

A New Chapter in Kids

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by Brenda Kleinjan

IF HISTORY HOLDS TRUE, A LARGE MAJORITY OF South Dakota's registered voters will head to the polls Nov. 4 to vote. And, this year, more than half of the state's school-aged children will also have the opportunity to participate in that time-honored process through Kids Voting South Dakota.

Through the KVSD program, some students will participate by actual voting at a polling location, while others will learn about the process in the classroom. And, students in Rapid City and Sioux Falls will pilot an online voting system. No matter what method of participation, the bottom line is the same: students will have a better understanding of the importance of involvement in the election process.

"I think the biggest value will come years down the road as the students who have gone through the program become 18 and become part of the electorate in the country. This program will have taught them how to participate in the election process and the importance of thoroughly

evaluating the candidates and questions," said South Dakota Secretary of State Chris Nelson, a supporter of the program.

For many it is a chance for parents to instill one of a democracy's fundamental practices: individual voting.

While parents cast their ballots for the candidates and take a stand on the various initiated measures and constitutional amendments, kids will also be marking down their choices for statewide and national races such as President, U.S. Senator, U.S. House of Representatives and Public Utilities Commissioner. High school-aged students will also weigh in on the amendments and initiatives.

"Kids Voting is the earliest recollection I have of our government in action. It was neat seeing our voices being heard at the time," said Sean Bestgen, 18, a student at Brown High School in Sturgis. Bestgen is eligible to vote for the first time this year. The Meade School District was an early adopter of the Kids Voting program, joining



Voting

for the 1996 election cycle.

Students in the Aberdeen School District won't remember an election they haven't participated in. The community was the first in the state to launch the program back in 1992. Nine other communities added the program by the following year. With the addition of seven districts for the 2008 election cycle, the total number of South Dakota school districts participating is more than 70.

While these students' votes aren't binding – no politician will pave his or her way to Pierre or Washington, D.C., with the Kids Voting votes – the results make a lasting impression.

Citing a national study of young people conducted a number of years ago, Nelson points out one of the biggest barriers to young people ages 18-24 actually voting is a fear of the voting process.

"Kids Voting takes away that mystique. The students have gone through the registration process and know what it's like to give their name to a registration board and go behind a curtain to vote. They've gone through that whole process," said Nelson.

In the lessons leading up to Election Day, students also learn about becoming educated voters and the importance of studying both issues and candidates before voting.

"In my mind, the most important thing is being an informed voter. Voting is a right, and with rights come responsibilities. You need to know about candidates and the different issues to cast an informed vote," said Nelson.

The lessons about democracies and elections go beyond the first Tuesday in November.

Recently, two new lesson plans have been added to the Kids Voting South Dakota curriculum offerings. One deals with the role of cooperative voting procedures and the other on tribal elections.

The Cooperative Curriculum, which received national recognition through the National Community Service Award from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in

Above: Harding County High School English teacher Frank Maslowski advises a sophomore class meeting led by class president Taz Olson. Class elections have been a traditional way for students to actively learn about democracy. This year, the students will expand experience as the school launches its Kids Voting program. **Left:** Students in Sue Ann Clanton's third grade classroom in Buffalo, S.D., raise their hands to vote during a poll in the class. this fall, the students will be among the nearly 80,000 South Dakota students participating elections through Kids Voting South Dakota. **Cover:** Pierre student Anya Jones ponders a Kids Voting South Dakota ballot. Pierre students have been voting in Kids Voting since 1994.



Arlington, Va., seeks to increase students' understanding of cooperatives as a business and also to see the correlation of how a cooperative is like a democracy.

As part of the lesson plan, students learn about a cooperative's business structure as a corporation owned by the members who use the cooperative's products and services. The element of member ownership and control is exercised through the cooperatives' voting processes. A cooperative is primarily controlled by a board of directors elected by and from the cooperative's members.

Cooperatives operate as democracies in that the members control the cooperative by casting votes on major business decisions. Students learn that the cooperatives are representative democracies in that the board of directors is elected by the cooperative's members.

The Tribal Election Curriculum, which was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, focuses on tribal government and elections. It was created in collaboration with tribal representatives, teachers and KVSD staff.

The curriculum is available to all schools beginning this fall.

"It gives a face to tribal governments," said DeVee Dietz, director for KVSD. Dietz noted that it gives an explanation of the state's nine different reservations and covers a history of tribal voting since the 1870s.

Dietz said the curriculum should be especially useful for students prior to local tribal elections.

The two curriculums, along with the basic Kids Voting curriculum and process, should pave the way for a more involved group of future voters.

"Anecdotal evidence shows that once students learn about the process and become excited about it, obviously they're going to participate at a high rate when they become adults," said Nelson.

For more information about Kids Voting South Dakota, visit www.usdemocracy.org

For more information on voting in South Dakota, visit www.sdsos.gov.

For more information on voting in Minnesota, visit <http://www.sos.state.mn.us/homel/index.asp>