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The Institute for Emerging Issues (IEI) recently released its 2015 North Carolina Civic Health Index. Authored by IEI and produced in partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship, this report highlights an extraordinary opportunity to strengthen our communities, our businesses, and our economy by improving our state’s civic health.

As the report spells out, civic health is the social and economic vitality that results when citizens interact productively with their neighbors, involve themselves in community institutions, and actively engage in public issues. To determine North Carolina’s civic health, IEI analyzed data drawn from special Census and other government surveys, looking at rates of volunteering and giving, voting, working in groups with neighbors, and confidence levels in public institutions.

The key findings of the report note several areas where North Carolina’s current levels of civic engagement are no better than national averages. For example, while young adults have more trust in corporations, the media, and public schools than their older counterparts, their rates of participation on several indicators lag those of older adults by more than 25 percentage points. As several studies suggest, while these young adults believe government can serve as a powerful tool for addressing social...
problems, this so-called startup generation is also perfectly willing to look outside of government and forge individual pathways as social entrepreneurs rather than investing in collective citizen engagement.

In all fairness, if we are to look to these young adults as future leaders, we must invest in civic engagement in our K-12 curriculum. As the Guardian of Democracy report by The Civic Mission of Schools points out, students who receive effective civic learning are:

- More likely to vote and discuss politics at home.
- Four times more likely to volunteer and work on community issues.
- More confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with elected representatives.

The North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, a program of UNC-Chapel Hill’s Program in the Humanities and Human Values, works with schools, governments, and communities to prepare North Carolina’s young people to be active, responsible citizens. They offer quality resources for educators and professional development programs, which include access to scholars on key topics, innovative lesson plans, and interactive pedagogical training.

Activate Good, an organization that works to increase volunteering in local communities in support of charitable causes, recently launched Activate Schools. This initiative helps local high schools integrate a Community Leadership and Service class into the curriculum to ensure that students learn about the value of volunteering and are empowered to become volunteer leaders.

Civic engagement is about building and fostering strong relationships, and using these connections and
social networks to address community challenges. Better preparing our state’s young people to be active and engaged citizens will help to ensure our state’s future economic prosperity. North Carolina has a great opportunity to build a strong and healthy future through an educated and engaged citizenry.

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Do you know a teacher who is working hard to help students succeed? Let us know, and s/he could be featured in the next education issue!