

CIVICS IN ACTION

SHAWNEE HIGH SCHOOL

Should our schools develop future community leaders and active citizens who will make a difference? Shawnee High School, headquartered in Union County in far Southern Illinois, is doing just that. Its students investigated a local issue, brought together local, state and federal officials, found solutions, and then the students helped raise \$100,000 toward a solution. The school has only 160 students, 65% of whom are low income, and one teacher, Jamie Nash-Mayberry, for all its social studies courses, but it is preparing youth to be active citizens and community leaders.

Two years ago, their teacher made the students aware of potential flooding of homes, farm land and other properties due to the deteriorating levees surrounding their communities. The students devoted about one class day a week over two years to studying this issue. They consulted experts from the Corps of Engineers, Southern Illinois University, and local and state officials. The students invited their state and federal legislators to hold a summit in the community to address the flooding problem and when the summit seemed delayed, they wrote Oprah Winfrey asking her help. While Oprah did not respond, the students' letters attracted press attention. After the story appeared in local newspaper and on the local television, the legislators set the summit date. Eventually, the summit produced some potential solutions and some grants. When the local levee commissioners needed help securing their portion of funding for a new drainage system, they came to the students. The students tapped into the resources they had developed and were able to help the levee district secure the needed \$100,000 in funding. The students, working with the art department, also designed and sold T-shirts with the funds going to

the levee district. The school district recently honored the students and their teacher for their contributions to the community.

These students learned the need to keep public officials informed of local problems, the willingness of these officials to respond, and the difference that collective citizen advocacy can make. To know whom to contact, these students had to learn the roles of the various branches of government and the interplay among local, state and federal officials. To be effective, these students conducted original research, gathered and processed information, thought critically, spoke and wrote persuasively, and collaborated and worked as a team. The students also learned the power of the media to highlight an issue as well as the limits of the media when it gets the facts wrong. Their teacher reports that they experienced the value of "giving back" to their communities. These students possess the knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions necessary for effective citizenship.

There are many models for involving students in becoming effective citizens and we will feature some of those in the following months. Ms. Mayberry and Shawnee High School met the challenge of teaching citizenship with nothing more than a creative teacher, a supportive administration, willing students, and a few hundred dollars for one field trip. This school is fulfilling its mission "that all students acquire and use knowledge, skills and behaviors necessary to become productive and successful members of society." (www.shawneedistrict84.com)