

**COMBINING CIVIC EDUCATION
AND STUDENT GOVERNMENT:
A PROPOSAL**

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The role of schools in developing the next generation of democratic citizens in the United States has always existed. In his First Annual Message to Congress, George Washington (1790/1939) stressed the importance of education as the key to the overall political well-being of the new nation.

Knowledge is, in every country, the surest basis of public happiness. In one in which the measures of government receive their impression so immediately from the sense of the community as in ours, it is proportionally essential. To the security of a free constitution it contributes in various ways: by convincing those who are entrusted with the public administration, that every valuable end of government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people; and by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority; between burthens proceeding from a disregard to their convenience, and those resulting from the inevitable exigencies of society; to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness—cherishing the first, avoiding the last; and uniting a speedy but temperate vigilance against encroachments, with an inviolable respect to the laws (p. 493).

For the Founding Fathers citizenship education was a critical aspect to develop the new national government based upon republican ideals. Furthermore, proper citizenship education not only taught about the processes of the new government, but also encouraged participation, which they believed critical to limiting the possible power encroachments many governments succumb to during their histories (Smith Pangle & Pangle, 2000). Therefore, education for democratic citizenship education must develop three goals in students: a knowledge of the political process, an ability to analyze political issues and a desire for active participation in the democratic process.

Before a school can develop such a comprehensive citizenship education curriculum, it must decide what a democratic citizen looks like. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe three types of “good citizens” in a democratic government, which are the personally responsible citizen, participatory citizen and the justice-oriented citizen.

According to the authors, the personally responsible citizen is one who obeys the laws, volunteers to worthy causes and is responsible in the community. The participatory citizen understands the process of government, participates in the community, and organizes volunteer efforts. The justice-oriented citizen works to eliminate the problems that cause the need for volunteerism and how social interactions affect the individual in a society. According to Westheimer and Kahne, a combination of the participatory and justice-oriented citizen is the type of citizen schools should develop in its students. This goal is not impossible because many citizenship educators in the United States have indicated a shared belief in promoting tolerance and open-mindedness, discussing controversial political issues and the need for continuous civic involvement (Anderson, et al, 1997).

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

In order to develop these traits in future democratic citizens, the school's curriculum must explicitly address these issues. Patrick and Vontz (2001) develop four components of educating for citizenship in a democracy. In this framework, the curriculum develops the intellectual skills and the behaviors necessary for good democratic citizenship. The first aspect of this curriculum is the development of civic knowledge. In order to be good citizens in a democracy, students must understand how a democratic government is organized and functions. Secondly, good citizens must develop the cognitive skills to understand the issues facing the democracy and assess possible solutions that develop the common good of the democracy. The third curricular aspect of citizenship education is to give students the participatory skills necessary to

show that they can influence the public decision making process. Finally, a comprehensive citizenship education develops the democratic dispositions necessary to function in a free and democratic society. Following these four components, a school develops not only a good citizen, but a competent one as well.

As it concerns the knowledge and dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship, American schools do a good job. In the International IEA Civic Education Study (Baldi, 2001), U.S. ninth-graders scored significantly higher than the international mean on the total civic knowledge scale. Additionally, no other nation significantly outperformed students in the United States. U.S. students also showed dispositions conducive to democratic government. The results of this study indicate that close to 90-percent of American ninth-graders report “it is good for democracy when everyone has the right to express opinions freely” (p. xvii) and approximately 80-percent believe that voting in every election to be important for good citizenship. Furthermore, the study also reports that 89-percent of ninth-graders in the United States thought that helping people in the community was an important part of being a good citizen. In other words, American ninth-graders know what it means to be a good and competent democratic citizen.

In addition to the district’s mandatory 50 hours of community service to graduate, the efforts of teachers at Hazelwood West would indicate a significant attempt to develop good citizenship traits in students, especially in the field of social studies. Every ninth grade student must take an introductory civics class that covers topics concerning the Federal, state and local government as well as geographical and economical topics. After taking a survey of world history since the Renaissance their sophomore year, students

take American history since 1865 as a junior. During this year, students have the option to take the Advanced Placement American History class as their junior requirement. During this class, students learn about the founding of the nation and survey the nation's history through readings and analysis of trends and issues facing the nation at various points of the 19th and 20th centuries. As seniors, students can take a variety of social studies classes that will continue their intellectual development as democratic citizens. In Honor American Government, students not only learn additional information about the structure and nature of the American Republic, but also learn debate and rhetoric skills necessary to analyze and construct arguments about issues citizens currently face. In International Relations, students develop an understanding through research and primary source analysis about the foreign relations of the United States and the nation's place within the global community. If they choose to take Advanced Placement European History, students develop a deeper understanding of Europe's history through primary source document analysis and historical argument construction. Outside of the traditional curriculum, the social studies department sponsored the school's participation in KidsVoting during the 2004 and 2006 election seasons. By taking a full range of classes offered by the Social Studies Department at West, students develop many of the intellectual skills necessary for democratic citizenship.

In the Language Arts Departments, teachers engage students in critical thinking concerning literature and current events. Language Arts teachers and students conduct mock trials based on the central characters of a novel that they have just read. Blog postings over current events, theme construction in the writing process, moral education discussions and critical analysis of non-fiction works are some of the activities done in

the department that complement the citizenship education program. The Science Department addresses on a consistent basis the ethical issues concerning scientific research. In practical arts, the business classes discuss business ethics and the role of morality in the business world. In fact, it is impossible to develop a complete list of citizenship education friendly lessons and units at West because of the quality of programs at the school. This comprehensive citizenship education curriculum directly addresses the civic knowledge, analytical skills and democratic dispositions stressed by Patrick and Vontz suggestions.

According to Hillygus (2005), this should be enough to develop the participation skills necessary for democratic citizenship. The study found a correlation between verbal SAT scores, taking social science classes and civic participation by voting. In essence, Hillygus argues that if students develop strong civic knowledge, analytical skills and democratic dispositions, they will participate in civic activities such as voting in elections. However, an analysis of recent presidential elections indicates a different trend. Despite the encouraging data from the IEA study, only 41.9 percent of registered 18-24 year olds voted in the 2004 presidential election. Many would see an improvement in these numbers since only 32.3 percent of registered voters in that age group voted in the 2000 election. Upon further study of the election results, this is a misleading conclusion. When compared to other groups in the 2004 election, the 18-24 age set voted in significantly lower numbers than other ages. The 25-44 had 52.2 percent of its registered voters participate in the re-election of President Bush. Furthermore, the 45-64 age group had two-thirds of its registered voters turnout in the election to vote, while the 65 and higher group had 68.9 percent of its registered voters cast votes for President in

2004. A look at election turnout numbers indicates this trend has existed since the 1972 election, which was the first those aged 18-21 could vote (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Obviously, the 18-24 age set does not have the same number of participatory citizens as other groups. Therefore, the efforts of public high schools in citizenship education are not developing young citizens who participate in the democratic process by voting.

STUDENT GOVERNMENT AS A MEANS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In order to address this civic participation deficiency, schools must give students the opportunity to participate in democratic processes within the school, which often transfers into adult participation in the democratic process (Zeldin, et al, 2000).

Involving youth in the direct government in school is a basic principle of citizenship education (NCSS, 2003), and has many benefits to the students who participate in such a school governance system. Students involved in authentic school government develop leadership and public-speaking skill, have a better understanding of public policy and democratic government, learn to work in groups of others not similar to themselves, and develop a stronger personal identity (Mantooth, nd). Schools that allow for authentic participation in student-led school government have the largest impact on the participatory citizenship development of their students. Authentic participation in such a student government includes anything that gives student real administrative power over certain aspects of their school (Miller, 2004b).

School districts and individual school have developed various methods to involve students in the government of the district and/or school. Some districts have student members on the school board, other some schools have turned over significant portions of

the school's administration to the student government (Miller, 2004b). Potter (2004) develops the fictional Middleton School Community as the ideal of citizenship education. At its core, Middleton focuses on student government and participation in the district and the community. Hudson High School in Hudson, Massachusetts has an active student government that devotes one-hour-per-week to student governance issues. The students also meet with members of the community to deal with issues facing not only the school, but also facing the larger community. Instruction at the school, especially in the area of social studies, focuses on the structures and development of the local school government and its operations. In addition, students and teachers sit in interviews of potential teachers and administrators in the school (Miller 2004a).

A school looking to duplicate the success of Hudson High's student government does not need to develop such a government from scratch. The National Council for the Social Studies (2003) has developed basic principles and guidelines for developing an authentic student government. Among the suggestions of the NCSS, a written constitution should govern all activities of the student government and that constitution should reflect a consensus of all the major players for power within the school building (i.e. principals, teachers, students, etc.). This constitution must allow for the mediation of conflicts that will arise over time concerning the inevitable power struggle among the students, administration, faculty and staff as well as an amendment process that will allow for necessary changes to the constitution over time. NCSS also advises that participation in the student government should be representative of the student body and all students should have regular and direct access to their elected representatives. In addition, NCSS suggests that a strong civic knowledge curriculum that allows students to

understand the democratic processes of their own student government complement all authentic student governments developed in a school.

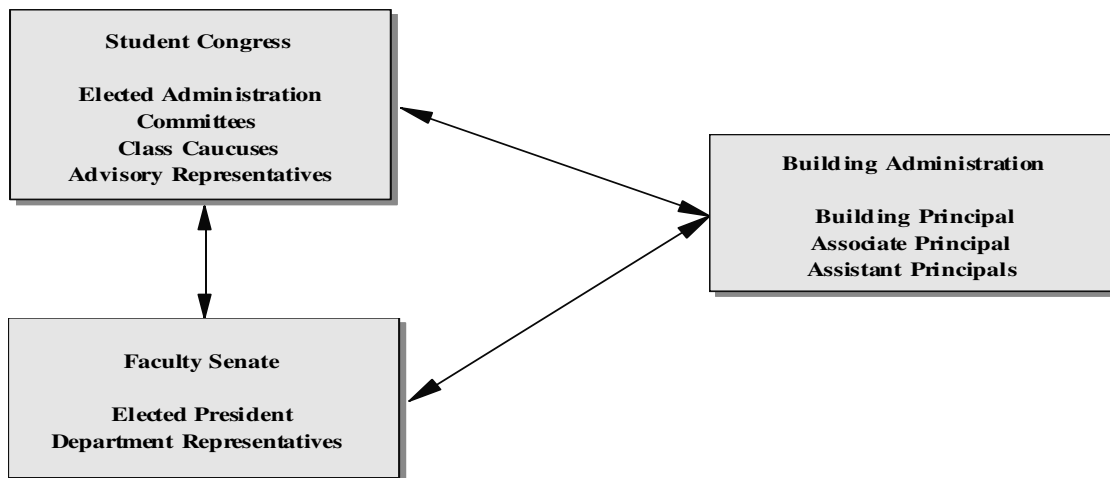
THE PROPOSAL FOR HAZELWOOD WEST

As Hazelwood begins a once-per-week advisement period for the 2007-2008 school year, it would be the perfect time to implement an authentic student government to compliment the school's already strong efforts in developing civic knowledge, analytical skills and democratic dispositions in its students. This advisement period will allow for the election of a representative to the student government, giving each student direct communication with their elected representative on a regular basis. Therefore, all students will have an experience of participation in a republican form of government. However, before West High can implement an authentic student government, students, teachers, principals and staff need to participate in writing the constitution that will govern the new school organization. This part of the process will begin and conclude in year one of the proposal.

Beginning as early in the school year as possible, the major players for power in the school building will begin negotiating the power structure of the new government. Each advisory will elect a student representative to the constitution writing process. A faculty representative from each academic department and representatives from the building administration will join the student representatives and begin writing the constitution that will divide the responsibility of school government among the various interests and how decisions and policy will develop and receive approval. Table 1 illustrates the flow of power among these interests in the school. As the negotiations

proceed, each representative will report to their constituents concerning the progress and issues discussed. In addition, West High School has an active student newspaper and in-house cable station that could report on the activities of the Constitutional Convention of Hazelwood West. By adding the journalism piece the process, people in the building gain another authentic part of a modern representative government. Ideally, by January or February of the school year, representatives will have written and accepted a general constitution. At this time, each advisory, or the entire student body, will undertake the ratification process. The particulars of this process will be determined in the convention itself.

TABLE 1

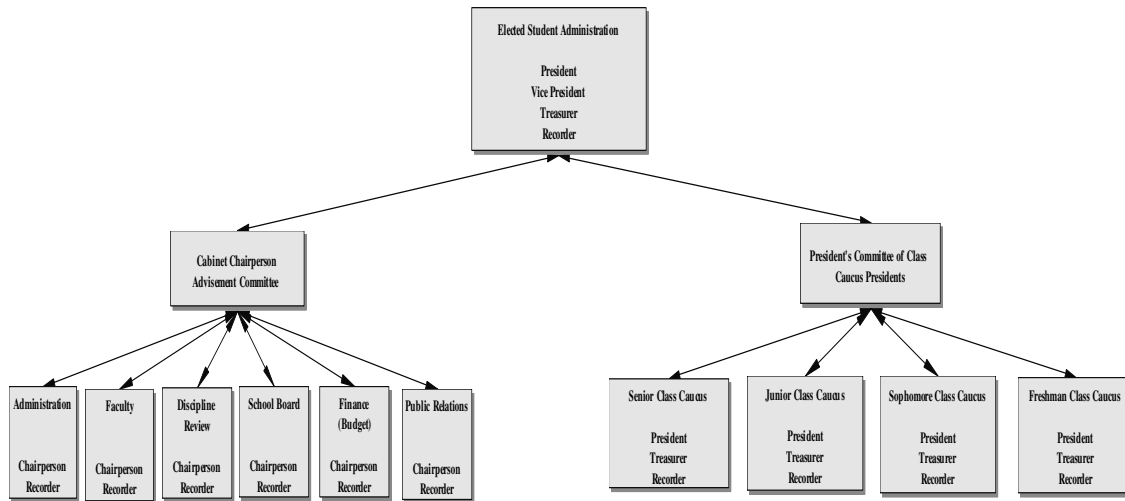


Of course, if the people of West High reject the constitution by the standards set forth by the convention, the process must begin again. Assuming ratification, however, the process continues into its general election phase. While the process of elections and what positions will be voted for, as well as who is eligible to run for office, is up to the convention to decide, the first election of the new government will occur during April

and early May. The major action during this election process will most likely occur for the Student Congress. Using the West newspaper and the in-house cable station, students running for office will need to appeal to the student body in order to gain election. Other major parts of the new student government will proceed in a similar manner, or the manner prescribed to them by the newly ratified constitution.

Once elections have taken place and the individual makeup the new student government has been determined, the process leads into the second year, the implementation year. While many of the structures and organizations within the student government will develop during the constitution writing process, a possible structure of the student congress follows and table 2 illustrates this structure. At the top of the congress is the popularly elected student administration consisting of a president, vice president, treasurer and recorder. This elected administration will have two advisory boards, the cabinet chairpersons committee and the council of class presidents. The cabinet chairpersons committee will comprise the chairs of the various administrative committees. These committees could include an administrative liaison committee, a faculty liaison committee, a discipline review committee, a school board liaison committee, a finance committee and a public relations committee. The advisory representatives will serve on these committees, with each representative serving on one committee. The elected administration and the cabinet chairperson advisement committee will appoint the representatives to the various administration committees at the beginning of each school year.

TABLE 2



During the writing of the constitution, delegates would develop the roles of each of the administrative committees. Possible duties for the administrative committee could be serving as a liaison between the students and the principals, developing solutions for administrative issues that arise throughout the school year and serving on the committees that hire new principals. The same roles could also apply to the faculty administrative committee. The school board committee could attend and address the school board on issues important to the students at West High. The discipline review committee might serve as a place where students could bring grievances against the possible unjust punishments of students. The finance committee would oversee the congressional budget as well as organize fundraisers. The public relations committee could serve as media specialists for the in-house news services as well as the media outside the school. Delegates could develop other administrative committees as they see a need and define the roles of each committee to include less or more power than these suggestions.

The student congress will also need to be able to address individual class concerns. Therefore, a possible solution is to create individual class caucuses, which

each elected representative will serve on, based on their year in school. Each caucus would elect a president, treasurer and recorder to run the caucus meetings. These class caucuses could administer spirit week activities for their respective classes, help develop and organize class activities such as prom and any other role(s) the delegates writing the constitution would see as necessary. As needed, the presidents of the class caucuses would meet with the elected administration to discuss class issues affecting the entire school.

Of course, the actual makeup of the student congress, faculty senate and the power shared between them and the administration depends on the developments of the constitution writing process. The outcome could be something similar to the American form of government where the two house of the congress work together to achieve changes, subject to the approval of the executive. Another possible outcome would be similar to the British system, where the lower house (the students) would have tremendous power and the upper house would serve only as a delaying check against possible democratic abuses. However, these are not the only two models possible. Other high schools have developed student government and delegates could research their government and apply them to the West government as it develops.

As the first year of implementation proceeds, problems will arise that will allow students, faculty and administrators to adapt their constitution to the situation, or amend it as necessary. Once everyone becomes accustomed to the new way of governing Hazelwood West High School, the government will become more stable and new representatives and student administrations can develop a trusting relationship with the traditional powers of the school. If the school government develops this trust, then its

influence and effectiveness will only increase. As students develop a positive attitude about their student government and their ability to influence the policies and practices at their high school, the likelihood of their participation in the American government will increase. If this happens and Hazelwood West develops good and competent citizens that are democratically oriented and willing to participate in government, the school would make George Washington proud.

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