



Civically engaged students in Pennsylvania's public schools

With a record number of individuals participating in early voting, this presidential election is one for the history books. Today, millions of Americans will head to the polls to use their voice to determine who represents them at a local and federal level. While many students in Pennsylvania's public schools are not of voting age, their voices and contributions are significant. Below are a few ways that school districts and students are fostering civic engagement in their communities.

- 1. Considering student voice in decision-making.** At Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), students are not only permitted but encouraged to share their voice in their school and local communities. This initiative began when Superintendent Dr. Anthony Hamlet unveiled his 2017-2022 Strategic Plan: Expect Great Things, a five-year roadmap focused on transforming PPS into a student-centered culture. This plan provides a consistent stream of student input to local leadership. Since the inception of the initiative, the partnership between students and leadership has expanded to the school board, city council, county executive office and state legislature. Listen to [A Seat at the Table: Encouraging Student Voice](#) at keyedradio.org to hear from Prishti Tyagi, a student at Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy; Sam Bisno, a student at Pittsburgh Barack Obama Academy of International Studies 6-12; and Asia Mason, project manager of student voice at Pittsburgh Public Schools.
- 2. Engaging students before they reach voting age.** It's important for students of all ages to understand how the government functions. In Kristi Sines' sixth grade civics class at Meyersdale Area Middle School in Somerset County, that's exactly what she's teaching. Over five years ago, she implemented an innovative project where students create a board game to depict the steps to making a bill in the House of Representatives and the Senate, with an emphasis on the obstacles and challenges lawmakers face each day. Since employing this innovative method of teaching, Sines has noticed a difference in her students. Learn more about her project and how she is teaching students about the individuals who run our country in the Bright Ideas article of the [March/April 2020 Bulletin](#).

- 3. Recognizing youth as an important cohort of eligible voters.** According to the [Pew Research Center](#), “one-in-ten eligible voters in the 2020 electorate will be part of a new generation of Americans – Generation Z.” The Generation Z cohort, which contains about 24 million voters, includes individuals who were born after 1996. Thanks to [Chuck Underwood](#), we know that generations have distinct differences in how they learn, live and communicate, which will bring new insights into our country’s leadership. As the number of young voters increases, the Pennsylvania Departments of State and Education created the [Governor’s Civic Engagement Award](#) to recognize schools and student ambassadors who offer and encourage voter registration within the schools. To hear more about this award and civic engagement among the commonwealth’s youth, listen to [Civic Engagement in the Generation Called Z](#) at [keyedradio.org](#).
- 4. Encouraging community relationships and contributions.** Whether students’ skills are developed through career and technical education or in a traditional classroom environment, public school students have talents that are valuable to their communities. Community interaction is an important component of civic engagement. Utilizing trade skills they learned, students from Cumberland Perry Area Vocational Technical School [built a new event pavilion](#) at the Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle. This pavilion, which was designed to look like the hangars the U.S. military used in World War II, will be used to house events such as education programs for the public.
- 5. Fostering social cohesion in school communities.** [Social cohesion](#) “refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a community.” Social cohesion can begin in school communities as students learn more about the individuals in their communities, develop empathy and compassion, and participate in activities that benefits others. Below are districts that are working to develop social cohesion in their communities:
- Earlier this year at [Conshohocken Elementary School](#) students explored the history, culture and contributions of Hispanic Americans in celebration of National Hispanic Heritage Month.
 - [Cannon-McMillan High School](#) has been designated as a No Place for Hate school by the Anti-Defamation League, a program that celebrates diversity and fights bias, discrimination and bullying in schools.
 - Students from [Thomas Jefferson High School in West Jefferson Hills School District](#) recently completed lessons as part of the Dignity and Respect Campaign.
 - [Pennridge High School](#) was the first district in Bucks County to be recognized as a Special Olympics National Banner Unified Champion School.
 - [Carlisle Area School District](#) created an integrated K-12 approach to education about Black history and culture.

