

Enlisting the Next Generation of Florida Citizens

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I. Policy Statement

Younger Floridians will become engaged in the civic life of their community *if they are asked*. The Florida Chamber of Commerce, The Florida League of Cities, the Florida Association of Counties, the Florida Association of Special Districts, and the Florida City and County Management Association should encourage their members to work with youth, schools, and non-profit organizations to develop and publish a community plan for youth civic engagement. Such a plan would create a setting in which the civic climate of the community is welcoming and inviting to youth; create a strategy that offers a wide range of activities and provides youth with a breadth and depth of meaningful opportunities for participation in local government; enlist support from adult allies, both within and outside local government, which enables young people to have a real impact on issues that concern them. To encourage and recognize leadership providing youth with pathways to engagement, a Governor's Award for Excellence in Youth Civic Engagement should be established. The efficacy of these efforts would be assessed by a continuing civic health index for Florida and its communities, as well as a biennial survey of local government to document their progress in supporting youth civic engagement.

II. Executive Summary

- Civic engagement levels have been declining in the United States. Florida has one of the lowest levels of civic health in the nation. As a patient, Florida's civic health would be deemed to be in *critical condition*.

- A citizenry engaged in civic life is vital, not just because it fosters political trust and legitimacy in political institutions, but also because it has been demonstrated to correlate with a strong educational system, a competitive workforce and a dynamic economy.
- Younger citizens—those under the age of 30—are the least likely group to be civically engaged. This is true nationally, but it is especially the case in Florida, where a recent civic health index of those under 30 ranked younger Floridians in the bottom quartile on six of nine civic engagement indicators.
- Enlisting the next generation of Florida citizens to become civically engaged is a critical policy objective. In time, those under the age of 30—the Millennial generation—will come to outnumber the Baby Boom generation. The future of civic engagement in Florida depends on implementing policies *now* that move beyond token levels of youth participation in local decision-making toward efforts that truly prepare and empower youth to be active, engaged citizens.
- Local government is the obvious institutional setting to promote a strong youth voice in local decision-making processes, not just on “youth issues” but those issues that affect the entire community. Youth who are engaged in meaningful civic engagement opportunities also tend to do better in school and avoid risky behaviors. In addition, they are more likely to vote, volunteer and become lifelong civic leaders as adults.
- Florida’s local governments should be encouraged to implement strategies from the National League of Cities, *Authentic Youth Civic Engagement: A Guide for Municipal Leaders* and encourage their members to work with youth, schools, and non-profits to develop and publish a community plan for youth civic engagement. As an incentive, a Governor’s Award for Excellence in Youth Civic Engagement should be established that recognizes and publicizes exemplary accomplishments in building sustainable pathways for youth civic engagement.
- A reliable and continuing way of measuring civic health is essential. A Civic Health Index, for both Florida and its different communities will assess the efficacy of efforts to improve youth civic engagement along with biennial surveys of local government.

III. Explanation of Issue

Civic engagement encompasses a variety of forms of political and nonpolitical activities. Conventional forms of civic engagement include: voting; working in election campaigns for political parties; contributing to political causes and candidates; contacting public officials;

attending public meetings, political rallies, protests or speeches; signing petitions; serving in local organizations; working with others to address community issues; and writing articles for mass media (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady 1995; Putnam 2000). Whatever mode it takes, the principle of civic engagement is an essential part of American democracy. Indeed, a civically informed and active citizenry might be considered a vital strength of the American political culture, and an ingredient of American exceptionalism. Alexis de Tocqueville observed of America in 1834, that “the political activity that pervades the United States must be seen to be understood” (Tocqueville, 1966: 249). Simply put, a civically engaged citizenry was the sign of a healthy democracy and society.

Thus, it is of great concern when recent studies find that the civic health of the nation is on life-support. For example a study by the American Political Science Association and the Brookings Institution warned that “American democracy is at risk...Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues and less equally than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity” (Macedo et al., 2005: 1). However, a citizenry that is civically engaged is not just an end in itself: it is essential for a strong economy, safe neighborhoods, vital communities, successful schools, workforce development, and eliminating inequities. For example, a recent study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that states and localities with *more* civic engagement in 2006 saw *less* growth in unemployment between 2006 and 2010. More generally, these findings suggested that “participation in civil society can develop skills, confidence, and habits that make individuals employable and strengthen the networks that help them to find jobs” (*Civic Health and Unemployment: Can Engagement Strengthen the Economy?* 2012, 5). Thus, civic health is important, not just for politics and government, but how it affects social well-being and economic health.

Clearly, it is of grave concern to find that Florida’s civic health is in critical condition and among the worst in the nation. This was the sobering finding of the *Florida Civic Health Index: Beyond the Vote* (2008) the first statewide report to systematically examine civic engagement in the Sunshine state. Subsequent reports have confirmed the 2008 results and have examined the civic condition of Florida’s major metropolitan areas, finding that the Miami–Ft. Lauderdale area had the distinction of exhibiting the weakest civic health in a state whose overall civic health is one of the worst in the nation (see *Florida Civic Health Index: Communities and the State’s Civic Destiny*, 2009 and *A Tale of Two Cities: Civic Health in Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 2011).

The lack of civic engagement is particularly evident among younger Floridians—the Millennial generation—who in time will outnumber the Baby Boom generation. That youth civic engagement lags behind that of older citizens is, of course, a national phenomenon. Indeed, it was generational replacement that that was identified as a contributing factor to the decline of civic engagement (Putnam 2000), with the members of Generation X and Millennials not living up to the civic values and engagement as exhibited by what Tom Brokaw described as the

“greatest generation” (Brokaw 2004). However, Florida’s Millennials have among the lowest levels of civic engagement in the nation. In an analysis completed just last year, Floridians under the age of 30 ranked in the bottom quartile on six of nine civic engagement indicators (*Florida Civic Health Index: The Next Generation*, 2012).

Education plays a critically important role in shaping the state’s civic health (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady 1995). Reflecting that, Florida citizens who have attended college are significantly more engaged in their communities and more engaged in electoral participation than are those with only a high school degree (*Florida Civic Health Index: Communities and the State’s Civic Destiny*, 2009). The lack of formal education, in contrast, creates lifelong barriers to engaged citizenship. For example, among the Millennial generation, high school dropouts are virtually unrepresented in Florida’s active civic life. This means that many of our citizens face a lifetime of not only economic hardship, but second-class citizenship as well (*Florida Civic Health Index: The Next Generation*, 2011).

However, increasing the number of Floridians who graduate from High School and college will not by itself increase the civic health of the state. Rather, it is *intentional civic education* that provides the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are essential to be an informed and engaged citizen. A recent study compared civic engagement in Miami, the least engaged large city in the nation, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, the most engaged. It was found that an individual with only a high school education in Minneapolis-St. Paul was about as likely to be engaged as an individual with a college education in Miami. In other words, the Twin Cities’ schools collaborate more with other community based educational institutions and engage adult citizens in ways that builds satisfaction and trust. While schools do not perform better in the Twin Cities than those in South Florida, Twin City *institutions* do a better job of teaching specifically civic knowledge and connecting to other civic learning experiences in communities. (*A Tale of Two Cities: Civic Health in Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 2011).

The adoption of the Justice Sandra Day O’Connor Civics Education Act in 2010 was a major step toward the goal of addressing the condition of Florida’s civic health. The new law requires middle school students to complete a course in civics and to pass a statewide civics examination at the end of the 7th grade. It also calls for the integration of civics content in reading and literature classes beginning in kindergarten and continuing through high school. While the O’Connor Act does much to restore the civic mission of all Florida schools, available evidence suggests that acting *alone*, schools are unlikely to be able to solve the problem of Florida’s civic health. Both Miami and Palm Beach schools, for example, have included civics in their curricula for several years; yet absolute levels of civic involvement among young people remain exceptionally low in both communities (*Miami Millennials: A Civic Health Index*, 2012). In addition, the civic participation gap between the most and least educated and affluent appears to be undiminished by a formal education requirement. (*A Tale of Two Cities: Civic Health in Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 2011).

To learn the skills of engaged citizenship and civic leadership, young people need opportunities to build on classroom knowledge and practice the skills of engaged citizenship. Much as the young chemist must work in the laboratory to fully grasp physical principles and their consequences, young citizens need a laboratory where they can learn about collective action and how collective needs can be addressed in a democratic system. While schools can partially meet this need through simulations, mock elections, mock trials, and the like, the real laboratory for civic education is the community within which the school resides. Local governments, non-profits, service organizations, advocacy groups and even the private sector are core elements of the community that can offer young people a living laboratory where they can learn the skills that they need to build the future. If we fail to provide that laboratory for the next generation of citizens, the prognosis for Florida's civic health is unlikely to improve.

IV. Policy Options and Discussion

Addressing Florida's low levels of youth civic engagement must take place in the communities where citizens work, learn, play, build relationships, and encounter opportunities to undertake public work. The adoption of the Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act offers a foundation upon which communities can build pathways to participation. In schools that touch every community in the state, young people going to high school and on to college will know more and will be able to do more about civic life and public work – in all, about 200,000 students each year. The challenge, of course, is how to build a sustainable structure on that foundation; one that can offer every young person opportunities to experience civic life and to develop the skills of civic leadership.

Florida's local governments – cities, counties, and special districts – are in a unique position to assume a leadership role in this challenge. From long-term planning to dealing with the daily needs of our homeless, local governments touch virtually every issue that shapes the quality of our day-to-day lives. Working with schools and the nonprofits – which they often fund – local governments comprise a ready-made laboratory for learning the realities of civic life. The National League of Cities (NLC) points out that when cities have offered meaningful opportunities for youth to be engaged, more young people participate and encourage their peers to do the same. In addition, cities have found that other benefits follow from meaningful youth participation, including budget savings and revenue generation, increased support for city initiatives, improved policies and programs for youth, and improved indicators of well-being among youth. (National League of Cities, 2010) Some Florida cities and towns have already begun the process of engaging their young people by creating a Mayor's Youth Council. But much more can be done. NLC, for example, offers ten strategies beyond youth councils to

engage youth in public policy, planning, and decision-making (National League of Cities, 2010: 51)

In *Authentic Youth Civic Engagement*, the NLC has articulated a framework that can help local governments develop a plan for sustainable and broad-based youth civic engagement.

- The Florida League of Cities, the Florida Association of Counties, the Florida Association of Special Districts, and the Florida City and County Management Association should encourage their members to work with youth, schools, and non-profits to develop and publish a community plan for youth civic engagement.
- To encourage and recognize leadership providing youth with pathways to engagement, the Governor should establish by Executive Order, the Governor's Award for Excellence in Youth Civic Engagement. Each year, the award should recognize and publicize exemplary accomplishments of cities, counties, and special districts, respectively, with special recognition of community-wide partnerships that engage schools, non-profits and the private sector in building sustainable pathways for youth civic engagement.

To determine the efficacy of efforts to improve civic health in Florida, a reliable and continuing civic health index is essential. This will permit citizens, educators, and policy-makers to chart our long-term goal of an engaged and responsible citizenry. Data collected by the U. S. Bureau of Census' Current Population Survey (CPS) partially meets this need for a statewide Civic Health Index. CPS data, however, only allows for reliable civic engagement estimates of Florida's four largest metropolitan areas (Jacksonville, Miami-Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, Tampa-St. Petersburg).

- To monitor the progress of civic health in Florida's smaller communities, additional data is required.
- In addition, local governments should be surveyed on a biennial basis to document their progress in supporting youth civic engagement.

Both of these data collection efforts will support the development of both state and local policies and programs to meet the challenge of improving the civic health of Florida and all of its communities.

Florida ranks low when it comes to state of its civic health. A weakened civic health has implications far beyond a simple interest in government and politics, and so improving civic health is a desirable goal for educators, state and local politicians, community leaders, professionals and non-profit organizations. It will take an investment of time, effort and resources to improve Florida's civic health. However, action now will yield results. To do nothing would be to continue the downward spiral of civic disengagement in the state. The policy option presented in this brief address efforts to improve the civic engagement of younger Floridians. While the low levels of civic engagement in Florida are evident across all

generations, transforming the civic culture in the state must begin with its younger citizens. A starting place for this transformation is to build upon efforts to promote civic education in the classroom. A necessary condition for a culture of civic engagement is emphasizing civic education. However, it is not a sufficient condition. Younger Floridians will only become engaged if they are asked. Local government, at the state, county and city level, offers the ideal vehicle to offer opportunities and avenues for youth civic engagement.

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