Commentary: Teaching civics by having kids throw their own party

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“I would like to thank everyone who supported me in trying to make a change in America. Although we did not prevail in this election, the entire Speak-Out Party will forever and always speak up and stand up for what we believe in.

I have come to greatly respect Lola Thompson for her determination, and I wish her the best of luck in protecting our glorious country.

Thank you again for volunteering to make America stronger and better.”

— Alma, presidential candidate of the “Speak-Out Party”

By Margit E. McGuire

Standing before her fifth-grade classmates, ten-year old Alma* had just run for president of the United States as a candidate of the Speak-Out Party. She graciously acknowledged her loss to the winner from the Pledge Party and thanked her supporters. During our contentious and very real world campaign season, one wonders if the losing candidate will be as eloquent.

How are we teaching young students about the presidential election and its role in our democracy, especially in a time when the presidential campaigns are rancorous and a teacher’s comments could be easily interpreted as support for one candidate over another? This year, like other presidential election years, poses a dilemma for teachers at all levels: How to teach about the presidential election in a manner that helps young children understand — and value — the democratic process.

One Snohomish teacher, Su Hickenbottom, tackled this problem many years ago using a “narrative” strategy whereby students create a story in which they take on roles as the main characters in a presidential election. Students found this approach engaging because they were imagining themselves in a real campaign. This approach was so powerful, we went on to share it with teachers throughout the country. This year, many teachers have immersed students in a presidential election of their own using this narrative strategy.

Why is it so important to teach young children about the presidential election?

Attitudes toward democracy are formed at an early age, and to ignore important lessons on civic education in those early years risks creating long-term effects on voting,
community engagement and beyond. This is starkly evident when millennials continue to have the lowest voter turnout of any age group.

Another impact of limited civics education was highlighted by David Brooks in an Aug. 19 New York Times commentary, explaining that a quarter of young Americans said democracy is a “fairly bad” or “very bad” system of government based on the World Values Survey.

This is alarming and, coupled with data that children in the early grades are spending less time in social studies than ever before, is profoundly sobering. (See Leming, Ellington & Schug in “Social Studies in Our Nation’s Schools.”) This campaign season makes it even more challenging to embrace the values of a democratic process for electing a president.

For these reasons, among many others, Washington state’s Council on Public Legal Education is spearheading a statewide Civic Learning Initiative. The initiative seeks to support development of high-quality civic learning opportunities for all students throughout the state, especially underserved youth – immigrants, refugees, youth in rural communities and youth of color.

Promoting the narrative strategy for teaching children about the presidential election is one example of encouraging development of a more vibrant civics education program for Washington’s children.

Guided by the teacher, students divide into two groups with each group forming their own political party and deciding what they stand for, organizing party platforms and creating campaign slogans for a national presidential campaign. Students imagine themselves as campaign workers or presidential and vice presidential candidates for their party. They create adult characters with a history of experiences that would make them well qualified to run for president or work in the campaign headquarters.

For example, Emily assumed the name of Courtney Phillips and decided that she wanted to be the campaign manager for the Pledge Party. She imagined previous experiences that would make her an ideal candidate for this job, including running a campaign for Gov. Michelle Jones. In this role, she considered herself to be outgoing, creative, not afraid to speak in front of an audience and always looking on the bright side. She said she believes she is qualified for the job because she is “hard working and never gives up.”

As children conceive of themselves in these roles, they learn not only the textbook information about presidential elections, but also the real-life practicalities of running a successful campaign.

This approach allows the teacher to sidestep potentially uncomfortable questions of support for the real candidates that might place students at odds with each other when they often repeat what they hear at home about the election.
But make no mistake, students are taking in the actual campaigns as they consider their own platforms, slogans and speeches blending what they can imagine with what they see and hear in the media. In fact, the actual campaigns inform their work.

Despite some alarming information regarding the lack of civics education in our schools, there is hope if we can commit to the importance to civics in the early years of schooling.

We have the tools to teach civics well, we simply must embrace the importance of civics in the school day and make time for young people like Alma to think deeply about her role in a democracy. She’ll be voting in eight short years and now is the time for her and other young people to engage in civic education because in the end we want her and other young people to “speak up and stand up for what we believe in.”

For more information on Washington’s Civic Learning Initiative and upcoming activities, go to www.courts.wa.gov/education/

* All student names are pseudonyms.

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