

From
INQUIRY
to
ACTION

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From
INQUIRY
to **ACTION**

Civic Engagement with **Project-Based Learning** in All Content Areas

STEVEN ZEMELMAN



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DEDICATION



To Susan, my wife and partner, who has fed me, laughed with me, and worked alongside me on her own invaluable teaching all through this project

And to the inspired teachers and energized students across this country who make inquiry and social action matter in their schools and communities

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INTRODUCTION

You've cracked open a book on linking powerful teaching and learning with students' social action, an approach that can transform education at many grade levels. It's filled with stories of great classroom instruction from grades five through twelve that include thoughtful student action in their communities. And it provides detailed how-to steps for teachers to guide similar efforts themselves. So what does this kind of teaching and learning look like? Let's not waste a moment but head to Elizabeth Robbins' history class at Hancock High School in Chicago to find out.

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND SOCIAL ACTION IN A HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY CLASS

As Elizabeth's juniors began the process of identifying the social action work they would tackle as a class, they spent several days surveying the assets in their heavily Hispanic Southwest-Side-of-Chicago working-class neighborhood. They listed churches and stores, interviewed neighbors to identify problems and issues, and searched the web (a useful website for Chicago would be "Dreamtown"—www.dreamtown.com/neighborhoods/chicago-neighborhoods.html)—but other cities have

their own sites documenting resources). Elizabeth also used news articles on neighborhood displacements over the years to get students thinking further about underlying issues that affected them. Then in small groups students brainstormed issues they considered most important in their lives and communities. This is a crucial moment, when students begin to realize they are going to be working on something that matters to them, and that the choice will be theirs. The seventh-period-history juniors narrowed their list to these concerns:

- High unemployment
- Racial discrimination
- Neighborhood violence
- Deportation of undocumented immigrants
- High cost of college attendance
- Juvenile justice

These were all huge issues, obviously, so to explore in any depth they'd need to focus more narrowly, once one was chosen. Students formed groups based on their interests, embarked on some initial research, and prepared presentations, complete with PowerPoint slides, to advocate for their chosen topic. They explained why their issue was important, who was affected, and what organizations were working on it. Students researching juvenile justice, for example, learned that teens were especially impacted by automatic waivers that switched trials for serious crimes from juvenile to adult courts. The class would be selecting just one issue, so once all the presentations had been heard, it was time to take a preliminary vote. Students in new small groups compared choices and reported the results:

- Use of waivers to try juveniles in adult courts: 16
- Neighborhood violence: 2
- Deportation: 2

The vote appeared overwhelming. But rather than go with the majority, Elizabeth asked the class a question that shows how strategic but measured guidance can make this kind of project truly transformative: “What will happen if we just accept the choice of the sixteen?” Students quickly observed that the losing four would tune out and disengage from the effort. Which led to Elizabeth’s next question: “So how should we deal with the difference? How could we arrive at a consensus?”

“We should each give our reasons and hear from the others,” kids responded. “We should discuss this.” Again Elizabeth tossed it back to the students: “How should we do

that?” The students chose a discussion strategy they’d already learned: four corners. They gathered in the corners of the room, based on their preferences (really just three corners, in this instance), to talk things over. As spokespersons for the groups began to report, however, the discussion devolved into a debate, so Elizabeth interjected: “Wait a minute. How is this going to get us to a consensus? You need to listen to one another.”

After a few more back-and-forth rounds, several students proposed trying to look for common ground. This shifted the conversation, and speakers began groping for connections between the topics: deportations and trial waivers both create “bad vibes” in the community, they thought. Use of waivers to try juveniles as adults sends more kids to prison, where they learn to use more violence. They acknowledged the legitimacy of each other’s choices. Elizabeth finally helped by observing that all three issues particularly affect minority communities. Even if the connections were a bit of a stretch, students were now listening to each other and appreciating various points of view. They’d experienced an important lesson in how to work together as a group and deal with honest differences. The class was now ready to begin researching the problem of prosecuting minors as adults, with a proviso to also include the effect of this policy on neighborhood violence, and the relationship of the policy to deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Fast-forward a week: students had discovered that a bill was under consideration in the Illinois State House of Representatives to end the automatic transfer from juvenile to adult courts. Now the kids were highly focused: How could they lobby legislators to pass the bill? And what was the process by which the bill would advance from committee to a vote on the House floor? Students who would have been deeply bored reading a textbook passage on American legislative procedure were eagerly trying to learn how the bill would be reviewed by the House rules committee. While one student called an assistant to Representative Barbara Flynn Currie, the rules committee chair, the others waited expectantly. But the news was grim: if the committee didn’t vote before the impending end to the legislative session, the bill would die.

Alas, it’s possible that too many legislators might have worried that they’d look “soft on crime” if they supported the bill, so the safest thing to do was to simply avoid voting on it. The students didn’t accept defeat, however. They talked to Representative Elaine Nekritz, who sponsored the bill, and who in turn suggested they contact a Chicago organization called the Juvenile Justice Initiative. Its director visited the class and described the organization’s ongoing campaign to get the law changed. The students decided on three actions to support the initiative’s campaign to pass the bill the next year:

- A letter to the editors of the two major Chicago newspapers
- Web-based circulation of a petition
- A fund-raising campaign selling snacks (unhealthy, of course) to fellow students

Challenging Students to Make Their Own Decisions

Notice that this activity moved students beyond the kind of “argument” in the Common Core writing standards that focuses only on defending a position. Instead, they were exploring the more complex thinking needed to find deeper connections between equally important issues and to bring everyone on board.

Just as important to the learning process, Elizabeth rarely gave students explicit guidance, but she didn’t remain silent either, instead repeatedly tossing questions and challenges back to them. In another class her students focused on the high cost of college, and hypothesized that an important factor could be the poor management of funds. But how would they research this? An observer in the classroom could barely control his desire to help, wanting mightily to suggest that they google a college’s administration page to find a financial officer they could talk to. But fortunately he held back as Elizabeth masterfully pressed them: “What do you need to know? How can you find out about this?” When asked later about her insistence that they solve problems themselves, she smiled. “If I do this for them now, they’ll never be able to do it on their own when they leave here.”

Students reflected on her approach as well.

Marianna: Most teachers just tell us what to do.

Carlos: Since it’s *our* topic, we should be the ones to decide how to work on it.

Marianna: She wants us to decide. But sometimes it’s hard.

Alejandro: We’re actually trying to *do* something.

Carolyn: We did projects for the history fair, but it wasn’t as exciting.

And yet, there are times when the teacher *does* need to help and guide. More on this to come as you’ll see teachers deciding throughout Chapters 1 through 4.

At the school year's end, the students were still at work. And their appraisal of their effort?

Carlos: *It's exciting to put a plan into action. I want to be able to make a change in the world.*

Marianna: *If we want to do something to improve our community, we'll know how to do it now.*

To hear Elizabeth speak about teaching with social action, watch her TEDx talk, which inspired the writing of this book: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-lUrM-rmIE

LEARNING THAT MOVES FROM INQUIRY TO SOCIAL ACTION—A DEFINITION

As you can see in Elizabeth Robbins' students' project (she would quickly correct anyone who said it was just hers rather than the kids'), the work takes students through the process of choosing, researching, and actively working to influence a problematic policy in the community that is important to them. Students learn to be active and responsible leaders by actually seeking to promote change, rather than just being—*supposedly*—prepared to be leaders in the future. And as classroom stories will illustrate throughout the book, this can be done at almost any age, in almost any subject.

There are at least four major steps that students take in this process:

- Identifying issues important in their lives and community, and deciding on one to address
- Researching the chosen issue and deciding how to change or improve the situation
- Planning an action, including determining a goal for change; identifying who or what body in the community has power to make the change; and deciding how to approach that person or persons
- Carrying out the action

Two features are especially crucial to making the experience authentic and empowering for students. First, they must own the responsibility to make choices and decisions and to figure out solutions to problems themselves. The teacher of course facilitates the work, but leaves as much of the decision making as possible to the kids. Second, the work should culminate in some action focused on change in the school or community. It's not enough to just talk about change, or practice in mock legislatures. When students see adults actually listening to them with respect, *that* is when they begin to realize they have a voice and can make a difference in their world. Their efforts may not always succeed, but in being heard they come to value the studying, reading, writing, and planning that they have done. School and learning begin to truly matter.

WHY TEACH THIS WAY—AND WHY NOW?

Our kids can act silly and goofy, but when they interviewed and then presented their report to the town director of public works and the head of a local citizens' committee, they were so poised and mature. I was so proud of them, and I realized how important an authentic audience could be. And our school board heard about their impressive performance.

—Roosevelt Middle School teacher Laurie Hendrickson
(in suburban River Forest, Illinois), after her Robotics Club students
presented to officials their findings on the need for better
flood protection for local homes

Why is it so important to conduct projects like this in our classrooms—at least some of the time—and why especially now? Well, first of all, school is our primary means of preparing children not just to be “college and career ready,” but also “citizen-ready”—inviting them to be responsible citizens *now*, as Elizabeth Robbins declares, not just in the distant future. John Dewey told us that a key role of public education is to prepare citizens for participation in a democracy. But students need to experience the rush of being heard and acknowledged by adults in their community, or actually making something happen to improve it. It's the responses of people in the real world around them that teach young people how communities work and which words and actions can make a difference. In addition to caring and understanding, smart skills and strategies are needed to promote change, and students will learn them most effectively by actually trying them out and discovering what works.

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Teaching with Social Action Provides Focus on Community

When we teach government, we need to teach it in terms of relevance and access. But at its heart, it must have an action civics base.

—Elizabeth Robbins, “Young People Are the NOW,” TEDx talk

A second reason why this approach is so important is that American society’s intense focus on individual achievement and well-being tends to eclipse *community* needs and efforts. Government agencies and public programs are viewed by many as ineffective, compared to the power of competitive private businesses. Yet many social needs cannot be met by private corporations that focus mainly on their own success—not because they are uncaring but because by definition that’s not what they’re designed to do. At the same time, many public institutions and policies don’t always serve those social needs very effectively. They can be fraught with problems and imperfections that citizens need to address rather than simply dismissing them out of hand. Schools are some of the only public entities that can help strengthen the public commitment to community, since they can focus not just on an immediate result but on equipping the next generation to contribute. However, they aren’t doing that as well as they could just yet. When Robbins asked, in her TEDx talk, how many audience members had taken a civics or government class, almost all two hundred raised a hand. But when she asked, “How many can say you learned how to be active members of your community in school?” just one lonely hand went up.

Teaching with Social Action Creates Stronger Student Engagement

This isn’t brain surgery. If you just open the door and give kids a chance to choose the issues they’re passionate about, they will take on the toughest, most complex tasks, and they’ll do all the work themselves, rather than leaving it to you.

—Jill Bass, Director of Curriculum and Teacher Development at the Mikva Challenge organization in Chicago

Students who don’t see the connections between what they are asked to learn and their own present needs often feel disempowered and bored in school. We know our

subjects really matter and will help our kids understand and negotiate their world as they grow up—so why doesn't that yawning student in the third row get it? In fact, most young people are quite idealistic. They recoil at injustices and wonder why problems in their neighborhoods or the wider world don't get fixed. They long for peace and safety and mutual understanding. They want to experience agency and be actively engaged. They may claim not to care about school or what goes on around them, but that's usually just a pose to avoid their sense of powerlessness. Learning connected with action in the community grabs onto children's need to engage in meaningful, active, and empowering efforts.

Teaching with Social Action Improves Students' Mindsets about School

The comments of Crown, a chronic truant prior to participating in this classroom [fifth grade in a school next to the Chicago "projects"], resonate strongly: "I did not feel school was a place for me. I didn't think it would help me in my life, but this project made me like coming to school . . . It did not feel like the boring school I was used to." His turnaround and newfound dedication to schoolwork and attendance demonstrated the power of a democratic classroom, where students were critical members encouraged to embrace their own ideas of what is worthwhile.

—Brian Schultz, *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* (pp. 9–10)

Beyond just banishing boredom, connecting school with the world in which students live leads them to value learning and to feel a sense of belonging to the school community, resulting in higher achievement. Camille Farrington and her fellow researchers at the Chicago Consortium on School Research reviewed the studies on how student mindsets about school affect achievement. As they report in *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance* (2012), kids' attitudes make a major difference in their learning, and teachers can greatly influence these attitudes. Researchers and testing experts call such attitudes "noncognitive" factors—not because they don't involve thinking, but because they aren't measured by traditional standardized tests. These include positive mindsets such as:

- I belong in this academic community.
- My ability and competence grow with my effort.

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- I can succeed at this schoolwork.
- This work has value for me.

Obviously, students who don't view learning in these ways are unlikely to work very hard on it. "If I'm not going to succeed anyway, why should I bother?" But one powerful way to strengthen these attitudes positively is to have students see how their learning can indeed make a difference in the real world.

An early practitioner of teaching and learning with social action, Brian Schultz (quoted above), in *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* (2008), tells how this approach altered attitudes as well as learning for his fifth-grade students in a Chicago public school in 2004. No doubt others conducted similar projects before this one, but perhaps they'll pardon the attention to this remarkable story. The students campaigned for a new school to replace their dilapidated building and achieved local and national fame. Ralph Nader visited during his presidential campaign and wrote on his website:

The youngsters appear transformed. Their attendance rate is 98 percent and coming from a part of Chicago rife with drugs, street violence, gang activity, physical deterioration and unemployment, this is testimony to their interest. They design each part of their research and action strategy. They learn how to do surveys, write different letters [to seek] support from politicians, community leaders and from their own peers. Nine hundred students from other schools have expressed their support.

—Ralph Nader, www.commondreams.org, April 20, 2004

Teaching with Social Action Gives Students Immediate Purpose for Learning Academic Skills

The other thing I wanted to make sure you are aware of is how much your academic skills are being strengthened by the project. . . . When you look back on fifth grade I want to make sure you realize how much math and reading and writing and social studies you learned without even knowing it.

—Columbia University Teachers College professor Celia Oyler, speaking to students while visiting Brian Schultz's classroom (in Schultz 2008, p. 108)

Children of course need to learn academic skills and content—math, history, science, literary analysis. As Oyler observes, applying learning to public action gives a purpose

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for these academic subjects, so they aren't approached as mere practice for some undefined future need that most young minds don't yet envision. Children live in the now. So when students know their arguments and proposals will be read with a skeptical eye next week by the city council or be published in the local newspaper, they become much more willing to revise, edit, correct their grammar, and, more broadly, to think about what reasoning will be effective with their audience. They'll be eager to research and find relevant information to bolster their claims. Teachers who engage students in working for solutions to community problems find that even attendance improves. Kids stop worrying so much about grades and instead focus on using their new skills to achieve real-world results.

Yes, But Can We Really Do This?

Especially nowadays, when there are so many skills to teach, so many mandates and requirements to address, tests to prep kids for, and curriculum to cover, is this kind of teaching and learning even possible in our classrooms? This is a question that thoughtful teachers and writers on student civic engagement ask themselves very seriously (Berdan et al. 2006, pp. 6–7, and Levinson 2012, pp. 257–288). After all, public school teachers are hired to serve the state and the public, and to teach curriculum mandated by the school board that hired them. Civic engagement projects can require precious time otherwise used to “cover” that curriculum. However, those mandates are made with a larger purpose—expressed in the mission statements of many schools and districts—to prepare the next generation to be productive and responsible citizens. Further, good teachers want students to meet and exceed standards in meaningful and engaging ways, rather than marching them through disconnected skill lessons that are promptly forgotten.

So here's the good news: this isn't an either-or situation.

The skills and content required by a state's adopted standards, even when these standards are imperfect, are inevitably addressed when students carry out the kinds of projects described here—though not necessarily in the order predicted by a traditional curriculum. Governmental mandates and social action in the classroom need not be mutually exclusive—as long as testing regimes aren't allowed to displace weeks and weeks of instructional time.

Teachers know, too, that children of all ages and backgrounds wish to improve the world around them, and that great teaching and learning can be built around that desire. These teachers seek tools to engage students in active roles in and beyond school, along with building traditional academic skills, because they see citizenship as more than a passive role. And they recognize the need to develop community consciousness among the future citizens sitting in front of them now. The urge to make the world a bit better than we found it remains a powerful motivation among America's teachers—one of the main reasons many chose this line of work in the first place—and it is a goal shared by many parents as well.

But this desire on teachers' part raises another question: With civic engagement in the classroom, can teachers keep from promoting their own political and social views with their students? (See Oylar 2012, pp. 5–6.) Certainly if the answer is no, the classroom would no longer be about educating children, but simply indoctrinating them. However, as you will see in the stories and strategies that follow, a central characteristic of this work is that the teacher, in fact, does *not* tell students what issues to tackle, what to believe, or what positions to take. Rather, he or she organizes activities so that students learn to make these decisions themselves, based on their own careful inquiry and reflection on conditions in their own lives.

So the answer is yes, teaching and learning with social action is not only possible, but urgently needed in today's schools. And good teachers are leading such projects in classrooms across the country.

Teaching with Social Action Provides Students with the Tools and Experience to Help Address Injustices in Their Communities

There is a profound civic empowerment gap—as large and as disturbing as the reading and math achievement gaps that have received significant national attention in recent years—between ethnoracial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on the one hand, and White, native-born, and especially middle-class and wealthy citizens, on the other.

—Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (pp. 32–33)

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It's no secret—especially in light of recent and ongoing tragedies—that in spite of years of civil rights campaigning and some visible progress, poor and minority communities across the country continue to be denied many of the rights and resources they need to build productive lives and futures for their children. At the same time, too few members of these communities have developed the civic skills to obtain the opportunities they need. Sometimes they blame themselves or their neighbors, rather than coming to understand the structural forces that limit those opportunities. All citizens need the skills, knowledge, and sense of agency to find and seize these opportunities if we are to have healthy, democratic communities. By involving students in learning that leads to social action, teachers are promoting change right now as well as giving students the tools and mindsets to continue this work as they grow and mature.

In fact, *The Civic Mission of Schools* report by the Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement asserted in 2003 that addressing this need is a key task for schools—and the need is only greater today:

Civic education should help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. [This includes being able to] act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes . . . [and to] have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in their capacity to make a difference. (p. 4)

Happily, when a teacher like Adam Heenan in Chicago—another of the many educators using this approach—guides high school students through community action projects, the kids begin to leap across the gap and take on these civic roles. As one student in his class put it quite simply:

Before I didn't think I could actually make a difference, but now I am working with people at my church on antigang initiatives.

Teaching with Social Action Is Invigorating and Meaningful for Teachers

I get the satisfaction of giving students the opportunity to carry out the kinds of efforts they'll need in order to be involved in their community. As a teacher, it's gratifying to see students work independently. It's exciting and makes me very proud. It reinforces my belief in the power of young people.

—Elizabeth Robbins, interview, June 4, 2014

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Unlike the good old days (if those ever existed), teachers today often feel disempowered and blamed for the structural situations of their schools as well as society's larger ills. But connecting classroom and community offers an opportunity to show the world how our teaching really can matter. Helping students reach out into the community enables teachers to build relationships with outside community members and organizations, and in turn this lets those outsiders see the powerful learning taking place in our classrooms and the enthusiasm engendered in the students. Teachers are helping their students address some of those societal ills that do in fact make education more difficult. Taking action, even in small ways, goes far in dispelling the discouragement that teachers can experience when feeling passive and helpless.

How Is Teaching with Social Action Related to Project-Based or Expeditionary Learning?

Project-based and expeditionary instruction bear many similarities to the teaching and learning explored here, since they focus on real-world topics of importance, call for in-depth research, and invite students to create products for real audiences beyond just the teacher. But two major elements of teaching and learning with social action take students further and deeper:

1. **Student choice.** The focus of teaching and learning with social action is not just about student engagement, but about student *empowerment* as active citizens. This means that students learn to make their own thoughtful decisions by actively doing so now, during their education, rather than leaving educators to hope that, without any experience, this skill will magically develop later. By contrast, the project-based activities and units one usually sees in professional books, on websites, and in videos are mostly teacher-planned. They may be excellent, relevant, and engaging—but teachers are still the ones making the key decisions. Leaving so much to the students can feel risky. One can't know in advance just how the work will unfold. But, in fact, when students take the lead, they repeatedly surprise us with their intelligence, creativity, and tenacity.
2. **Action for improvement in the community.** Project-based learning usually leads to a product or outcome of some kind—a student-produced video, a PowerPoint presentation, a science demo—that embodies an issue or concept or topic students have learned about. They appreciate this and work hard to achieve strong results. The outcome in teaching and learning with social action, however, is specifically to seek some improvement in the community. This goes beyond traditional “service learning,” such as volunteering at a food pantry, and includes at least an attempt to achieve some larger change. It may be a more modest

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What About National Standards?

Many of us are not in love with everything in the latest standards—their internal flaws, lack of research support, links to problematic testing, and implication that every student should be learning the same things at the same time, while not getting much art, drama, storytelling, or anything else that many reformers mistakenly think aren't needed in the adult work world. The standards have nothing to say about making learning meaningful or connecting with students' lives and issues in their communities. True, the standards don't entirely reject these things, and in fact, the best professional writings and workshops on standards do aim to achieve them in meaningful ways. But we know that in too many school districts the focus will be on rote exercises and time-gobbling preparation for the tests that supposedly measure learning, rather than on those lively learning activities. In fact, one of the projects observed for this book was postponed because the school required every teacher to drop everything and focus on test prep—even though studies have found that such an approach doesn't help, and that *the best way to increase test scores is to focus on teaching our subjects* (Allensworth et al. 2008).

But right now, the standards are the order of the day for most of us. And the engaging research, analysis, argument, and speaking activities in this book actually address many of the most relevant Core standards, including writing for various audiences and purposes, researching in depth, reading critically, and building oral and collaborative skills. So the activity explanations provided in this book will, on occasion, take note of ways that standards are addressed. And many of us have seen that students who are engaged in studying and acting to achieve change in their communities also do just fine learning required skills, exceeding the standards, and performing on the tests. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that the standards themselves tend to focus only inward, on practices like “close reading,” which even if used thoughtfully do not help students learn how to participate responsibly in the wider world. Rather, the strategies used by teachers in this book are ones that will bring standards to life and make them worth pursuing.

effort to get a neighborhood park rehabbed. Or, as in one Chicago-area project, it may be something as important as guiding teens through the process of having nonviolent arrest records expunged from police files. It is this kind of attempt—and at least sometimes achievement—that leads young people to realize they can actively contribute to their community and needn't feel helpless about problems they see around them. Additionally, if we want students to transfer what they learn in our classrooms to their own lives, they need to experience and learn from the full process of social action, even (or especially) when that process is messy, recursive, or time-consuming.

Which Subjects and Grade Levels Are Right for This Approach?

You might think that civics and social studies classes are the natural homes for such learning, and of course they are. But teachers and students in any subject can productively engage in social action projects. English courses are especially appropriate when they focus on nonfiction reading, since so much material in that genre deals with large social, cultural, or environmental issues (though many plays and novels explore these areas as well). Science, particularly when it deals with environment or health, opens up many opportunities to connect with local and national real-world concerns. While many topics in math are more abstract, statistics and data analysis are key tools for much of the research that students will do when pursuing a social action project (see Chapter 4 for a great example of this).

For elementary teachers, of course, the question of subject relevance is much less an issue, since a single teacher may be responsible for every subject and can integrate a project with many elements of the curriculum without neglecting any of them. Wondering whether younger kids can do this? Chapter 1 tells the story of a group of three fifth-grade classes. Or check out the news article about a school in Montclair, New Jersey, where third-grade teachers guided students through the same kind of learning (Kaulesar 2015). Throughout the course of this book, you'll find examples and stories from every major subject area and a wide range of grade levels.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

As you can see in Elizabeth Robbins' civic action project, students work through a series of steps to carry it out—steps that are transferable to any social action project. Chapters 1 through 4 take you through these steps with vignettes and practical strategies. In

actual execution of a project, of course, the steps aren't necessarily confined to a particular order, and students may return to one or another step repeatedly as they pursue their goal. But they're presented separately to more easily explain how to support each aspect of the work. The ideas and strategies in this book are especially informed by the efforts of the Mikva Challenge, a Chicago organization that works with teachers and students on just such projects. Their curriculum guide, *Issues to Action*, follows a six-step process similar to that described here, and this book was extensively influenced by examples from teachers who work with Mikva.

So here's what you'll find in the chapters ahead.

- **Chapter 1: Choosing an Issue.** This can involve community surveys, reading text sets of short articles on current issues, hearing from visiting experts or officials from the community, holding discussions in small groups, or other activities. In many cases the whole class may work on a single issue, though as we'll see, it can also be effective for individuals or small groups to each tackle a concern of their own choice.
- **Chapter 2: Researching the Issue.** Now students go online, read more in-depth information, interview experts, gather data, organize their findings, inform one another about what they're learning, and explore a solution or solutions they wish to propose. Students will likely need plenty of support and guidance to find relevant, trustworthy material and they may need help with comprehending it effectively.
- **Chapter 3: Making a Plan and Preparing to Act.** This can take many forms, depending on the issue students have chosen. Usually, the work will involve determining key audiences to be reached—responsible officials, news media, governing boards, or community organizations. Students need to learn about various governmental agencies and organizations to understand whom they'll need to approach, and how officials in these organizations think. This will be followed by writing reports, proposals, letters to the editor, speeches, or other oral presentations. Support for students' writing is essential. Specific actions need to be planned out as well—fund-raisers, testimony to officials or boards, meetings or events to raise community awareness.
- **Chapter 4: Taking Action.** Again, activities and support will depend on the issue students have chosen, though there are suggestions for strategies to help the effort go well. More than ever, the teacher's role is to stand back as students carry out their planned activities. Reflection afterward is especially important. And teachers must think about how to help students deal with disappointment and value their effort whether they achieve their goal or not.

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The remaining chapters of the book tackle the issues of building a foundation for this work in your classroom and taking this work beyond the classroom.

- **Chapter 5: Empowering Students in the Classroom.** If students are to engage in thoughtful public action based on their learning, we must shape classrooms to model and support it. Teachers should make their classrooms as democratic and participatory as possible, and this chapter explores three big elements of classroom process to help do this:
 1. Building classroom community so that students appreciate and support one another and have the skills and habits for working collaboratively.
 2. Organizing the classroom using a writing workshop structure to help students conduct the many stages of the work. While this chapter cannot address all aspects of writing instruction, it provides some essential strategies to adapt this highly effective framework for supporting almost any kind of student effort. A central part of a writing workshop is carefully defining the teacher's role—the teacher must be a model, but must also insist that students make as many of the decisions, choices, and problem-solving efforts as possible. The chapter explores this careful balancing act.
 3. Having crucial conversations as they arise. Whatever the topic at hand, students may express beliefs that raise issues of fairness, prejudice, human rights, or lack of understanding of others. It is essential for teachers to treasure these teachable moments and hold class discussions that examine such matters promptly, whether they fit in the required curriculum or not.

- **Chapter 6: Bringing Social Action to Relationships in the School with Restorative Justice.** This chapter moves beyond the classroom to look at a key way that teachers and students can make a difference across the school itself. Restorative justice involves a philosophy and a set of strategies that build community, prevent negative interactions, and repair harm caused when such interactions do occur. An increasing number of schools are adopting this approach to strengthen school culture using talking circles and peer juries or councils. It's especially relevant for learning with social action because it very effectively addresses the grievous issue of racial imbalance in the discipline practices in schools. So this chapter takes a look at how to initiate restorative justice practices. It describes the key strategies, including peer juries and peace circles, employed in one elementary school in Chicago. It then outlines steps and resources for establishing or strengthening such a program in your school.

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- **Chapter 7: Growing an After-School Program.** There are many advantages to organizing teaching and learning with social action beyond the classroom. For teachers who want to work with students in an after-school club or area-wide organization, the chapter lists many of the resources out there, in many of our cities.
- **Chapter 8: Promoting Change in Schools.** Finally, we'll explore the strategies and challenges for teachers who want to promote more social action learning in their schools. All too often, teachers carry out projects like those in this book completely on their own. But while all of us have full plates serving our students well, sharing the effort with partners can make life far easier. Imagine what it could be like if a whole grade level, or a whole school, took on community improvement efforts. The work of initiating such collaboration is akin to community organizing. We'll outline some steps, large and small, to get started.

Educators know all too well the tremendous pressures squeezing out the time and resources and support for the kind of teaching and learning described in this book. Principals and teachers worry that their jobs can be at stake if test scores don't go up. Days and weeks of rote test prep are required in many schools. Some education journal articles even criticize extended study projects as undesirable because they (supposedly) do not include enough concentrated analysis of a few isolated skills and readings. So teachers may need to get creative about scheduling, “teach between the cracks,” or substitute a project for a more traditional unit to cover the same concepts in a more active way. Or draft justification statements to explain how their projects are indeed covering Common Core standards (really—we've read some). Fact is, teaching and learning with social action can take place in just about any school.

You and your kids can do this work, too. Now, let's get started.