

## DID YOU KNOW?

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By Susan Kovalik, © 2008 Susan Kovalik

### **Voting**

A New Year, a year of possibilities and probabilities both requiring a quick mind and a long-term plan about what we believe and how we act on our beliefs.

We are surrounded by the news coming from Iowa about the first primary election to select candidates to run for the presidency. Lots of words and hand shaking and promises and every news outlet looking for the story that will capture readers. This is an extraordinary country, we are relatively new, we accept people from all over the world, and we have many different religions without internal bloodshed and our children have access to free public education K-12. Our fortunate we are.

Compare this with an election with the news coming from Pakistan, Kenya, Iraq, South Africa and other countries struggling to figure out how to have a rule of law that would allow equal representation for all, even women, through voting. Their biggest challenge, beyond the tribal warfare, is the realization of where do people receive the experiences that allow them to build the infrastructure of a government? The mirror neurons, mentioned in last week's article, in young people mirror what they see and what they have seen. In these countries, there are years of war, refugee camps, genocide, hate, anger, mistrust and other forms of destruction to their families and their villages. Where are the people who can see the larger picture separate from just seeing larger power? It is not about an election; the first consideration is education of its young in the knowledge of how to ask questions, make decisions, reach consensus, and accept the majority rule without revolution. Democracy is not easy.

It makes me wonder about how we prepare our students to be participants in the larger picture. I remember when my youngest son came home in January of his senior year and announced he was quitting school. Part of his announcement included what he was legally able to do now that he was 18: sign a contract, join the military, sign his own absence notes, register to vote, buy cigarettes, get married and otherwise make his own decisions. When I began to question his decision he suggested that I visit his classes for one

day and see what it was like. I believe every adult needs to follow the schedule of a student for one day in order to appreciate both sides of the stories that come home from school. I did visit the school and his classes. They hadn't changed much from when I attended high school. The difference between us is that I was actively involved in student government and other extra curricular activities. We did have a talk I pointed out that if he chose to leave he would have 1 month to come up with a plan for earning a living. He took the GED and left. He did come up with a plan and the rest of the story is for another column.

His older brother chose to be involved in extra-curricular activities and that eventually led him to be selected for a one year term to the State Board of Education as the student representative. He also was selected twice as an outstanding student leader from California and traveled to Washington D.C. to meet the president. It is estimated that only 30% of high school students are active in extra curricular activities and that those involved have a much better chance of going on to college, it is expected.

One of the founding principles behind free, mandatory education K-12 was in Thomas Jefferson's words, "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code, is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness..." 1786.

Where do students receive the necessary training, information and knowledge to be able to vote at 18? Our education should allow us to understand the ballot measures that influence how we live and how we are taxed. Consider the following resolution by the Washington legislature: Joint Resolution 8212.

The legislature has proposed a constitutional amendment on inmate labor. "This amendment would authorize state-operated inmate labor programs and programs in which inmate labor is used by private entities through state contracts, and prohibit privately operated programs from unfairly competing with Washington business." Should this amendment be Approved, Rejected?

So how was that issued explained to novice voters? What did we need to understand to make an informed vote?

Here in Federal Way, we have a population of 87,390. Twelve thousand of those are enrolled in the public schools. I'm sure we have thousands of children under the age of five and some who are not American citizens as yet; given those figures we then see 38,128 are registered voters and 15,682 actually voted in the November election. So as Dr. Phil would say, "How's Democracy working for us?"

For many students, this will be the first presidential election for them to think about and for some, vote; the challenge is that you cannot wait until 18 to start to understand how the systems work that keeps a school district, city, county, state and nation functioning. Where do we give them the guidelines for responsible citizenship?

Think About It...