

# Best Practices for Implementing Effective High School Voter Registration Programs

By Lauren Forbes

**Have you ever gone to a high school and stood in the background and watched these high school students run a voter registration drive? It is very encouraging and motivating...You cannot help to be proud of what they are doing on their own. You not only see, but also feel a sense of democracy at work.**

*– State Official, Secretary of State's Office, Arizona*

Throughout the nation, one of the most consistently underrepresented demographic groups, in terms of both registration rates and voter participation, is the youth population.<sup>1</sup> In the United States in 2008, 18- to 24-year-old citizens were registered at a rate of 12 percentage points lower than the general voting-eligible population, and voted at a rate 15 points lower than the general voting-eligible population.<sup>2</sup>

Research suggests that high school voter registration programs, a national trend with broad support, increase electoral participation among young people. States, counties, and cities across the country have recognized the

underrepresentation of youth in the U.S. electorate, and some have consequently adopted laws, administrative rules, or mandates to increase youth participation through high school voter registration programs. In Project Vote's ongoing efforts to encourage civic participation among America's youth, we have been gathering data to gauge the existence and effectiveness of high school voter registration programs nationwide.

To assess the degree to which high school voter registration programs have been implemented, encouraged or otherwise instituted at state or municipal levels, Project Vote contacted state officials and education administrators, inviting them to participate in a survey. Data from this survey comes from all 50 states and has allowed Project Vote to identify best practices, solutions to problems encountered in various jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of high school voter registration programs across the United States. The following is a compilation of best practices and effective tips that our survey respondents recommended for implementing successful high school voter registration programs.



## Establish partnerships among election officials, school administrators, and community organizations

### Consider stakeholders at all levels.

State schools chiefs, county school district superintendents, educators, local election officials, and student and community organizations all have a stake in high school voter registration programs. Gather a group that will plan and implement an effective voter registration program. Including student leaders in the initial discussion is essential, as students are most influenced by their peers. Coordinating community organizations--especially ones that already run voter registration programs--to implement district-wide efforts is a successful approach taken in **Virginia**. Election officials in **Georgia** found it helpful to get high school principals involved, keeping them up-to-date on voter registration requirements and initiatives.

### Reach out to schools and communicate often.

Once a plan for high school outreach is in place, communicate often. Officials in **Vermont** have found that communicating with high schools directly via email, mailings, and social networking sites, such as Facebook, has been very effective in promoting voter registration program participation. Additionally, Vermont officials have partnered with student councils, sports teams, and clubs to create positive peer pressure that encourages students to register to vote.

### Utilize online resources.

In **California**, the secretary of state's office offered an alternative to voter registration cards by encouraging high schools to add a link called

"MyVote" to their school's website, which gives students and staff access to voter registration forms 24 hours a day. Linking voter registration to high schools' homepages makes registering quick and accessible. **Georgia** has dedicated a website to voter registration, designed for students.

### Conduct in-person outreach.

State officials in **Connecticut**, **Florida**, and **Nebraska** have recognized that a physical presence in high schools to conduct voter registration programs is essential. That way, officials are able to field questions about the registration process and aid students in completing their registration forms. In **Virginia**, school administrators partnered with election officials to create a friendly voter registration competition among schools, which was successful.

### Carefully prepare presentations and pitches.

In **Florida**, engaging students with a 30-minute video before walking them through completion of the voter registration form, step-by-step, proved to be an effective presentation technique used by state election officials. Ensuring that students can relate to the presentation, perhaps by adding an emotional pitch, will have better results. In **South Carolina**, live voter registration demonstrations at school events successfully engaged students in the voter registration process.



## Actively involve students and teachers

### Establish peer-to-peer programs.

One way to encourage student voter registration is to establish a student registrar or student poll worker program. In **Maryland** and **Nebraska**, student registrars are trained and certified to run voter registration programs in the high schools they attend. The **District of Columbia** has started a youth poll worker program. In many states, election officials have found that when students are allowed to run a voter education and/or registration program within their school, it increases the number of students who register to vote.

### Let the students craft the plan.

Allow students to design their own voter registration program and run it. Allowing students to design voter registration programs allows them to think creatively and have buy-in to the program. In **Arizona**, election officials found that students prefer to run their own voter registration programs instead of having election officials “run the show.” They immensely enjoy involvement and are exceptional at motivating their classmates. Officials in the Arizona Secretary of State’s office observe and learn from student-crafted programs. They are able to mimic what works when implementing programs at other schools. Arizona officials have found that students can be very creative with ideas about conducting well-organized voter registration drives.

### Connect voter registration programs with other events.

In **Maryland**, the state Board of Education runs a program to train student registrars during National Student Leadership Week, which culminates in the election of the Student Member of the Board of Education (SMOB). The election simulates real voting on actual election equipment with certification by the Board of Elections and students are taught how they can have a real impact when they exercise their civic rights.

### Conduct classroom visits.

Partnerships between election officials and government teachers are often very effective. In **Virginia**, for government teachers who were willing to partner with county registrars, allowing the registrars time to talk to students in their classroom was very effective in producing student voter registrations.

### Convene a student advisory board.

Comprised of students from each county school to act as high school liaisons, student advisory boards will be able to organize and coordinate voter registration drives. This is a practice that has seen great results and information-sharing in **Florida**.



## Include a voter education component

### **Familiarize students with the voting process.**

Voter registration targeted at students gets more people to participate in government not only because it stresses the importance of registering, but also because it educates people on the process of voting. In **Ohio**, the Grads Vote program highlights the process of absentee voting and provides information on serving as a poll worker. Officials in **Nebraska** have found that involving schools' civics instructors was effective. This way, students are provided with background before they register to vote.

### **Partner with non-governmental organization to focus on voter education early.**

Teaching citizenship and multicultural civic education from kindergarten on up can be more effective than waiting until high school to educate youth on the various aspects and responsibilities of citizenship. In **New York**, non-governmental organizations walk students through the process on real voting machines and explain the absentee ballot system. In **California**, participants in its 4-H Clubs learn about citizenship from an early age. The program structure allows only youth to vote in club decisions. By the time students are old enough to vote they are prepared to register and vote.

### **Provide students with information about local and state races, explaining how the issues relate to them.**

When students know the value of voting and how they can have an influence on political

leaders by voting and communicating with their elected leaders, they are likely to be civically engaged for life.

### **Don't forget the technical details.**

Educate the students on the appropriate laws and regulations that cover voter registration and related "Dos" and "Don'ts." While some of the technical information can be detailed, officials in **Arizona** have found that students are very quick to comprehend the requirements necessary for voter registration activities.

### **Cater the message to your state's election laws.**

In states that have Election Day Registration, such as **Wisconsin**, making students aware of the upcoming election and communicating the ease with which voting occurs, as well as informing them that they can register before or on Election Day, has proven successful. If your state allows pre-registration, notifying students that they may register while they are 16 or 17 has proven effective in **West Virginia** among other states.

### **Take a respectful approach when working with students.**

**Arizona** officials found that election officials who addressed students as if they were peers were most effective. Notifying the appropriate school coordinator or faculty member of the students' successful participation serves as a positive reinforcement that their initiatives were noticed and appreciated.



## Enact innovative voter registration programs

### Think inside and outside the classroom.

Making voter registration part of the required curriculum worked in many states, including **Virginia**, **Iowa**, and **Arkansas**. The curriculum might involve bringing in the local registrar to supervise students completing the registration forms. Making voter registration part of the required curriculum in **Virginia** enabled students to complete registration forms in class under the supervision of personnel from the registrar's office. **New York's** Participation in Government (PIG) course stresses three legal obligations of citizenship and provides students the opportunity to interact with elected officials on local, state, and national policy issues.

### Make effective use of media.

The **Louisiana** secretary of state buys advertisement in a magazine that all public and private school students receive their senior year. This advertisement has the official voter registration card in the magazine. The student can take out the card, complete it, and send it to the local registrar of the voter's office, or send it to the office of the secretary of state.

### Hold mock elections.

Mock elections are a great way to introduce the concept of voting to young people. In **California**, during mock elections, students are encouraged to register to vote at tabling events staffed by their peers, which appears to be an effective approach.

### Get the word out online.

In **Georgia**, state officials found that using electronic delivery of materials was most effective in reaching all intended recipients.

### Hold general assemblies.

In **Maryland** and **Louisiana**, school assemblies dedicated to voter registration produced high levels of registration. At assemblies, local registrars have the opportunity to present to students and demonstrate voting machines.

### Use pre-filled forms where online voter registration is not available.

States that offer online voter registration should be sure to target young people, who use the Internet more than any other demographic. In **Washington**, officials found that sending direct mail to students' homes when they turned 18 was effective. They compared a pre-filled voter registration form, a postcard with the online registration web address, and a control group (who received nothing), and found that the pre-filled form was effective, but cost-prohibitive.

### "Celebrate" voter registration.

Encourage schools to think about the most effective ways to connect important landmark age or special event celebrations. This might be done by involving registration at graduation ceremonies, as many schools do in **New Mexico** and **Vermont**, or by distributing voter registration cards to students for recognition of their 18th birthday.



**Think about the best, and most cost-efficient, approach.**

In **California**, mailing 2.5 million voter registration forms to over 2,000 high schools proved to be an inefficient use of time and resources. California's secretary of state changed focus and proactively contacted high schools in California to inquire if they needed additional voter registration cards. This inquiry significantly cut costs to the state because voter registration cards were not wasted on schools that were not going to be able to utilize them.

**Schools and teachers can offer extra credit for students who register to vote.**

Since there is no single effective approach to increasing the number of high school students who register, thinking about all incentives for students makes sense.

To increase civic participation among young people, election and education officials are finding ways to register high school students, taking a variety of informed and creative approaches. Establishing partnerships, actively involving students and teachers, including a voter education component, and enacting innovative voter registration programs are themes that Project Vote's high school voter registration survey respondents recommends for implementing successful high school voter registration programs. States that utilize these practices have registered many voters, effectively engaging the youth population in the democratic process.

Project Vote thanks all who participated in the survey and will continue to seek and evaluate best practices, as states innovatively engage high school students to register them to vote.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The youth population is citizens between the ages of 18 and 30.

<sup>2</sup> Current Population Survey, November 2008.

## About Project Vote

Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, litigation, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies can register, vote, and cast ballots that count.

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