special education teacher and student council advisor, knows that while only a handful of students are elected to lead, the student council engages the whole student body.

“All the students get a copy of the agenda and minutes of the meetings, which is discussed throughout the day. They can also get involved in council-led activities,” she said.

The Midland School offers all students the chance to petition for change with a “Suggestions

Box” near the main office. Students have successfully lobbied for more hot lunches in the cafeteria, additional overnight respite outings, and changes to the playground.

The experience exposes all of The Midland School’s students to the democratic process.

“They learn to put forth an idea and help make change happen as a result. It is very empowering,” concluded Giorello. “They learn the process and how to use the proper channels.”

“Student council shows students that their voice matters. They can take action and make a difference,” added Robin Casucci, a speech language therapist who serves as assistant advisor to the Student Council.

Character Education

Researchers know that there is a strong relationship between civics education and character education. At Westbridge Academy, character education is the foundation of all instruction and learning. The school, located in Bloomfield, NJ, serves students with learning, social, and behavioral disabilities. There, staff teach the six pillars of character: trustworthiness,

Teachers: What Can YOU Do To Build Civic Engagement in Students

- Encourage Students to Develop and Express Opinions
- Encourage Students to Vote on Classroom Decisions
- Consider a Student Newspaper
- Work to Make Community Service part of Your Lesson Plan
- Take Part in School-wide and Community-based Donation Drives
- Invite students to discuss Current Events—Local, State, National and International Issues

respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

“We want our students to be global citizens—to be able to advocate for themselves and also to learn how to be part of a democracy,” said Dr. Viviana Litovsky, the school’s executive director.

While only a handful of students are elected, the Midland School student council engages the whole student body.



“We have found that through character education, our students grow beyond ‘tolerance’ to a true appreciation of diversity,” she added.

Many Westbridge students go on to take part in the New Jersey Department of Education’s annual Dare to Dream Student Leadership Conference, both as participants and as presenters.

“We teach our students how to take self-advocacy to the next level by bringing their skills and knowledge to others,” she concluded.

Character, civic engagement, and self-advocacy are deeply intertwined. Each requires learning skills that build a foundation for meaningful citizenship in a complex democracy. It gets down to the belief that change is possible!

“The opportunity to affect change is very powerful and exciting,” said Latham. “Young people need the chance to decide what matters to them and learn to speak up and organize for change. It is how our country was built.”

Latham is sure to tell young people an important message:



The Peer Leadership Program at New Road School in Ocean County is preparing students for citizenship by training them to be young leaders.

“You have the keys to the planet much sooner than you realize. There are things that seem insignificant to you now, but once you have these skills, they appeal not only to teachers and employers, but to friends as well. It is exciting to be around leaders. And anyone can learn how to grow as a leader—no matter who you are,” Latham concluded. **P&F**

RESOURCES

New Jersey Association of Student Councils

<http://www.njasc.org/index.html>

Center for Civic Education

<http://www.civiced.org/>

National Constitution Center

<http://constitutioncenter.org/learn/educational-resources>

American Student Government Association

<http://www.asgaonline.com>

National Association of Student Councils

<https://www.nasc.us/?SSO=true>