
Learning Freedom through Civic Education

JAN GOTTSCHALK

“I feel good because I know now that I can change my community for the better by voicing my opinion!” That is how Chase Weavil, eighth grader at Southwest Middle School in High Point, describes the Citizen I Am pilot project sponsored by the newly organized North Carolina Civic Education Consortium. “I really like the program because it lets me participate in what’s going on in my community,” Chase adds.

Inspired by the consortium’s vision and enthusiastically supported by the consortium, two teachers at Southwest Middle School designed Citizen I Am with the creative leadership of their assistant principal. Using the concept of a town meeting, Pam Myrick, sixth-grade teacher, and Sharon Pearson, eighth-grade teacher, developed a classroom teaching model through which middle and high school students can actively examine, debate, evaluate, and respond to a current local issue from an array of perspectives.

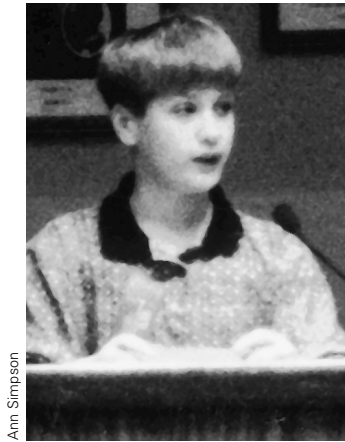
As their community issue, Myrick and Pearson selected the controversy surrounding the Federal Express hub proposed for the Piedmont Triad International Airport. This issue is particularly important to Southwest Middle School students and their parents because of the school’s proximity to the proposed hub and to sites where a new runway would have to be constructed to accommodate Federal Express. Students studied the issue, toured the airport, and met with community resource people who represented various positions on the proposed hub. Citizen I Am culminated in a town meeting in the city’s council chamber, moderated by High Point Mayor Rebecca Smothers. Students presented and debated their positions for and against development of the hub. Then, in voting booths set up by the High Point Board of Elections outside the chamber, students cast their ballots on the referendum question, endorsing development by a two-to-one margin.

Before the town meeting, middle school students formed caucuses and prepared position statements on the proposed Federal Express hub.



Ann Simpson

The author, a former social studies teacher, is director of the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium.



Ann Simpson

Students delivered fact-filled, impassioned speeches before a packed council chamber.

Other students involved in Citizen I Am are as enthusiastic as their classmate Chase. "I like how we're getting to learn about things happening around us now and how FedEx

[may] affect our community," explains Amanda Farrington, sixth grader. "The project gets students more involved in class than reading out of a textbook. Kids who sometimes don't pay attention seem to be learning more and are more involved."

"Knowing about current events can tell you not only about our everyday politics but about how important and interesting it can be to keep up with the news!" says Jennifer Mild, sixth grader.

The project has helped students and their teachers use the community as a learning laboratory. Eighth-grader Nick McPherson describes Citizen I Am as "a great experience and a fun way to learn about the economy of our city."

As Myrick and Pearson developed this dynamic, comprehensive interdisciplinary unit with Assistant Principal James Ingram, they were careful to connect learning experiences to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. In addition, they incorporated Paideia seminars (discussions guided by open-ended questioning), writing across the curriculum (integration of writing into all subjects), character education, and development of critical thinking skills.

Citizen I Am is one of many projects that the consortium is sponsoring. This article explains the consortium's origins and vision, and describes some other efforts under way or planned.

THE NEED FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

The consortium was conceived in 1997 by the Institute of Government and North Carolina's Association of County Commissioners, City and County Management Association, and League of Municipalities. They were responding to requests from local officials who felt that the prevalent civic disinterest among youth threatened the future of democratic governance in

their communities. Find ways, these officials urged, for community leaders and classroom teachers to relate civics to young lives so that students will be motivated to learn, understand, value, and ultimately practice effective local citizenship.

Numerous statewide polls, studies, and news reports reinforce the need for improved civic education. For example:

- Only 36 percent of eligible North Carolina voters cast ballots in the 1998 elections.
- In 1998 just 64 percent of North Carolina high school students taking the end-of-course test in Economic, Legal, and Political Systems (ELP, the required high school civics course) demonstrated proficiency.
- In 1997 a report commissioned by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation called *Civic Education: Preparing Tomorrow's Citizens* documented the disinterest. As one high school student said, "I go through class and wonder, Why should I care about this? What does it mean for me?"¹

The Institute of Government and the consortium's founding partners recognized that the decline in citizen participation and the disinterest in civic education posed a serious threat to the quality of government and life in North Carolina. Formation of the consortium was their first step in addressing that threat.

"State and local governments must take an active interest in the consortium's activities," explains Debra Henzey, public information officer for the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners. "We can't increase citizens' trust in government if our future voters have little comprehension of what's at stake when they don't exercise their right to participate by voting or serving on committees. We won't increase self-sufficiency in communities if future residents don't know how to work with government and other organizations to solve local problems."

The consortium is a partnership of more than 180 organizations and individuals that have a stake in civic education, including universities, schools, governments, nonprofit agencies, professional associations, and businesses. Its motto, "Learn your freedom," captures its several goals well. Through sponsorship or encouragement of projects like Citizen I Am, it is helping students engage in real issues with community role models and thereby experience the empowerment that active citizenship in a democracy engenders.

Although the focus of the consortium is North Carolina, the challenge is national. Last year the National



Through rebuttal, students practiced civil disagreement.

Commission on Civic Renewal said that the United States is becoming “a nation of spectators.”² Research by graduate students in the Institute of Government’s Master of Public Administration Program

has not yet identified a program similar to that of the North Carolina consortium. In fact, teachers and government officials from several states have recently inquired about the North Carolina project with the thought of starting their own state consortiums.

“Teaching young people about their roles in a democracy is especially difficult when cynicism about government is widespread and community ties are weak,” explains Gordon Whitaker, professor of public administration at the Institute of Government and faculty adviser to the consortium. However, the consortium’s partners, all of whom volunteer their time and talents, have enthusiastically embraced this challenge. “These volunteers are committed to work together to develop effective citizens for the 21st century,” Whitaker affirms.

THE CONSORTIUM’S VISION

Even before the consortium received a \$50,000 planning grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, its founding organizations had begun to carve out an ambitious vision. Today the consortium’s partners are working to develop young North Carolina citizens who promote and protect democracy by

- caring enough about their state and communities to make them better;
- understanding governments, nonprofit organizations, and businesses, and knowing how to work with them to build stronger communities;
- seeking, analyzing, and evaluating information about public concerns; and
- deliberating, negotiating, organizing, persuading, listening, and advocating with respect for themselves and others.

In spring 1998 the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation followed its planning grant with a \$100,000 grant for operating expenses. The operating grant has allowed the consortium to hire its first executive director and to develop programs to revitalize civic education.

SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

Citizen I Am focuses on the consortium’s goal of providing classroom resources and support for educators. Another goal is to help teachers and community partners develop new skills and strategies to nurture informed and engaged young citizens. The consortium’s Professional Development Work Group, one of four standing committees carrying out the consortium’s vision, focused its first efforts on ELP teachers. “Supporting the professional development of ELP teachers, who represent the ‘front line’ of high school civics in North Carolina, is a high priority of the consortium,” according to Sandra Cook, chair of the work group and director of Newspapers in Education for the North Carolina Press Association.

At the work group’s urging, Ann Simpson, associate director for development at the Institute of Government, and Whitaker sought and secured a \$35,000 grant from the North Carolina-based Cannon Foundation to sponsor an institute for ELP teachers in summer 1999. The institute will help teachers use local issues and community resources to teach ELP concepts. One of the consortium’s partners, Doug Robertson, former social studies consultant for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, will direct it.

Thirty ELP teachers will be selected to attend the all-expense-paid institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill the week of July 25–30. Teachers who complete the course will receive a \$500 stipend, three continuing education units, and a gift certificate to select civic education materials for their classrooms.

“The ELP institute will be successful if it builds networks of teachers throughout the state who use community-based, issue-focused strategies in their ELP courses to develop more knowledgeable and engaged young citizens,” says Tim Jones, Raleigh attorney and consortium partner, who chairs the ELP institute subcommittee. “Teachers who participate in the institute will be expected to provide workshops and demonstrations of the strategies they’ve learned. Our goal is nothing short of revitalizing the teaching of ELP, bringing



Ann Simpson

Jan Gottschalk, consortium director, and James Ingram, member of the consortium steering committee and assistant principal of Southwest Middle School, eagerly awaited the outcome of the student vote.

the course up-to-date so that students are inspired to apply lessons on democracy to relevant local issues.”

The ELP institute is a model of the collaboration that the consortium is dedicated to fostering among partners. Begun as a consortium project, it has become a joint effort with two consortium partners, the Center for the Prevention of School Violence and the Constitutional Rights Foundation. These partners will contribute a Youth for Justice grant, as well as faculty and material support.

“Consortium partners have much greater impact when they join forces,” explains Leslie Anderson, visiting instructor at the Institute of Government, who guided the consortium through its formative stages, including development of a strategic plan. “All new partners receive a directory describing the work and programs of fellow members. We’re convinced that this resource and the networking that is developing through the organization will unite ideas and energy to strengthen civic education in North Carolina.”

COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION

Civic education is as likely to occur outside the classroom as within it. In fact, some critics of civic education contend that the components of competent citizenship are not taught in American schools. The report *Educating for Citizenship* charges that “the content we teach and the way we teach it virtually occlude the citizenship results we say we want to have.”²³

Indeed, many students receive their first and perhaps most influential lessons in citizenship through community activities such as 4H, scouts, church youth groups, and service learning (activities outside the traditional school experience that provide students with further understanding of subjects they are studying, while benefiting the community). The consortium’s Community-Based Education Work Group, chaired by Sally Migliore, director of the National Society for Experiential Education, is dedicated to developing and enhancing experiential learning opportunities and resources to extend civic education beyond the classroom.

“We know that community life, with all of its richness and diversity, offers students opportunities to learn through direct, ‘hands-on’ experiences,” states Migliore. “Beliefs, values, and actual skills in becoming active citizens are honed through learning with and from community members.”

To promote and replicate best practices, this work group is studying the critical components of non-school, community-based civic education. Researchers insist that effective citizenship is an active role and therefore that preparation for it must be active as well, involving students directly in their communities.⁴

GRANTS TO OVERCOME BARRIERS TO CIVIC EDUCATION

The consortium also has developed a civic education grant program to provide seed money for projects that nurture citizenship. Made possible with a \$75,000 commitment from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the program will announce its first grants, ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000, in May 1999. Grant criteria reflect the consortium’s advocacy of community-based education. Collaborative projects, especially partnerships between schools and community organizations, nonprofit agencies, or local government agencies, are preferred.

Grant applicants have been encouraged to propose projects that target what consortium partners have defined as the top five barriers to civic education in North Carolina:

1. Students lack firsthand contact with public officials in city, county, and state government.
2. Students lack opportunities to apply classroom civics lessons to real problems.
3. Teachers have too many demands to “teach to tests” (that is, to tailor their instruction to the kind of material covered on standardized tests).
4. Teachers have insufficient preparation in teaching civic education.
5. Students fail to realize the importance of democracy.

Selected from more than 100 barriers identified by partners, these five will provide consortium work groups with a screen for determining whether proposals take the appropriate directions.

Response to the grant program has been overwhelming, with proposals coming in from groups across North Carolina. The consortium hopes to maintain and expand the grant program because it is an ideal way to support local collaboration to develop effective citizens.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

The consortium has grown rapidly in the past year, in part because of the enthusiasm of its partners. The Public Support Work Group, chaired by Henzey, continues to identify organizations and individuals that should be involved in this major statewide effort. “The consortium must represent the diverse views and concerns of citizens from all parts of the state,” Henzey notes. Membership is open to any private or public organization or individual in North Carolina addressing civic education for children and youth. (See below for a list of partners and ways to obtain more information about the consortium.)

In addition to building public support for civic education, this work group has begun development of a citizenship index. Led by Ran Coble, director of the North Carolina Center for Public Policy, the initiative seeks to identify clear measurements of citizenship that could be used to establish a baseline of competencies for the state’s youth and adults.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSORTIUM MEMBERS*

Ahoskie Christian Center	Family Resource Centers of Bertie County	North Carolina Center for Nonprofits
Appalachian State University	Halifax County Cooperative Extension	North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research
Leslie Anderson Consulting	Human Relations Commission	North Carolina Citizens for Business & Industry
Avery County High School	International Social Studies Project	North Carolina City & County Management Association
BB&T	Junior Achievement	North Carolina Closeup
Bennett College	Kids Voting	North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs
Bertie County Commission	Latin American Resource Center	North Carolina Commission on National & Community Service
Broughton High School	League of Women Voters	North Carolina Community Development Association
Business Records Corporation	Lee County Senior High School	North Carolina Council for the Social Studies
Campbell University	Mediation Network of North Carolina	North Carolina Court of Appeals
Center for the Prevention of School Violence	Millbrook High School	North Carolina Department of Correction
Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools	Morgan & Associates	North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
City of Asheville	Mountain Resource Center	North Carolina Department of Commerce, Division of Community Assistance
City of Durham	National Society for Experiential Education	North Carolina Equity
Communities in Schools of Wake County	New Hanover High School	North Carolina Human Relations Commission
Constitutional Rights Foundation	Newspapers in Education, North Carolina Press Foundation/Association	North Carolina Institute of Minority Economic Development
Conway Middle School	North Carolina 4-H Youth Development	
County of Cherokee	North Carolina A&T State University	
County of Durham	North Carolina Association of County Commissioners	
County of Hoke	North Carolina Association of Student Councils	
Duke University, Kenan Ethics Program & Sanford Institute	North Carolina Bar Association	
Durham Scholars Program	North Carolina Business Committee for Education	
East Carolina University		
East Garner Middle School		

* As of February 28, 1999

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Organizational Consortium Members

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North Carolina League of Municipalities	State Board of Education Teen Data Center	University of North Carolina, Greensboro University of North Carolina, Pembroke
North Carolina Progress Board	The Mediation Center of Eastern Carolina	University of North Carolina, Wilmington
North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center	The Woman's Club of Raleigh	Wake County School Board
North Carolina Senate, Office of the President Pro Tem	Timber Drive Year Round School	Wake Forest University
North Carolina State University	Town of Chapel Hill	Wayne County Cooperative Extension Service
North Carolina Youth for Tomorrow	Town of Concord	Wildacres Leadership Initiative
Northwest Guilford High School	Town of Fuquay-Varina	Winston-Salem State University
Page High School	Town of Garner	YMCA of Greater High Point
Rutherford County Schools SOS	Uhuru Community Development Corporation	YMCA of Greater Winston-Salem
Sarah's Refuge	University of North Carolina, Asheville	Youth Advocacy & Involvement
SAS Institute	University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill	Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation
Self-Help Credit Union		
SHAKTI for Children		
Shaw University		
Shepard Magnet School		
Southwest Middle School		

To learn more about the consortium's activities, contact the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, Institute of Government, CB# 3330 Knapp Building, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3330; phone (919) 962-8273; e-mail gottschal@iogmail.iog.unc.edu.

"A credible, well-publicized citizenship index can help build public awareness and support for stronger emphasis on civic education in our schools and communities," explains Coble. "Just as the Child Health Index has rallied the public around issues such as proper nutrition and early childhood vaccinations, so can a citizenship index periodically remind us not only how far we have come but how much farther we have to go to produce civic-minded students."

CIVIC EDUCATION AND THE INSTITUTE'S MISSION

In 1931, law professor Albert Coates formulated a unique, forward-thinking mission for the newly created Institute of Government. The Institute would provide training and consultation to state and local government officials; teach adults to become active participants in the governance of their communities; and educate schoolchildren in the values and the processes of civic participation.

The Institute has energetically pursued the first two parts of its mission for sixty-eight years. The consortium, according to Michael Smith, Institute director, "is our response, in conjunction with our state and local partners, to ensure that the next generation assumes its civic responsibilities and opportunities."

Bringing together students, community members, and teachers to revitalize civic education and build a new generation of knowledgeable, caring, and involved young North Carolina citizens is an enormous challenge. Unquestionably it would fulfill Albert Coates's dream. If responses to the consortium's pilot project at Southwest Middle School are any indication, that dream can be fulfilled. As sixth-grader Heather McHugh concludes, "I like the Citizen I Am project because it helps us get into what's happening around us. It's helping me learn to be a better citizen." And that is what the consortium's motto, "Learn your freedom," is all about.

NOTES

1. Joan Rose and Debbie Lee, *Civic Education: Preparing Tomorrow's Citizens*, report presented to the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, Winston-Salem, N.C., May 30, 1997, p. 13.
2. William J. Bennett and Sam Nunn, *A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do about It* (College Park, Md.: National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998).
3. Kathleen Cotton (comp.), *Educating for Citizenship*, School Improvement Research Series, p. 4, available at <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c019.htm>.
4. Cotton, *Educating for Citizenship*, p. 9.