

LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON CIVICS EDUCATION

INDIVIDUAL COMMENTS FROM TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Senator Berta Gardner
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The Civic Education Task Force was a fascinating experience. We learned that a number of states require students to pass the United States naturalization test as a condition of graduation. Initially I thought this was an interesting idea but came to realize that civic engagement is not measured in any meaningful way by memorizing the multiple choice answers to a 100 question test. Civic engagement is a vastly different concept which has to do with variety and depth of involvement and interaction in a community.

Some of my favorite ideas from the task force have to do with activities that expose students more to these kinds of opportunities. In addition to programs like Close Up, We the People, and American Legion's Boy/Girls State that intentionally seek to teach students government, several other programs like service projects, school clubs, school business partnerships, parents in the schools programs, and take your child to work days, also contribute to a student's understanding and engagement.

Most of us have circles of people with whom we interact, are influenced by and have influence upon. The size and number of these circles are a function of our involvement with others. Someone actively working towards improving aspects of their neighborhood, community, city and state, is much more likely to feel a stronger sense of purpose, accountability and connection to the people they know, and places they live. Someone who is less engaged, may not feel the same sense of connection or investment and could easily feel isolated and indifferent to the people and places in their area.

Some years ago I was privileged to be in Barrow during a whale harvest festival. A woman approached me angrily, complaining about the International Whaling Commission. When I asked questions about whaling she spoke to me strongly and passionately about the cultural importance of whale harvesting. She explained why it was so important in her culture and community, especially for young men. She told me how easy it is for boys on the cusp of manhood to get caught up in trouble if they don't see an important role for them in their community. For these young men, being part of a whaling crew was a "coming of age" ceremony, a process of teaching them levels of service and obligation, of being an essential part of a team with responsibilities beyond the critically important task of delivering a sacred food source to their community.

Listening to the task force presentations and discussion, my understanding of that whaling conversation shifted. I recognized that what she was talking about was the true meaning of civic engagement. It's a feeling of connection to a community and having a sense of purpose and accountability to the people around you.