

## Democratic Education: Concept promoted as teaching for 21st century

By BRANDON A. PERRY

Common sense dictates that individuals are more likely to cooperate with rules and guidelines that they help shape. Generally, most individuals are accepting of laws and regulations if they have a voice in the system that has created them.

In recent years a growing number of educators, students and parents have begun to believe this same principle applies to youth in the classroom. They are promoting a concept known as "democratic education," or "student voice," which it is sometimes called.

Basically, democratic education is a process in which students participate in decisions that affect elements of the general climate of schools. Through student led meetings and councils youth are able to work with adult administrators in shaping their learning environment.

Megan Howey, the coordinator of the VISTA Service Learning Project, out of the Harmony School Education Center in Bloomington, IN, works with the small schools initiative in the Indianapolis Public Schools. She said democratic education is a great way to strengthen the partnership between the major stakeholders in education: teachers, students and parents.

"Student voice is highly important in helping teachers understand the needs of their students based on the perspective of those students," said Howey. "If teachers are in schools to educate students and not just simply teach a curriculum, then they need to know if what they're doing is actually having an impact."

Advocates of democratic education believe students should be able to play a role in school decisions in a similar fashion as adult citizens, who use elections, petitions and town hall (or citizens') forums to make their voices heard.

Advocates say democratic education can be used not just to maximize learning in the classroom, but also show students how to be active citizens in a democratic system and raise appreciation for America's civic values by allowing them to actually use democratic methods of participation.

"If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have the opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led," said John Loflin, a local teacher and member of the Democratic Education Consortium, a local alliance of educators advocating for student voice. "Students who are introduced to democratic practices and actively learn to take part in them actually become productive citizens."

Supporters of democratic education emphasize that the approach goes beyond the traditional idea of common student councils that have no real responsibility or voice in making decisions and coming up with solutions. Instead, they say, school systems should not have the standardized "one size fits all" approach in teaching and considering implementing student government associations that make real decisions that affect the students they represent - from alternative lunch menus to learning alternatives, from school rules to school events.

They also recommend having student representation on local school boards and the creation of a student alliance in each school district. Loflin noted that voter turnout in Marion County (only 25.2 percent of voters participated in 2003 Indianapolis elections, for example), as well as many areas of the country, has been very low in recent years. Loflin believes democratic education can also be helpful in raising poor voter turnout rates by engaging students who will take what they have learned in the classroom and use it as adult citizens.

"An increase in voter turnout will occur when public schools, especially our high schools, model and actually practice in schools what is going on in the larger community," said Loflin, who has attended seminars about democratic education in the U.S. as well as India and Germany. "How can we advocate for democracy in Cuba or Iraq, when our own citizens do not vote in elections, and when we fail to practice it in our own classrooms and schools?"

John Wallace, an instructor at Arsenal Technical High School, agreed that anything that can get students more involved in their education is beneficial, but said it's important for students to be shown that accountability goes with having a voice in decision making.

"The students who are going to have a say in the curriculum need to understand the importance of responsibility that comes along with having that voice," he said.

Some opponents of democratic education argue that it cannot be implemented in schools because too much freedom and authority for students who aren't ready for it can lead to chaos. But supporters say democratic education can lead to greater self-esteem among students, higher teacher satisfaction, higher levels of achievement and less suspensions and expulsions.

"Teachers who do incorporate student voices have a higher rate of engagement from their students," said Howey. "The students feel like their opinions matter and that leads to a greater learning environment for everyone involved."

