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Photo by Edith E. Beatty

Creating a Laboratory for Democracy

First Amendment Schools engage all members of the school community in practicing civic habits of the heart.

Edith E. Beatty

Democracy was in the air as community members and visitors descended on Fairview Elementary School in Modesto, California, last spring to participate in a forum addressing Fairview’s school uniform policy. Fifth grader Louie Alvarez, vice president of the student council and a proponent of school uniforms, stood before an enthusiastic crowd of more than 1,000 people and moderated the community debate. He was learning how to practice his inalienable First Amendment rights.

Although the decision had initially

fallen under the purview of the school’s safety committee, it soon became clear that all stakeholders—including students—needed to be able to voice their opinions. Students, teachers, staff members, administrators, parents, district leaders, school board members, members of the business community, and former Fairview students had the opportunity to express their views in a public dialogue before casting their votes. School and community stakeholders spoke eloquently on both sides of the issue, addressing such concerns as economy, equity, the colors of gang identity, the extent to which uniforms

maintained student decorum and safety, and the importance of student choice and voice. The safety committee considered all stakeholders’ views before it reached its decision to eliminate the school uniform policy. Students, who overwhelmingly opposed the policy, helped write the new standard-of-dress rules.

The First Amendment Schools

Although the debate at Fairview centered on the school’s uniform policy, the forum’s greater mission was to create an environment in which all members of the school community

Students at Fairview Elementary School in Modesto, California, cast their votes for student officers (above left). A student at Nursery Road Elementary in Columbia, South Carolina, takes the oath of office as First Amendment School representative (above right).

would learn to practice their First Amendment freedoms.

Early in 2001, ASCD and the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center joined forces to launch "First Amendment Schools: Educating for Freedom and Responsibility," a nationwide initiative designed to transform the ways in which schools model and teach the rights and responsibilities that frame civic life in our democracy. Designed to move the First Amendment's precepts out of textbook discussions and into practice, the project also deepens educators' understanding of the First Amendment. In the spring of 2002, Fairview Elementary became one of 11 school sites across the United States chosen to pioneer this vision.

The initiative's founders envisioned First Amendment Schools to be places "where all members of the school community practice the civic habits of the heart necessary to sustain a free people" (First Amendment Schools [FAS] Founders, 2001). The project's guiding principles are to

- Create schools that serve as laboratories of democratic freedom.
- Develop in all members of the school community a commitment to inalienable rights and civic responsibility.
- Engage all stakeholders in a shared commitment to work together for the common good of the school community.
- Foster the knowledge, skills, and virtues necessary for thoughtful and effective participation in the democratic life of the school community and beyond.

Impact on School Culture

With the Fairview debate over and the decision made to eliminate the uniform policy, things don't seem all that different around the school's campus. But the way in which the decision was reached had a profound effect on Fairview's culture. The resulting new culture of collaboration and community is spearheaded by the school's First Amendment School Leadership Team. The team—comprising students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members—represents an "abiding commitment to teach and model the rights and responsibilities that

undergird the First Amendment" (FAS Founders, 2001). This powerful mission has had an enormous impact on the school community and has strengthened the connections of teachers, parents, and students to the life of the school.

Teachers

Chano Flores, a school reading specialist at Fairview and a Leadership Team member, explained the impact of the new culture:

I don't think any of us realized the magnitude of becoming a First Amendment School. Our quest to demonstrate and practice how to apply these principles really made all of us look at ourselves as adults, especially in the area of communication. If we couldn't communicate with one another, then there was no way we were going to be able to model these practices for our students.

"I learned that you don't have to be an adult to speak your thoughts."

At a recent faculty meeting, teachers spent the first 45 minutes in small groups generating examples of the impact of their First Amendment-related work. During the second part of the meeting, reading intervention specialists worked with classroom teachers on implementing intentional reading strategies to enhance student learning. After the faculty meeting, the school reading specialists discussed how the first dialogue increased the power of the second. Liz Benson, who led the discussion, noted that

when I engage in a powerful conversation with teachers about respect and responsibility and then ask them to engage in a professional conversation about their classroom instructional practices, they are more likely to take me seriously. In the absence of the first dialogue about our First Amendment activities, the discussion of reading strategies wouldn't have happened or would have been lost in the typical minutiae of staff meetings.

Parents

The First Amendment Schools Project has greatly increased parent involvement and participation in school decision-making processes. Earlier in the year, Padres con Voz (Parents with Voice) successfully petitioned the Modesto City School Board to extend a safety fence around the front of the school. The appointed spokesperson for this group said that "when the First Amendment sign was posted outside the school identifying each of the five freedoms, I took my rights seriously." Each month, Padres con Voz members meet to learn more about academic standards, parental rights and advocacy, and ways to help their children with homework.

Parent Laura Maligon attests to the culture of increased openness and freedom at Fairview:

We are blessed to be a part of this project! I have learned so much about my own freedoms—I used to say very little, out of fear of saying the wrong thing, but now I know I can speak my mind.

Students

Fairview students recently petitioned administrators and the school's food services to take the macaroni and cheese off the lunch menu. "I just had a petition a couple of months back about the ravioli!" says Fairview principal Rob Williams.

I could just send the petition back to them and say, "Enough, this is silly," but I won't because this is how they learn to get good at this. I want them to know how the petition process works. Kids need to learn to do this with what's most important to them now, like hot lunch menu items, not with the things that we think they're supposed to be concerned about.

Louie Alvarez learned a lot through his experience at the uniform debate. "I learned that kids can make a difference," Louie said. "You don't have to be an adult to speak your thoughts." He felt proud and empowered, and even though his position did not prevail at the time, he isn't going to give up on acting on his rights.

Impact on Academic Mission

Before becoming a First Amendment School, Fairview found it difficult to

simultaneously be a collaborative learning community, show accountability for academic achievement, take fiscal responsibility, and meet the innumerable demands that all schools face. Although the principles of the First Amendment Schools Project are idealistic, they are practicable and comply with the current U.S. focus on standards, accountability, and student achievement. Schools can align the principles with standards across the disciplines by focusing on developing students' critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

By directly connecting schooling to students' experiences, the project fosters in every class the sorts of skills that informed citizens need—such as the ability to discuss controversial issues in a civil manner and ask informed questions. For example, each classroom at Fairview conducts daily and weekly meetings that give students the opportunity to discuss instructional goals, peer relationships, and social issues. In addition, the entire student body meets with the school principal at monthly Town Hall meetings. This year, the meetings' agenda is to draft a school constitution that clearly states how students want to be treated.

Principal Williams recalls that in the old days, "There was no heart or driving force to work hard. Students, staff, and parents need to believe that there is a higher purpose to schooling than just better test scores." Now, he claims,

our commitment to academic best practices is only enhanced by having a schoolwide agreement on how we will do our work, how we can create a cohesive working environment, and how we can maintain our First Amendment School focus to create good citizens.

Since becoming a First Amendment School, Fairview has improved academically as much as any other school in the state. Fairview, a year-round school serving 1,060 students in grades K–6, has a diverse student body: 53 percent of students are Hispanic, 33 percent are white, 4 percent are black, and the remaining 10 percent come from other ethnic groups. A moderately high percentage of students are eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Students are likely to soon exceed a score of 700 (out of 800) on their California Academic Performance Index—an unheard-of achievement for a school with these demographics. One year into the First Amendment Schools Project, the school's Academic Performance Index score increased 17 points, a significant improvement. The project has also helped staff members identify their top five academic concerns by having them complete a "What Works in Schools" online survey. This ASCD staff development tool showed staff members that creating and fostering a collegial, professional learning community would greatly increase student achievement. As a result, the school site council budgeted \$20,000 to support weekly instructional grade-level meetings to assess student work and discuss best practices.

An Enduring Vision

Principal Williams points out that

when you create an environment in which students understand and feel good about their purpose, things change. Being jolted into understanding the five freedoms and creating a laboratory in which to practice them changes the way people listen to, treat, and respect one another. At Fairview, we firmly believe that our mission is to leave no child behind academically and to adequately prepare all students for citizenship. ■

Reference

First Amendment Schools Founders. (2001). *First amendment schools: Educating for freedom and responsibility. Vision statement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD and Arlington, VA: First Amendment Center.

Author's note: For more information about the First Amendment Schools Project or how to become an Associate or Project School, visit www.firstamendmentschools.org. Rob Williams, Principal of Fairview Elementary School, contributed to this article. He may be reached at williams.r@monet.k12.ca.us.

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