

Laboratories of Democracy

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the American government acted quickly to mobilize what it called “critical homeland defenders” to meet the threat faced by our nation and the world. Not surprisingly, 21 government agencies made the list, ranging from the State Department to the U.S. Border Patrol.

That may be what it takes to address the immediate crisis. But for the long-term preservation and expansion of democratic freedom, the United States must look to public schools—the one institution founded to transmit civic principles and virtues from one generation to the next. Public schools must not only be added to the list, they should be moved up to the top as America’s most important homeland defender.

Before 9/11, civic education was taken for granted or treated as an afterthought in many school districts. Renewing the civic mission of public schools wasn’t high on America’s educational agenda—even as evidence mounted that growing numbers of young Americans were uninformed about democratic principles, disengaged from the political process, distrusting of government and uninterested in working for the common good. But the wake-up call

School communities shape their culture by teaching and modeling individual rights, civic responsibilities and concern for the common good

on 9/11 reminded many Americans, including many school leaders, of the vital link between democracy and public education.

Predictably, some of the response has been superficial, even jingoistic, as lawmakers from New York to California rushed to restore patriotic exercises to the classroom. Most educators, however, understand that there is no quick fix. As detailed in a groundbreaking 2002 report entitled “The Civic Mission of Schools,” educating for citizenship in our democracy will require that schools provide students with more instruction

in history and constitutional principles, more discussions about public policy issues and more opportunities for civic engagement through service learning and school governance.

Practicing Democracy

At the First Amendment Center, we share this vision for public schools as laboratories for democracy and freedom. That’s why we joined with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in March 2001 to sponsor a project called “First Amendment Schools: Educating for Freedom and Responsibility,” a national reform initiative designed to help schools teach and practice democratic principles throughout the community.

At a First Amendment School, students and all members of the school community are given meaningful opportunities to practice democracy; students learn how to exercise their individual rights with responsibility and experience what it feels like to serve the common good; parents, students and educators work together to help shape the school culture; and civic education is translated into civic engagement through service learning and civic problem solving.

Over the last two years, we’ve had the chance to work closely with the first

11 First Amendment Project Schools through site visits, telephone interviews, leadership conferences and progress reports. As the schools complete their second year (of a three-year grant cycle), all 11 provide case studies for how public schools can work to become laboratories of democracy by carrying out their civic mission and maintaining a strong commitment to high academic achievement. Here's a brief look at three of those schools.

● **Case Study 1: Nursery Road Elementary School, Columbia, S.C.**

Nursery Road, a public elementary school, opened in 1980 to accommodate a growing student population in the Lexington, S.C., School District 5. It is a diverse community despite its compact attendance zone. Many of the teachers who opened the building remain.

In its First Amendment School action plans, Nursery Road identified three primary goals: engaging all members of the community in implementation; providing all students with grade-level appropriate activities that teach, model and reinforce the value of democratic citizenship; and reinstating student government that represents all students and offers them opportunities to practice democratic citizenship.

During a site visit, it was apparent that Nursery Road placed a high value on ceremony. At a schoolwide assembly, students entered holding the flags of every country represented in the community. The choirs sang patriotic songs, the children dressed as historical figures, and the school constructed a giant American flag made entirely of cup cakes.

During a second visit to the school at the end of the school year, we listened as teachers described a much meatier course of study. "I was in shock when I first heard about this project," said one 3rd-grade teacher. "My first thought was, 'This can't work at an elementary school.' But," she continued, "this project is one of the best things we've done at Nursery Road. I see how fundamental it is to our role as educators and as citizens."

"Now when my kids say the First Amendment," said another teacher, "they actually know what it means. It's so exciting to see how much they've internalized it."

Many teachers responded to our questions by speaking about specific projects at the school, such as the decision to reinstitute student government. "The best thing we did," said teacher Bonnie



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Jean Avilez, "was have all the kids, even the kindergartners, watch taped speeches of each student candidate and then teach them how to be an attentive and active listener." Principal Mary Kennerly offered her take on the process this way: "I think we gained a lot from our decision to require each candidate to spend some time after school learning about how to deliver a speech—and to insist that parents attend the workshops, too. Those parents made sure they were there for their kids, including some parents who don't usually get involved."

Later that day at a schoolwide assembly, we got a first-hand sense of what the teachers were talking about. Each newly elected student officer took a public oath of duty. Tiny hands were placed on top of important school documents, like the school's mission statement and discipline code. With solemn, proud expressions, each student pledged to "use responsibility in all decision making and in the exercise of all freedoms."

Next, 12 students presented one-minute persuasive speeches—a skill required by state standards. A variety of school needs were shared. "We should have a basketball team," argued one girl. "I feel the lunches at Nursery Road are delicious," began an articulate young boy, barely able to see over the podium. "But they often contain too many calories and too much fat." Another girl's speech about the dangers of wood chips on the playground prompted a six-year-old sitting next to us to show a splinter

she'd gotten as proof.

When the FAS team was asked to reflect on its first year in the project, they began by noting that "the knowledge base of democratic principles is now well established and reflection is beginning to occur. Without being asked, teachers are pursuing information, asking for resources, and planning learning opportunities that were not written into our original plan. These include student-written books and compositions, a literary unit and relevant books for students and colleagues to read. These additional activities at the classroom level have engaged students and also some parents."

* **Case Study 2: Center City Middle School, Salt Lake City, Utah**

Center City School, a public charter school for grades 7-12 holds a mission to provide "small class sizes, caring teachers and staff, academic rigor, service learning, and a democratic learning community." The school was founded in 2000 in a strip mall on a dead-end street.

We first visited the school in November 2002, a few months after it began working with First Amendment Schools. Student work, FAS posters, and inspirational messages were ubiquitous on the school's thin sheetrock walls. Music—it was U2 that day—indicated passing time instead of a bell.

In its action plans for the FAS project, Center City outlined four central goals: creating a stronger, revitalized and more vigorous student government; involving more effectively faculty, par-



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ents, students and community members; developing an advisory curriculum that strengthens student understanding of First Amendment rights and responsibilities; and implementing a cross-curricular emphasis on teaching, learning and modeling democratic principles, knowledge and behaviors.

Despite its goals, CCS struggled to identify early successes. The students represented scores of challenging cases. Many had been kicked out of one, two

or several previous schools. The student population was also in constant flux, leading a week's worth of community-building at the start of the year to be undermined by the constant turnover. "Too many people don't understand what we put in place at the start of the year," commented one teacher. "And since we'll continue to gain and lose students throughout the year, I don't know what we can do about it."

We saw more evidence of the chal-

lenges ahead when we sat in on a student advisory period. The intent that day was to have advisory groups respond to a new mission statement and offer any necessary amendments. "Do you like the idea of student government?" the teacher asked. "I don't know," said one boy. "I don't care," said another. "What does it mean to encourage students to use their voice?" the teacher asked. No response.

The day concluded with a FAS team meeting, at which the staff looked both exhausted and wary. It was still early in the year, but the student body was not answering the call to play a larger role in the life of the school. In fact, they seemed eager to cede all control to the adults. Against this backdrop, it seemed unlikely the faculty could sustain its energy and dedication.

We returned to CCS several months later, in May 2003, as the school year was winding down. There were many new faculty members and students since our first visit. As the day progressed, we observed that the new faces were eager to get involved, and the older faces seemed more relaxed and sure of their work.

During a student government meeting about how to enact a new state mandate that required all Utah secondary schools to say the Pledge of Allegiance at some point during the school day, students thoughtfully debated the issue. "I feel like I already love my country," said one young man. "Saying the pledge isn't going to do anything about it." Another wondered how students should be allowed to opt out. "Should they all go to a separate room, or should they just sit at their desks?" "If we removed them all, that might make them stand out more than they need to," opined a third.

As the class ended, no resolutions had been reached, but it was apparent why the faculty seemed so much more relaxed. They'd helped their students take the first steps toward leadership in the span of a few months.

We returned for a third visit in October 2003. The occasion was a day-long conference on student voice. Joining CCS were two Salt Lake City middle schools also involved in the FAS project. Throughout the day, CCS students demonstrated a heightened awareness and understanding of their school's civic mission. At one point we asked a student named Jahnvi to explain what she thought was responsible for the sea change at her school. "We talk so much about our community and the rights and

Getting Involved

There are two ways to join the National Network of First Amendment Schools—as an affiliate school or a project school.

Affiliate schools may or may not be engaged in the intensive work of comprehensive school reform. All, however, are interested in ensuring that all members of their school community—from the faculty to the administration to the parents, students and custodial staff—understand the importance of individual rights, civic responsibilities and communal respect.

Affiliate status gives schools a less intensive entryway into the larger work of FAS. It allows school communities to identify themselves with the FAS aims of educating for freedom and responsibility and provides them with useful resources to help them in their daily work. Affiliate school ap-

plications are considered year-round on a rolling basis.

Project schools receive three-year grant stipends totaling \$36,000 and commit to transform their schools and develop new models for democratic education. Project schools don't claim to have all the answers, but they are required to work across the community to come up with ideas to change the way their school works in the hopes of providing an example for other schools.

Project school applications are considered each spring. The First Amendment Schools Project is co-sponsored by the First Amendment Center and the Association for Super-visibility and Curriculum Development.

For more information, visit www.firstamendmentschools.org.

— Charles Haynes and Sam Chaltain

responsibilities of everyone,” she said. “It’s really kind of extreme, and some days it gets annoying, but it has changed the way we treat each other.”

How did Center City make such progress in such a short time? According to co-founder Sonia Woodbury, “the key has been our determination to stick with our plans and see them through.

“But most importantly,” she concluded, “the language of First Amendment principles has permeated all of our interactions with each other at school. Student-generated classroom rules, a new school constitution, and the rules for student government all suggest that the right to speak brings with it the responsibility to listen attentively and respectfully. That idea is then extended to school situations such as the right to learn and the responsibility to engage in learning, or the right to have a locker and the responsibility to use that locker appropriately.

“As students work with these ideas, we can see them gaining appreciation for the idea that the best way to protect First Amendment freedoms is to protect them for everyone.”

● **Case Study 3: Hudson High School, Hudson, Mass.**

Hudson High School is a large suburban public school in the midst of an innovative experiment in school governance. “After a lot of planning and hard work,” says Principal John Stapelfeld, “our community has implemented a new governance model based on democratic town meetings.”

The first step in the process was for Hudson to design and construct a new school that could facilitate student voice. The new building, which opened in fall 2003, uses cluster divisions to identify six different neighborhoods within the school. Eighth and ninth graders are organized by grade. In grades 10-12, however, students assign themselves to one of four clusters organized around broad areas of student interest: communications, media and the arts; science, health and the environment; technology, engineering and business; and public policy, education and social service.

In its work with FAS, Hudson’s leadership team identified a single, all-encompassing goal for its project: establishing a system of democratic governance that will include all stakeholders and be in effect by the 2003-2004 school year.

During a visit to the school in September 2002, we witnessed the earliest



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seeds of this experiment being planted. Throughout the afternoon, mixed groups of faculty, students and parents initiated a year-long discussion about what the new structure should ultimately look like. What should be the cluster themes? Will each cluster hold elections to determine its representatives? How will the school ensure that cluster time augments each student’s intellectual experience at school?

They were difficult questions, and the debates were not without frustration, especially when so many of the answers re-

mained elusive. “But,” said teacher Brian Daniels, “what we’re watching is democracy at work.”

In May 2003, Hudson took its next step with a community Cluster Fair. Every student visited a walk-through display of each cluster, received brochures, attended cluster information sessions, and made initial cluster selections. That same month, a faculty-student committee twice met off campus to draft a constitution for the new governance model. Their work was followed by a week of schoolwide reaction and revision. Finally, at a joint faculty/student meeting in June, the community considered amendments and ratified the document.

So how has Hudson’s experiment gone so far? Daniels admits, “It was hard at first, but it’s hard to be counter-cultural. The kids didn’t know how to act, the teachers didn’t know how to act, and so initially there were a lot of fights about the little things, which sucked up some important energy. But now, it’s a lot better. During our last faculty meeting everyone agreed that the growth of the leadership among students has been amazing. Kids who would have never done so in the past have stepped forward. And four of the six clusters decided on their own to take time to build in some leadership training.”

In the September 2003 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Hudson Superintendent Sheldon H. Berman described why he felt such an overhaul was necessary. “Developing a strong academic program is crucial,” he wrote. “But educators also

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need to create a school culture that welcomes all students, helps them learn to work together and convinces them of their ability and responsibility to make the world a better place.”

More important than anything else, Berman contended, is the belief that young people deserve to learn how to practice their freedom responsibly. “Participating in a democratic community,” he wrote, “enables young people to enter the adult world with the skills, values and commitment to actively participate in our civic community.”

What Works?

Why, amidst intensifying pressures to raise student scores on statewide proficiency examinations, are some schools

spending substantial time on the culture of schools? Nursery Road Principal Mary Kennerly put it this way: “A healthy, respectful school climate is the first step toward a healthy, vibrant learning environment.”

She added: “At this time of controversial political and patriotic issues in our nation and our state, it has been healthy and productive for the adults and students in our school community to focus on the civic mission of schools. It has helped us understand concepts that are of utmost importance in a democracy.”

Kennerly outlined five chief lessons learned so far about strengthening civic mission of a public school.

- *First, the school’s leadership must*

have the passionate belief that citizenship is just as important as academic achievement.

“It’s not an either-or proposition,” Kennerly said. “I’ve seen first-hand for years that children who grow up to be successful, productive adults do so because of citizenship training as much and sometimes more than because of high test scores. And when the school leader indicates she believes this is a priority, she provides the room for those teachers who want to take off running with an idea to do so and supports them with time, supplies and the right to make key decisions.”

- *Second, it is vital to establish a working committee that has scheduled meetings all year and that has release time provided when necessary.*

The committee members have to be people who have chosen to be on the committee. Kennerly set up her committees at the beginning of the year. All school goals and committees are listed and everyone needs to serve on at least one so it becomes part of their professional goals for the year.

- *Third, deadlines have to be set and checked on. Plan far in advance.*

“A principal needs to trust the teachers. Sometimes when teachers have an idea it sounds silly or useless to me, but I’ve learned from experience that it almost always turns out better than I ever anticipated,” Kennerly said.

- *Fourth, include parents from the beginning.*

Gaining their respect and confidence goes a long way toward gaining community support for the school. It’s also a way to reinforce that the school recognizes parents as its most vital partners.

- *Fifth, believe students are capable of playing a larger role in the school.*

Teaching students about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, investing them with authority to help shape the school climate, providing them with opportunities to practice the citizenship skills they require—all of these steps help ensure that the school is safer, more intellectually alive and more valued by everyone who spends time there,” Kennerly said.

“Now tell me—what administrator, parent or teacher doesn’t want to see that?” ■

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