

## **The Kids Voting Approach to Civic Education**

If our children are to become the ideal citizens of tomorrow, we must make them educated and engaged today. This process requires more than a basic understanding of government. Instead, we must build their knowledge base while also cultivating the dispositions and habits required by the duties of citizenship. In order to do this, schools must take a dynamic, and multi-faceted approach. The influential Civic Mission of Schools report (Carnegie & CIRCLE, 2003) outlined six promising approaches to civic education. The Kids Voting program directly utilizes four of these practices to create a learning experience that results in dramatic and long-lasting effects. The approaches are:

### **1. Provide instruction in government, history, law and democracy.**

The Civics Alive! curriculum serves to instill a foundational understanding of how our government works. From government to history to law, Civics Alive! ensures that students have a firm grasp on the complexities and intricacies of American democracy. Beginning in the earliest grades and continuing all the way through high school, the Civics Alive! curriculum aids students in developing the knowledge and understanding necessary for lifelong democratic citizenship.

### **2. Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.**

What makes the Kids Voting approach to discussion so effective is its use of various political agents and events. First, KVUSA coordinates with the election cycle to capitalize on the increased energy and interest in politics. Second, KVUSA strongly incorporates mass media into discussion. This not only injects the students into the national conversation, but it also assists in building strong media literacy skills. Third, and most importantly, the KVUSA approach bridges the classroom with the home. By uniting the two most important arenas for political socialization, KVUSA is able to increase the amount and duration of its effects. These effects include, but are not limited to, increased news consumption, increased deliberative dispositions, and development of an individual political identity.

### **3. Design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learned through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.**

An effective civic education must transcend the classroom walls and reach into the community. That is why KVUSA couples the Civics Alive! curriculum with the Destination Democracy program. This program offers students the opportunity to interact with community members by working at a polling station or volunteering on get out the vote campaigns. This opportunity to employ their classroom lessons in a real political environment allows students to establish independent political identities and increased political efficacy.

### **4. Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures**

The Kids Voting program culminates in students participating in a mock election. This election focuses on the same issues being addressed in the real election and even uses a ballot that mirrors the real one. This process helps dispel the myths and mysteries of the voting booth. Furthermore,



research shows that simulations develop improved civic skills and are integral to fostering interest in politics, service, and local government.

The remaining two approaches identified in the report, encouragement of student participation in school governance and offering of extracurricular activities, are better suited to be addressed by the individual schools. However, while not directly addressed by KVUSA, these two approaches certainly benefit from the energized political atmosphere created by Kids Voting participation.

## **Kids Voting Effects**

The multifaceted, political immersion approach of Kids Voting is unique in its ability to cultivate the skills and desire necessary for long term political engagement. Thanks to numerous rigorous studies, KVUSA can claim the following outcomes.

### **Kids Voting has wide-reaching impact on civic development**

Kids Voting is able to create wide-reaching effects because it incorporates the most powerful agents of political socialization: schools, elections, families, peer groups, and mass communication. By instituting such an inclusive program, KVUSA has dramatic effects on a wide range of civic development measures. Students exposed to KVUSA curriculum demonstrate higher levels of news attention, cognition, discussion with parents and friends, deliberative dispositions, and civic identity. For example, in terms of news attention, one study found that 76% of participants reported frequently or occasionally watching news about the campaign on television and 73% reported following the campaign on the radio. After the passage of one year, participation is associated with increased social capital through higher levels of political activity at school and higher levels volunteering in the community.

### **Kids Voting is a catalyst for long-term civic engagement**

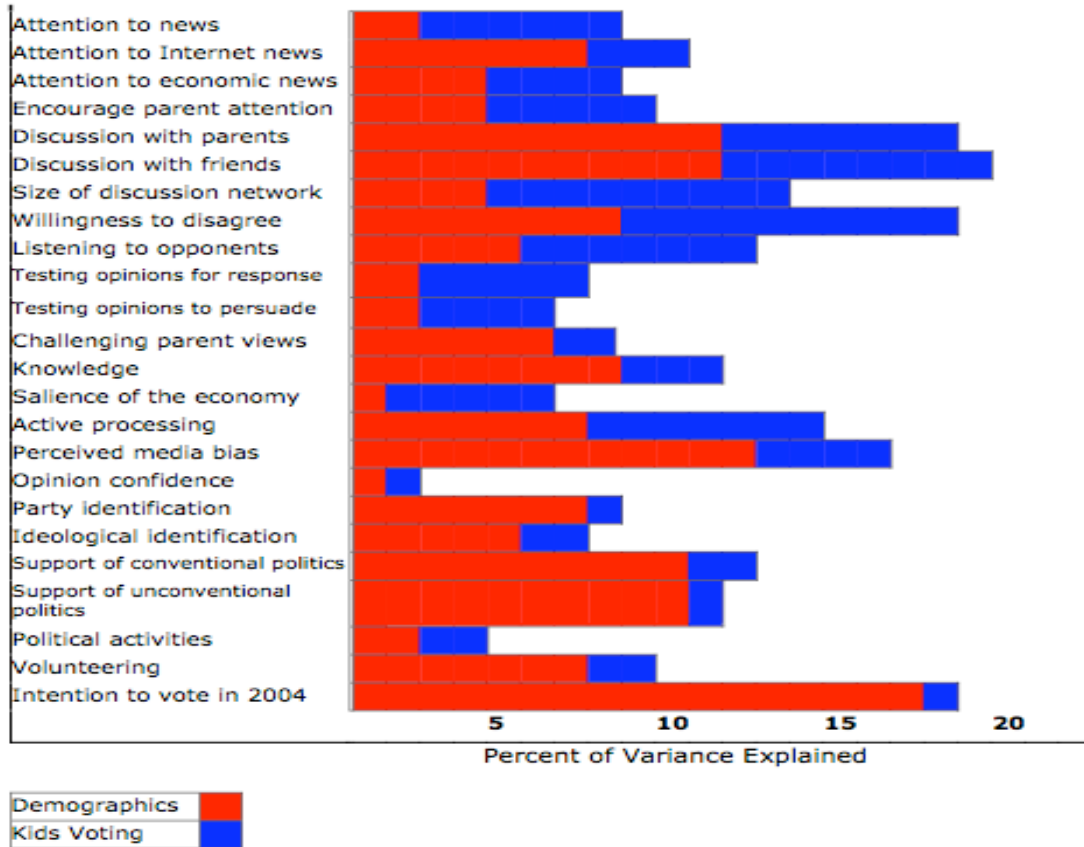
The most impressive aspect of KVUSA is the lasting impact of the curriculum. One year after the initial participation, KVUSA demonstrated effects in 21 of 25 curriculum measures. Specifically, KVUSA netted positive effects in levels of media use, discussion, cognition, opinion formation, and civic participation. In fact, students demonstrated *increased* levels of cognition, deliberative habits, and ideology. Table 1 illustrates the curriculum's influence compared to the effects of individual and family background. After looking at the table, the most important benefits become apparent. Kids Voting USA participation has the largest impact on media and discussion habits. This is important because frequent media use and discussion are the building blocks for lifelong engagement.

Moreover, KVUSA's influence remained significant for the following measures a full *two years* after participation: attention to Internet news, frequency of discussion with friends, testing opinions in conversation, support for unconventional activism, volunteering, and campus activism. Kids Voting USA is able to achieve these effects because students develop the self-sustaining democratic habits of news consumption and discussion.



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### Summary of Kids Voting Effects One Year Later (% of Variance Explained)



\*Note: While Kids Voting accounted for an increase in variance in all 25 tests, the results were not statistically significant for the following items: opinion confidence, party identification, support for unconventional politics, and intention to vote in 2004. This simply means that chance cannot be ruled out as the cause of the variance.

\*\*Source: CIRCLE. (2004, September)

### Kids Voting serves as a catalyst for deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy rests on the very principle that citizens should desire to test their opinions out in conversation. Kids Voting USA prepares students for this form of discursive citizenship by developing the necessary democratic dispositions. Specifically, numerous studies demonstrate that KVUSA promotes willingness to disagree, willingness to listen to opponents, testing out opinions in conversation and challenging the views of parents. Furthermore, students participating in the KVUSA program significantly expand their discussion networks. This broadening of discussion networks increases the likelihood of encountering differing opinions. When you couple the participants growing news consumption with their expanding discussion network, you find a strong foundation for deliberative democracy.

### Kids Voting closes the civic education gap

Great divides in political involvement still exist along racial and socioeconomic status lines. Therefore, any successful civic education program must work to narrow these gaps. In numerous



studies, KVUSA has demonstrated that ability. For example, low-SES students and parents from San Jose closed gaps in political knowledge, media use, discussion, and opinion formation after participating in the program. Moreover, Hispanic students in El Paso County narrowed or completely closed gaps in attention to news, attention to a state amendment enforcing English only instruction, knowledge, integration of new information, willingness to listen to opposing views, willingness to disagree, and support for conventional politics. These dramatic changes illustrate KVUSA's ability to close the civic education gap.

### **Kids Voting creates civic bonding of the school and family**

The two most important environments for civic growth are the school and the family. Working independently, these two spheres tend to have impacts that are marginal and fleeting. Kids Voting unites these two spheres to create long-term changes at the individual, family, and community levels. Kids Voting USA participants, inspired by classroom activity, demonstrate increased levels of student-initiated discussion at home. This discussion then spurs increased news attention and knowledge among children and parents. These new habits serve to create a political environment at home that is self-sustaining. The effects at home then boomerang back to the school by parents encouraging their children to more freely express themselves in class discussions (see figure 1 for a diagram of this process). KVUSA then enlivens the community by growing discussion networks and prompting greater intention to vote among the participants and their parents. Additionally, one study showed that KVUSA participation in 2002 predicted the following civic involvement measures for parents in 2004: news attention, cognition, discussion inside and outside the home, deliberative habits, support for unconventional participation, volunteering, and activism.

### **Kids Voting's positive effects on voting perceptions and turnout**

Central to the KVUSA mission is increasing the importance of voting among youth and increasing voter turnout rates among adults. While this may seem too lofty of a goal, the KVUSA program is up to the task. As a result of the inclusive, multifaceted approach, seventy-six percent of participants reported that it is important for people to vote on Election Day. Even more encouraging is the uniformity shown across grade levels. This helps to dispel the myth that civic education has little effect at the high school level. These results beg the question: does this increased importance of voting translate to actual voting when participants become of voting age? The short answer is *yes*. An analysis of voter turnout rates in Kansas demonstrated that KVUSA not only increased voter turnout in the short run, but it also increased voter turnout over time. Additionally, first time voters in counties using Kids Voting "voted at a higher rate than their counterparts in other counties" (Linimon & Joslyn, 2002, p. 25). Specifically, the voting rate for registered 18 year-olds was six percentage points higher for kids participating in KVUSA than those not participating.

In addition to increasing positive perceptions and first-time voter turnout, KVUSA is associated with increase voter turnout among parents. For example, one study compared selected areas in 15 states to comparable areas in the same vicinity that did not utilize the Kids Voting program. The researchers found that the 15 areas using KVUSA demonstrated a 2.2% increase in turnout. This is by no means an isolated finding. Similar studies have found that areas using KVUSA demonstrate a 1.7-3.9% increase in voter turnout. Furthermore, two studies using post-election surveys tried to isolate the specific influence of Kids Voting by asking if the program was the *determining factor* for their decision to vote. The first study of an Arizona statewide election



found that 2.6% of *all voters*, not just parents of participants, said that Kids Voting was the determining factor for their decision to vote. This translates to an additional 50,000+ voters going to the polls on Election Day because of Kids Voting USA. The second survey spanning five states found that 2.9 percent of registered voters stated that they cast their ballot “solely due to the existence of the KV program” (Merrill, 1993). These findings cannot be understated. Kids and parents are becoming more politically aware and engaged, and this energy is compelling them to go to the polls and cast their votes.

### **The overall impact of Kids Voting**

As the above results outline, KVUSA transforms the major aspects necessary for knowledgeable and engaged civic participation. The program equips students with the habits and skills necessary for a life of civic participation. KVUSA gives rise to a lively domestic sphere that encourages the sustained political growth of the parent and child. This blossoming domestic sphere then feeds back into the school and community by transforming the norms of political engagement and discussion. Supported by a revitalized domestic sphere, students have the confidence to actively participate in classroom discussion. They begin to broaden their discussion networks and when the time comes, they increase their voter turnout rates. Adults too are caught up in the wave of political engagement. Adults begin following and discussing politics with a broadening array of people, and like their children, they flock to the polls in higher numbers. All of these agents and effects seamlessly combine to create a community committed to democracy.

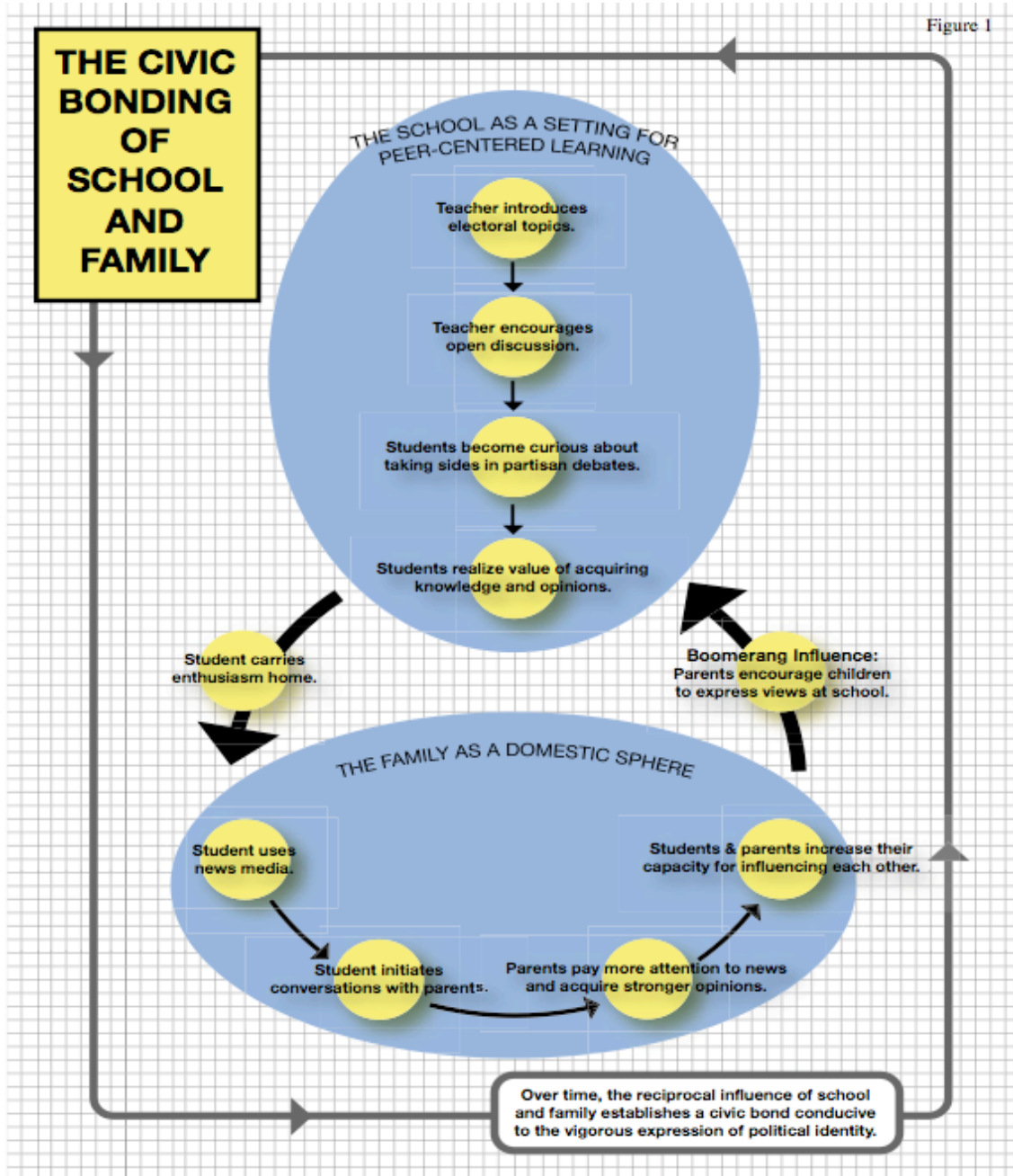


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Figure 1: The Civic Bonding of School and Family



\* Source: CIRCLE. (2003, July).