

Students learning to be citizens

By Nat Hentoff, FOR THE LEADER TIMES
Saturday, March 31, 2012

Two years ago, then-American Bar Association President Stephen N. Zack gravely warned: "Civic education courses have become electives in some schools; at others, they are not offered at all. We are producing a generation of citizens who are ill-equipped to govern themselves We must do better."

But there are signs that when students have the chance to get involved in our constitutional self-government, they are eager to continue.

In a recent New York Times story, Yasmeen Khan quotes Will Packer, an 11th-grade applied civics teacher at the Democracy Prep Charter School in Central Harlem -- a school that makes such classes a regular part of its mission. Along with debate, "Students in all grades hold mock elections."

Adds Packer: "We (at Democracy Prep) believe that no one's going to hold their hand and make sure that they do these things. We want to make sure that they are enfranchising themselves and empowering themselves to be active citizens in the community."

There are more than 80 schools that operate similarly to Democracy Prep in 13 states nationwide, serving nearly 35,000 students.

Founded by Seth Andrew -- who earned his degree in school leadership and school development from Harvard, Democracy Prep Public Schools operates four high-performing schools in New York and replicated its model twice in Rhode Island.

Students who are beginning to learn why they are Americans should especially read Andrew's contribution: "Fighting Civic Malpractice: How a Harlem Charter School Closes the Civic Achievement Gap."

That school is Democracy Prep Charter Middle School in Central Harlem, which in 2010, Andrew is proud to say, "was named the top-performing middle school and top-performing charter school in the entire City of New York.

"But academic growth is not enough to satisfy the mission of Democracy Prep. We must also prepare our citizen-scholars for lives of active citizenship -- which is, after all, the true mission of public schools."

Here, directly from Andrew, are the civic values that Democracy Prep schools are trying to uphold:

"What We Stand For":

"We host elected officials and community leaders at all our schools. Students participate in required community and public service ... Students learn to -- and do -- meet with elected officials and conduct lobbying visits. They deliver testimony at city and state legislative hearings (they're the youngest ever to do so in New York and Rhode Island) and learn to write their own testimony effectively."

He adds: "We believe that public schools have an obligation to help young people acquire and learn the skills, knowledge and attitudes to become competent citizens throughout their lives."

I have been writing about education for more than 60 years. By my criteria, students must learn what it means to be active Americans as they help preserve the Republic and its personal liberties. This is why I'm spreading the energizing news about Democracy Prep Public Schools.

Nat Hentoff is an authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.