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Walter C. Parker
University of Washington



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These students "adopted" a block near their school.

the damage. This is social action. But if they propose new rules to officials or request stronger enforcement of existing rules, this is political action. Both social and political action by citizens are important for the health of democratic communities. As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said early in this century, "The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people."

Community-service activities can be spontaneous and short-lived, such as when children learn of a fire at a nearby house and collect canned goods and clothing for the family. Activities can also be planned systematically and sustained over a longer period of time, such as the adoption of a creek or a section of the school grounds.

Examples of Community Service

The following projects have been done by real kids in real communities. Note that some are social, some are political, and some are both.

Saving a creek. The children at an elementary school near Everett, Washington, decided to do something about a dirty little stream named Pigeon Creek. The children were alarmed that Pigeon Creek had become so dirty that salmon stopped coming there to lay their eggs, so they "adopted" it.

The first thing the children did was to get an aquarium for their classroom and raise thousands of salmon eggs. Meanwhile, they worked with people in their community to clean up the creek. Litter was removed, and the children put up “DON’T DUMP” signs. When the eggs hatched, the students released them in Pigeon Creek and monitored the creek to keep it clean.

Getting out the vote. One elementary school teacher from Salt Lake City, Barbara Lewis, has a unique way of impressing on her students the importance of voting. In her book for children about social action, she tells them:

Do you know that a lot of adults are numb? They’re numb from filling out forms, balancing checkbooks, changing diapers, and changing tires. In the process, many have forgotten the principles our country was founded upon. Many don’t think their votes count for anything. . . . Imagine what could happen if kids attacked their communities in a campaign to shake adults out of the mothballs.¹⁷

Children can be very influential participants in get-out-the-vote campaigns. Distributed door-to-door, their flyers can read: “We can’t vote yet. You can. Please do.” By urging adults to register and vote, children can learn about voting eligibility, voting rates, and the role voting plays in representative democracies. Hopefully, the experience will encourage them to become regular voters themselves.

Teaching senior citizens about computers. Clare Devine teaches at North Dover Elementary School in Toms River, New Jersey. Her students had learned about computers in the school’s computer lab. They realized that many adults around them, especially older people, were nervous about working with these machines. Ms. Devine and the children decided to offer a series of classes to seniors. Significant cooperative group work and planning were involved—both good opportunities for citizenship learning. In the computer classes, the students showed their “students” how to write to their grandchildren using word processing programs and how to communicate on the Internet, and they shared some of their favorite computer games.

Ms. Devine liked how the project brought the two groups together. Did the seniors like the classes? “Yes, I think so. This year at the last class,” reported Ms. Devine, “they bought ice cream for everyone.”¹⁸

Giraffes stick their necks out. Members of the Giraffe Club in LaConner Elementary School in LaConner, Washington, make this vow: “I promise to stick my neck out to make a difference. I will help people, animals, and my environment to make the world a better place to live.”¹⁹ The little giraffes do all manner of things to help people. (The address of the Giraffe organization and other resources appear in Figure 3–7.) One service they perform is gathering donations of food for people at Friendship House, a shelter for homeless people.

Link to the
giraffe website at
www.prenhall.com/parker.

Other Community Projects

Good neighbor club. Middle-grade students formed a Good Neighbor Club to help elderly residents in the neighborhood with yard work and errands.



Peer tutoring for citizenship. Your students can help welcome new children from other lands, not only into the classroom social system, but also into the processes of democratic citizenship. An immigrant child can be paired with an especially good citizen in your classroom—or one who needs to learn to be a better citizen. This tutor helps the new student learn to participate in class discussions and consider all alternatives when making a decision. Ask a resourceful parent to obtain a copy of the citizenship test preparation booklet from the federal courthouse. The peer tutor can go over the items with the new student and

FIGURE 3-7 Community-service resources.

- American Bar Association**, 541 N. Fairbanks CT, Chicago, IL 60611-3314.
Phone: (312) 988-5522. Internet: www.abanet.org
- American Red Cross**, Program and Services Department, 2025 E. St., N.W.,
Washington, DC 20006-5099. Phone: (202) 303-4498. Internet:
www.redcross.org
- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**, Education
Department, 424 E. 92nd St., New York, NY 10128. Phone: (212) 876-7700.
Internet: www.aspca.org
- Boys and Girls Clubs of America**, 1230 Peachtree St., N.W., Atlanta, GA 30309.
Phone: (404) 487-5700. Internet: www.bgca.org
- Center for Civic Education**, 5146 Douglas Fir Rd., Calabasas, CA 91302.
Phone: (818) 591-9321. Internet: www.civiced.org
- Close Up Foundation**, 44 Canal Center Plaza, Arlington, VA 22314.
Phone: (800) 256-7387. Internet: www.closeup.org
- Constitutional Rights Foundation**, 601 S. Kingsley Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90005.
Phone: (213) 487-5590. Internet: www.crf-usa.org
- Educators for Social Responsibility**, 23 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138.
Phone: (617) 492-1764. Internet: www.esrnational.org
- Giraffe**, P.O. Box 759, Langley, WA 98260. Phone: (360) 221-7989.
Internet: www.giraffe.org
- Habitat for Humanity**, 121 Habitat St., Americus, GA 31709.
Phone: (912) 924-6935. Internet: www.habitat.org
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**,
4805 Mt. Hope Dr., Baltimore, MD 21215-3297. Phone: (877) NAACP-98.
Internet: www.naacp.org
- Rethinking Schools**, 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212.
Phone: (800) 669-4192. Internet: www.rethinkingschools.org
- Volunteers of America**, 1660 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314.
Phone: (703) 341-5000. Internet: www.volunteersofamerica.org

explain ideas, people, and places (e.g., national and local elections, representatives, and Washington, D.C.).

Adopt a part of the school. Frustrated by vandalism and litter on school grounds, fifth-grade children surveyed other students in the school to determine how many regarded this as a pressing problem. Results in hand, they wrote a proposal to the principal. On its approval, the children divided up the grounds by the number of classrooms in their school. Then they mounted a campaign to persuade each class to adopt one section of the school grounds as its own, regularly picking up the litter and painting over vandals' marks.

Civic letter writing. On a walk around the school, a third-grade class noticed that a main sidewalk was so badly damaged that children on their way to and from school had to walk into the street to avoid it. The class had practiced writing five kinds of letters: letters of support, letters giving information, letters requesting something, letters disagreeing with an action or opinion, and persuasive letters. They debated which kind was best for the current situation, eventually deciding to draft a letter to the city council informing it of the problem and requesting a repair.

Public information campaigns. Students can create posters and flyers for the school and neighborhood. These should be informational in nature, educating readers about a problem and suggesting possible or proven solutions the students think others should know about. Possibilities are fire safety in the home and at campgrounds, poisonous products in the home, and pet safety.

One group of fourth-graders was studying pollution problems in each region of the United States as part of their U.S. geography curriculum. One student brought to class a newspaper article about things that can pollute their front yards—weed killers and chemical fertilizers. Children playing in the yard and pets rolling in the grass can come into contact with these chemicals and track them into the house. They may develop rashes and become ill. These students produced a flyer that described the problem, listed information resources, and suggested remedies:

1. After using weed killers and fertilizers, water the lawn once a day for two days before allowing people or pets on it.
2. Take your shoes off before entering the house.
3. Don't use "weed and feed" products. They fertilize grass while spreading weed killer even where there are no weeds. Instead, pull weeds or use a spot sprayer.

The children printed the flyers and distributed them to the houses or apartments near their homes. Children, of course, should never go door-to-door without an adult supervisor. When this poses a difficulty, teachers rely on the classroom newsletter to get the word out to parents, school board members, and others on the class's mailing list.

CITIZENSHIP KNOWLEDGE

We have examined three categories of participatory democracy: discussing and deciding what to do about public problems (in the classroom, the community, and beyond), voting, and community service and action. If children learn to be good deliberators, well-prepared voters, and generous community servants, that would be terrific. But there is something better: knowledgeable deliberators, knowledgeable voters, and knowledgeable community servants. When participants possess a rich storehouse of knowledge about democracy and social life near and far, their discussions and decisions are more intelligent and their service projects more effective. As James Madison, one of the leading minds behind the U.S. Constitution and fourth president of the United States, wrote in 1788, "A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives."