New York City’s public school students had the day off this past Election Day, but the students of Democracy Prep were in school. To be more precise, they were in *attendance*, but they were not always in class. They were taking part in the Harlem charter school network’s annual get-out-the-vote effort: “I Can’t Vote, But You Can!”

Elementary school students, led by their teachers, were out on the streets handing out laminated cards encouraging citizens to “voice your choice this Election Day.” Middle school students canvassed their neighbors, talking about the mayoral election, pointing them to polling places, and registering them to vote. High school students fanned out to volunteer work assignments all over Manhattan: some manned phone banks at Republican mayoral candidate Joe Lhota’s headquarters; another group went to Bill de Blasio’s campaign office in Central Harlem to canvass and encourage registered Democrats to vote. Other groups of upperclassmen worked in conjunction with the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials to act as poll monitors in Washington Heights. Still others spent Election Day volunteering with the New York City Campaign Finance Board’s “NYC Votes” effort, encouraging voter participation and handing out “I Voted” stickers and voter guides.

At Democracy Prep, civics* is not merely studied, it’s unapologetically preached, practiced, and mastered. As the charter school network has grown from a single middle school in August 2006 to nine schools at present, its students have become a familiar Election Day sight on the streets of Harlem, registering thousands of voters in that time. In their ubiquitous school-bus yellow hats and t-shirts reading, “I Can’t Vote, But You Can!” groups of students turn classroom civics lessons into authentic civic engagement. Can civic engagement in schools create civic engagement in a community? In 2006, 9 percent of Democracy Prep parents were registered to vote. After numerous voter registration drives, today 78 percent are registered.

At first glance, Democracy Prep looks like yet another of the high-expectations, college prep charter schools,

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*Today, civic learning is generally defined as both having a knowledge of the ideas of democracy and the workings of federal, state, and local governments, and having the motivation and skills to participate in our democratic society.*
along with KIPP, Achievement First, Yes Prep, Uncommon Schools, and others sometimes known as “No Excuses” schools. Over the past decade, these charter school networks have become the face of urban education reform with their rigorous curricula, longer school days, young and hard-charging teachers, and often obsessive attention to student work habits, school tone, and discipline. Expectations and aspirations run high. Classrooms are not numbered; they bear the names of major colleges and universities, Brown, SUNY, and Howard. Students scheduled to graduate this June are not the class of 2014; they are members of the class of 2018, the year they will graduate from college.

Democracy Prep has differentiated itself from the other “No Excuses” schools, however, by elevating preparation for citizenship to a co-equal goal with college readiness. Hence, the greatest aspiration of all: there are no “students” at Democracy Prep. If you attend, you are a “citizen-scholar.” The school’s motto, “Work Hard. Go to College. Change the World,” focuses students’ attention on civic duty. The mission statement, which every staff member must commit to memory, insists that Democracy Prep “educates responsible citizen-scholars for success in the college of their choice and a life of active citizenship.”

This is no mere inspirational homily. While children born into low-income, black, and Hispanic families have a less than 10 percent chance to become college graduates, the odds they will grow up to lead lives of active citizenship as enshrined in Democracy Prep’s mission statement are not much better. “Low-income adults tend to participate in politics at much lower rates than more affluent citizens, trust government less, and have a weaker sense of political efficacy,” noted a recent American Enterprise Institute report on Democracy Prep. The report goes on to state that:

[b]ecause low-income parents often lack these prerequisites for engaged civic life, they are less likely to pass on expectations for active citizenship and political participation to their children. What is more, less active parents may even pass on a real mistrust of government and sense of powerlessness, both of which can depress any attachment to civic life in their children.1

Among the strongest correlations in educational research is that between educational attainment and civic engagement. The voting rate nationally for high school dropouts (39 percent) is less than half the rate of those with advanced degrees, according to a recent report from the Educational Testing Service.2 The same report concluded that the likelihood of a young, native-born Hispanic male voting falls nearly to zero if he is a high school dropout with bottom quintile academic skills who does not pay close attention to public affairs. In short, it is not an overstatement to suggest that disenfranchisement starts in our schools.

“Interactive, engaging civic education has been found to boost young people’s interest in news and politics for years after graduation,” notes Peter Levine of Tufts University (see Mr. Levine’s article, “Teaching the Deeper Aspects of Civic Education” on page 37 of this issue). “It can also be good for them as individuals, enhancing their motivations to succeed in school.”

Democracy Prep makes civics not just interactive but authentic, engaging students directly in government at the local, state, and national levels. In addition to the annual get-out-the-vote effort, students travel to Albany and Washington, DC to lobby elected officials and they rally and speak at public hearings in New York City. A student cannot graduate from Democracy Prep without demonstrating a series of “applied civic skills” including volunteering, publishing a written opinion, engaging in advocacy or campaign work, and raising money for a cause the student believes in. “I don’t believe that civic education can only come from a book: it has to be authentic,” says Democracy Prep founder Seth Andrew, who has insisted that citizen-scholars leave school knowing how to pull the levers of power—and being inspired to pull them. In the process, students at Democracy Prep attain the same types of deeper learning competencies highlighted throughout the rest of the articles in this publication: they leave school with a mastery of content, can think critically and solve complex problems in their communities, will collaborate around and communicate their beliefs, and develop other skills and competencies essential to their success.

“Successful science courses need labs,” Andrew says. “Language courses need speaking practice and study abroad. A civic disposition comes from knowledge, skills, and expe-
riencing how power and influence are wielded.”

College-bound 12th graders take the “Advanced Civics Senior Seminar,” which is designed to be a final assessment of each 12th grade scholar’s readiness to fulfill the school’s mission once he or she has progressed beyond Democracy Prep’s walls. The format, structure, and expectations of the Senior Seminar “simulate those of the discussion-based humanities courses seniors should expect to encounter during their freshman year of college,” notes Benjamin Feit, a Duke University law graduate and deputy chief of staff at Democracy Prep, who designed and teaches the course. Scholars are assigned challenging weekly readings that explore core civic concepts and are expected to drive thoughtful classroom conversations based on their critical analysis of the texts.

Seniors must also complete a yearlong “Change the World” civics project. Among last year’s inaugural graduating class, one scholar created “Path to Citizenship” resources for non-native young people in the foster care system, like the scholar herself, whose journey brought her from Mexico to New York City. Another student focused on strategies to bridge the sometimes tense relationship between police and the community members in Harlem. Still another scholar, who lost her mother, focused on how to help young people come to terms with the trauma and grief of losing a loved one.

Democracy Prep has neither adopted nor created an explicit character education program. Efforts to create effective habits of mind and cultivate a civic disposition are “baked in” to classroom culture and school tone. In every classroom there are brightly colored banners touting the school’s “DREAM values” of discipline, respect, enthusiasm, accountability, and maturity. The importance of demonstrating these values is reinforced with even the youngest citizen-scholars, beginning in kindergarten.

The day before Election Day, Democracy Prep middle school scholars were poring over the positions of mayoral candidates on education, policing, and other issues. In a 7th grade social studies class, a teacher asked students to “turn and talk” to each other about which candidates’ views most closely mirrored their own, and to show evidence to support their views. “I support Bill de Blasio because he will end stop-and-frisk,” said one citizen-scholar to her seatmate, alluding to the controversial New York City police practice that proponents credit for reducing crime, but which opponents criticize as racial profiling and a privacy violation. “But he’s against charter schools and you go to a charter school!” her partner interjected. Students debated, offered evidence to support their views, and understood how the decisions voters must make seldom have easy or obvious answers.

Democracy is complicated.

For a reminder of what’s at stake at Democracy Prep—and for America—consider the kindergarten class at Democracy Prep Harlem Elementary School, which opened in September 2013 at the corner of Madison Avenue and 127th Street. Shortly after noon on Election Day, dozens of cheerful, giggly boys and girls, flanked by their teachers, marched out of their school in single file and lined up on the sidewalk, taking up nearly an entire city block. They shouted election-themed chants reminding passersby of their civic duty. They handed get-out-the-vote fliers to adults, who were clearly charmed by the infectious youngsters. Civic engagement starts early at Democracy Prep.

Now consider that these 40 children are among four million kindergarteners who arrived in the nation’s schools this September. Together they comprise the Class of 2026. If all goes well, they will finish their senior year of high school and graduate days before our nation’s 250th birthday, on July 4, 2026. A recent study showed nearly half of U.S. public school students are classified as low-income. Thus, our schools face the challenge of closing not only the black-white achievement gap, but an income-driven civic engagement gap. Schools serving low-income children of color, like Democracy Prep, are fighting a two-front battle.

“When we say our motto is ‘Work hard, go to college, change the world!’ we’re serious,” says Andrew. “It’s our scholars who will change our world. It’s our responsibility to give them all the tools they need to do so.”
