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Sweet Land of Liberty - Lifelong informed voters

by **Nat Hentoff**

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According to the Council on Foreign Relations, we are experiencing an "education crisis (that) is a national security crisis." This includes the many schools that "have stopped teaching the sort of basic civics that prepare students for citizenship" ("Weak Schools Said to Imperil Security," Jason Dean, The Wall Street Journal, March 20, 2012).

I agree. That's why if I were president -- no chance; I'm an atheist pro-lifer -- the first thing I'd do is bring back those vital parts of the Constitution that George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Barack Obama have placed, they thought, in permanent detention.

Then I would tell the country in the State of the Union address about the achievements of the network of Democracy Prep public charter schools that accurately claims to be "the only school network working to close the massive civic education gap in America, which is even larger than the achievement gaps in English or math for low-income students."

What has happened to the Harlem Day Charter School is proof of how the Democracy Prep network is closing that gap. In 2011, Democracy Prep took over this academically failing school -- one of the oldest charter schools in New York City -- that was about to be closed (democracyprep.org/schools).

While Harlem Day's replacement, Harlem Prep Charter School, hasn't been open long enough to provide any official data, Seth Andrew, Democracy Prep's founder and superintendent, praises these students' rapid accomplishments:

"This is not a selective group of kids. These are the exact same families with the exact same poverty, same challenges in their day-to-day lives" as in the school it took over ("Eight months in, Bloomberg calls charter takeover a success," Rachel Cromidas, gothamschools.org, March 7, 2012).

As for the students who get into Democracy Prep public schools, Andrew writes: "We accept all of our students based on a random lottery (there is no test to enter) ... since we actively recruit students with special needs, we serve a higher proportion of such students than do our neighboring traditional public schools in Harlem" ("Teaching America: The Case for Civic Education," R&L Education, 2011).

Andrew writes that Democracy Prep takes particular interest in students who are "homeless, low performing, and low-income."

In addition to the basics -- reading, math, et al. -- these kids learn invaluable civics skills. Not many traditional schools do this, as described by Andrew: "Each Election Day, scholars (that's what the students are called) ... run our all-day 'Get Out the Vote Campaign,' standing on busy street corners ... handing out flyers that read, 'I CAN'T VOTE, BUT YOU CAN!'"

"Over the past five years, they have encouraged over 50,000 Harlem voters to get out the vote."

And dig this: High school students work a phone bank, "calling homes in Harlem and encouraging registered voters to head to the polls. Because our scholars have become knowledgeable about the candidates and issues, they often end up informing the would-be voters about the candidates" -- not in a partisan way, but just on what the issues are.

I wish that my public schools in Boston had instilled in me what Andrew calls a "civic attitude." My high school was the Boston Latin School, the first public school and oldest U.S. school, founded in 1635. One of my fellow alumni was Samuel Adams, whose Committees of Correspondence on key issues of British misrule were a precipitating cause of the American Revolution.

Adams would approve of another Democracy Prep initiative to directly connect students with officials who supervise all public schools in their area. As Andrew explains in "Teaching America":

"High school students on Democracy Prep's student council sit on the education committee of the local Community Board. The opportunity to interact with a real governing body turns a simple school assignment into an exciting, educational exercise of students' rights as citizens."

Andrew is indeed a perpetual student and scholar concerning schools that work. In finding out about Democracy Prep, I've become a student of his and his skills as a researcher. In "Teaching America," he made me focus on the core meaning of the "civic attitude" Democracy Prep cultivates.

This is, he writes, "the degree to which one believes in one's ability to play a meaningful role in society. Among young people aged 15 to 25, Latinos and African-Americans are far less likely than whites to agree with the statement that 'I can make a difference in solving the problems of my community.' It's no surprise, then, that these minority groups have far lower rates of community engagement."

From what they learn of American history to how they learn to engage in the problems of their own communities, these students' education has badly lacked the motivation to develop a "civic attitude."

But change is afoot at Harlem Prep, and other schools like it.

Seth Andrew continues to challenge all educators in this country to "end civic malpractice" by "closing the civic achievement gap." Teachers engaged in this quintessential mission will learn a great deal about why they too are Americans. So will the parents of Democracy Prep students who are making constitutional democracy an active reality rather than a wishful slogan.

But, most importantly, maybe some of these kids will eventually be in charge of school systems around this country, teaching their students to become proud, active citizens as well.

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