

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Kids Voting Virginia & Kids Voting USA

In a 1997 election for the Virginia legislature, the Democratic Party candidate in the Norfolk area won by only eleven votes. The newly elected delegate pointed to Kids Voting Virginia (the state chapter of Kids Voting USA) as an essential factor in his victory. A local mother had told him that “I came home late from work on election night; I was tired, and voting was the last thing on my mind. But my son said, ‘Mom, you have to vote. Kids Voting says people have to vote.’ So I did.” And a dad told the winning candidate that he had decided not to vote, figuring that his candidate was sure to win. “But my son and daughter needed a ride to the polls so that they could vote at the Kids Voting booth. I drove them over, and while I was there, I went ahead and voted too.” There are Kids Voting booths in more than 20,000 voter precincts; the program has affiliates in 38 states and its teacher-developed civic education curriculum is used for K-12 students in over 6,000 public and private schools.

Kids Voting began in 1989 when three friends, businessmen and journalists from the Phoenix area, journeyed to Costa Rica on a fishing trip. It rained – a great deal. One of their substitute activities was to take cab rides around the area where they were staying. They learned from a cab driver that voter turnout in Costa Rica regularly exceeded 80%. The cabbie volunteered that the high turnout was probably because voting is traditionally a family event—children accompany their parents to the polls and simply grow up thinking that voting is a regular and expected activity of adulthood. The three Americans returned to Arizona (where a governor had recently been impeached and voter turnout was unusually low) and began Kids Voting.

Students are introduced to issues first, then to candidates. One strategy in Virginia is to present children with a hypothetical amount of money and a list of current political issues and proposals. Students then choose how they would allocate their money. Issues and bill sponsorship are also organized geographically so that the kids begin to understand how voting and choice are affected by both economics and geography. Kids Voting booths frequently have pictures of the candidates, and the ballot initiatives are spelled out in age-appropriate language. Paula Case of Kids Voting USA reports that adults frequently check in at the Kids Booth to get a clear understanding of what’s at stake.

Some of the effects of the program are apparently subliminal. Paula Case tells about a business executive, in the midst of resettling his entire operation in a new state, who went to the polls thinking that he might not vote at all. He had been too busy to examine the issues and candidates in his new locale. But once he saw the ballot, he realized that he had heard about all the candidates and the issues, and was ready to vote—he had three children in the Kids Voting program, and they had been talking politics every night at dinner.

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