

# Guest commentary: We are responsible to teach youth about democracy

*By Young Whan Choi Guest commentary*

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As the country turns its attention to the 2016 presidential election, we can anticipate a robust discussion of red and blue states, super PACs and campaign ads. When the votes are tallied and a new president is named, our political pundits will analyze voter turnout and bemoan the apathy of youth.

It is easy to condemn youth, particularly when only 8 percent of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds in California voted in the 2014 midterm election. But what fails to get attention is our society's abdication of the responsibility to educate young people for democracy. In our fevered pursuit of higher test scores in English and math, our schools are sick from the paucity of civic learning opportunities for students. Without a strong prescription of high-quality civic education for all students, our democracy itself is in peril.

There is a movement in the state of California to spotlight this urgent need. California Supreme Court Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye and state Superintendent of Education Tom Torlakson convened a K-12 Civic Learning Task Force, which recommended that local counties take up the call to prepare this current generation of students for democracy. Alameda County is one of six counties in the state to answer this call.

On March 13, local leaders in education, business, law and government convened at Holy Names University to learn about this crisis in civic education as well as what can, and is being done, about it. Students and teachers from both Oakland Unified and Hayward Unified school districts spoke on a panel about their experiences with civic engagement.

What stood out was that when students had chances to work on societal problems, they found their education more relevant and interesting. OUSD teacher Becca Rozo-Marsh shared that students are "drowning in issues" and they need the chance to work on these issues in school so they feel empowered to work for change in the world. Some of her students surveyed their peers and found that students were concerned with bullying at their school. William Tobar commented that some students become bullies so that they won't be bullied, but he wanted his peers to reflect on their actions and see how that impacts others.

Alameda County Superintendent of Education Karen Monroe emphasized the importance of focusing on civic engagement for all students, particularly low income and students of color whose schools have cut civic learning from the curriculum in a push for higher test scores. While she wholeheartedly supports the Common Core State Standards' focus on college and career readiness, she urged us all to work together to prepare students to be community ready.

What if 2015 was the year that our state and local leaders went beyond giving lip service to civic education and began to invest financially in having all young people graduate college, career and community ready? If this investment meant that our teachers had collaboration and planning time to create powerful civic learning experiences for students, then we may very well change the bleak prognosis for our democracy.

Following the 2020 presidential election, we may then hear about a baffling rise in youth voting. But, the youth won't be surprised. They would have experienced repeated opportunities in school to get involved in making change. As community ready graduates, these young people would see voting as just the first step they can take to shape the future of this country.

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