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Encouraging Youth Civic Engagement

Note: This month’s Education newsletter was co-authored by Carolyn Chen and Zach Walker, summer policy interns at the Institute for Emerging Issues through the North Carolina Community Development Initiative Program. Carolyn is a rising senior at Cary’s Panther Creek High School; Zach is a rising senior at Leesville Road High School in Raleigh.

With the 2016 presidential elections on the horizon, the political buzz across the nation is louder than ever. On virtually every social media platform today, you will find people speaking out on political issues in one form or another. Political engagement through social media appears to be particularly common among youth. But for many members of our generation, re-tweeting and re-blogging on social media will be as involved as they get in the political process.

Political participation is the way citizens can shape public policy, voice their opinions, and elect leaders. Whether by leading a rally, donating to a campaign, writing an op-ed, hosting a debate, or simply voting in an election, political participation is how people push for change in their communities. Despite the influence political participation has in shaping our everyday lives, today’s youth remain extremely
disengaged.

Although voting is one of the most direct and powerful ways citizens can be involved in politics, turnout remains low for our generation. Voting determines who is elected, and in turn what policies are created. In the 2012 Presidential election, only 45% of eligible citizens between the ages of 18-29 voted, compared to 72% of eligible citizens ages 65-plus.

![Voting Rates, by Age, for the Voting Age Citizen Population: 2012](image)

Why are young adults so disengaged from politics? From our viewpoints as student and young citizens, disengagement is due to a lack of education about the subject.

The consequences of low voter turnout by young adults is not discussed as a major issue in schools. Voter registration for high school students seems to get less emphasis than in years past, especially since the mandate for high-school voter registration drives was repealed and the advance voter registration program for teen drivers was eliminated in 2014. Schools provide relatively little education on the political process to students, which leads to uninformed students who are not politically engaged or, even worse, to students who are misinformed.

However, many organizations are working to resolve this issue. Kids Voting, a statewide nonprofit, educates youth voters through classroom enrichment and family activities. One of their key engagement activities is the use of a mock election in civics classes. Mock elections enable students to weigh the pros and cons of candidates and become more informed. Students are encouraged to start school-sponsored mock election clubs to promote political awareness and bring more students into the political process.

The voting rate among young adults is astonishingly low, yet efforts to encourage political participation
have declined in recent years. But with internal and external support, schools and organizations can make a change and push students to become more politically aware and, in turn, have a greater say in shaping their future.

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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!