

Election 2012: Oakland schools get out the youth vote

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OAKLAND -- This week, a group of boisterous teenagers marched down to a ballot box a few blocks from their school. The first-time voter contingent and their sign-holding supporters whooped and chanted all the way to the Alameda County Courthouse, eliciting friendly toots from passing cars.

"I feel like I'm always complaining about what's wrong with the world," said Di'Jahnay Stewart, a Dewey Academy student who turned 18 on May 23 and registered to vote shortly thereafter. "I feel like if I vote, at least it'll mean something."

Many young Americans aren't as quick to exercise their new electoral power. Although they voted in larger numbers in 2004 and 2008 than they had in decades, their turnout was still the lowest of any age group. For all the buzz surrounding the 2008 presidential race, for all the YouTube videos and the plugs on MTV, just 41 percent of 18- to 20-year-olds and 47 percent of 21- to 24-year-olds reported voting in that election. By contrast, 58 percent of all age groups and 68 percent of those 65 and older went to the polls that year, according to a survey of noninstitutionalized adults by the U.S. Census Bureau.

"I'm finding a shocking number of young people who just won't vote," said Deanita Lewis, a parent leader who has long been involved in Oakland's public schools. The reasons she most often hears? "My vote doesn't count. It doesn't matter. Nothing's going to change."

Lewis is a member of Oakland Community Organizations, a coalition of congregations, schools and groups that is working with schools to educate students about voting rights and other ways to participate in the political process. The group coordinated Tuesday's "Let My People Vote" march at Dewey, an alternative high school, and helped to register more than 100 students at Oakland high schools, organizer Katy Nuñez-Adler estimated.

Other Bay Area schools, such as Pittsburg High and Black Diamond High, also in Pittsburg, have also encouraged their students to vote as soon as they are eligible, through registration drives. At Encinal High in Alameda, representatives from the League of Women Voters and the Alameda County Registrar of Voters have come to speak to students about civil rights and the importance of voting, and to register those who are 18 or about to turn 18.

Alexis Ogdie, an AP government teacher at Encinal, said about 95 percent of the seniors in his classes have been registered. In class, Ogdie said, his students regularly discuss controversial issues and how politics and government touch their lives.

Researchers who study civic engagement say those kinds of class discussions are often neglected, as teachers race through a multitude of social studies standards that focus heavily on the past. The study of current political events is especially important at high-poverty schools, where the tremendous pressure to raise test scores tends to displace civics lessons, said Peter Levine, director of Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

"I think one of the reasons young people don't vote is actually knowledge and information," Levine said.

"You have to know who you're going to vote for as well as how to vote."

A survey of 19 California school districts by the Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College found that white, wealthy and academically successful students had much greater access to political discussions and debates than the average student. Even within schools, classes with higher income, college-bound students were twice as likely to study how laws are made and to take part in service learning projects than the average classroom, concluded the report, "Democracy for Some."

Those differences in exposure, researchers say, also perpetuate a gaping disparity in lifelong voting patterns: Those with college degrees vote at twice the rate of high school dropouts and are 50 percent more likely to go the polls as residents with high school diplomas or GEDs, according to the census figures.

Outside the courthouse Tuesday, 18-year-old Dominique Dyer signed her ballot, slid it into the blue ballot box and raised her fists overhead in celebration as she turned to her friends. "It felt good to vote for the first time," she said. "I feel proud of myself for voting."

Joe Kahne, who directs the Mills College group, said the civics push at Dewey Academy and other schools will likely be felt long after Tuesday's election.

"Voting is very much habit-forming," he said. "People who vote when they're 18 are much more likely to vote four years later."

Read Katy Murphy's Oakland schools blog at www.IBAbuzz.com/education. Follow her at [Twitter.com/katymurphy](https://twitter.com/katymurphy).