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EDUCATION

Should Graduation Speakers Talk About Improving the World?

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It's high school graduation season. A time for speeches that remind youth to draw on their talents to make their communities and the world a better place. As an educator who focuses on ways to support youth civic engagement, I love those speeches. But, they do leave me wondering, if this is a goal we laud on graduation day, why aren't students asked to focus on this more during high school?

Schools and school districts aim to prepare students for college and for careers. Vitaly important goals, but helping to make the world a better place is enormously important as well.

Of course, many teachers want their students to care about societal problems and to contribute to their communities. But teachers have to fit these concerns in. Attention to these priorities isn't required. The structure of the curriculum standards in California and of the state and federal assessments that students receive barely attend to civic life. One exception is that some districts have a community service or service-learning requirement of 25 hours or so. Youth spend roughly 4,000 hours in high school. Is mandating 25 hours spread across four years (one minute a day) really the best we can do?

Consider an alternative. In Oakland, supported by the Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age Initiative, the school district has expanded its focus from preparing all students to be "College and Career Ready" to preparing all students to be "College, Career, and Community Ready." Teachers are implementing innovative curriculum from grades 9-12 so that students will have the capacities and commitments they need to address community concerns. Students' research and action projects include environmental protection, access to healthy food, educational improvement and violence prevention. The capacities students develop include running workshops, blogging, speaking to legislators, producing a webinar and conducting policy analysis.

In addition, to honor student work this year, the district held its first "Community Ready" awards ceremony. Two students from each of Oakland's 12 high schools received awards from Oakland's mayor. One award recipient, 17-year-old Yasser Alwan of Oakland International High School, produced a video to support a group working to get his school a soccer field. He and his peers developed a website, spread the word through their online social networks and spoke to the media and at community meetings in an effort to mobilize support for this cause.

Acting with similar goals in mind, LA's County Office of Education has launched an effort to institutionalize civics in 12 high schools and a new initiative is being planned for Sacramento. Could this emphasis on learning about and responding to community needs become the norm, rather than the exception?

The California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning thinks so. Established by California's Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye and State Supt. Tom Torlakson, the task force calls for ensuring that all students have opportunities to study issues, to evaluate different possible responses and to help make a difference. Yes, this means youth will need to discuss some controversial issues. The Task Force believes that it's key for teachers to help students learn to have such discussions in productive ways. The Task Force also is proposing to strengthen the State's history and social science 15-year-old standards. These standards predate Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and the Web 2.0 ecosystem that have literally transformed how civic and political life is practiced.

The benefits of adopting these recommendations would be substantial. Research demonstrates that when students have civic learning opportunities to research and discuss controversial issues, develop digital literacy skills, and engage in service-learning they become more interested in, capable of, and engaged in civic life. They also enhance their ability to undertake rigorous analysis and to produce compelling and informed perspectives -- crucial skills in the 21st century.

In short, policymakers, educators and the public must work to ensure that all youth receive these civic-learning opportunities. If we do, maybe in a few years, when graduation speakers exhort students to help improve both their communities and the broader world, the schools will have systematically prepared their students to do so.

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