

Democratic Schooling at the Sky Level (Grades 6–8)

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“Just a quarter of our country is optimistic about our system of government—the lowest since polls by ABC and others began asking the question in 1974,” reported Stanley B. Greenberg in the July 31, 2011 *New York Times*, *Sunday Review*, “Why Voters Tune Out Democrats.”

This is distressing news. What does this mean for the future of our country? The basis of democracy is popular sovereignty, rule of the people, and dependent on civic engagement.

Even with this present pessimistic view of our government, we know that people are capable of contributing positively to the various communities in which they are involved.

Inspired by the feminist concept that *the personal is the political*, we work to tie local civic engagement to participation in our larger system of government in a meaningful way.

Our government is a tool of the people. Learning how to use this tool—to *live* democracy—must be a fundamental focus of education starting at a young age.

Equality

One of the basic principles of our democracy, and Wingra’s pedagogy, is that we are all equals—no easy concept to manifest in a traditionally authoritarian setting.

We tend to stress processes of learning and being together over production.

That is not to say that students are full citizens of our school community; the staff are still the final authorities here.



Teachers prefer informal small group times where students have a voice over standing and lecturing.

We know that we learn from each other in a synergistic manner. We are equals in our common quest for knowledge and living a happy and healthy life. As we nurture the pure joy of learning, we view knowledge, like democracy, as a tool. All in Wingra’s learning community are equals in confronting new problems and learning about new ideas and technologies to deal with those problems.

Justice

We know that there is more to democracy than simply rule by the majority. There are other forms of decision-making that are more equitable and can lead to a more socially just society. Students practice different forms of decision-making strategies in different contexts to ensure that everyone’s voice is always heard.

Knowing how to engage positively and willingly participate in decision-making

events (like voting) is at the heart of the democratic notion of popular sovereignty.

Students do this in the Sky classrooms when they sign up on the morning agenda board and ask a classmate to facilitate the discussion or problem-transformation session. We teach these democratic skills and attend to opportunities for participation and sharing power.

Valuing the Process

In order to decrease external motivators and competition, we do not grade or test the kids. Rather, evaluation is authentic and collaborative. Students keep portfolios, and we write narrative summaries of our observations after interviewing students about

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their progress toward meeting goals.

We tend to stress processes of learning and being together over production. We believe that this method of schooling leads to greater intellectual autonomy, the basis of a free-thinking deliberative democracy.

The Nature of Knowledge

Just as democracy is not static, neither are we in our modes of dealing with learning and living life.

We function with the understanding that knowledge often changes over time and that each of us holds a particular interpretation of the world. We honor diversity, and there is a richness of learning because of this.

Part of our respect for local knowledge and interpretation is made manifest in how we present much of our curriculum. Rather than relying on teacher-directed presentations, we create thematic centers.

Students make choices about the particular content and ways of going about conducting their learning. We encourage students to negotiate the modes of learning activities.

Engagement

We expect students to be active participants in their learning—to take ownership of it—and to work to make Wingra and the larger world an even better place to learn and live.



Sky students stand on stage with Rev. Jesse Jackson during a rally at the Wisconsin State Capitol in April 2011. Photo by Miriam Kopelow.

The skills and concepts of democratic action are learned and put to use daily in the Sky classrooms. Students learn to take appropriate, effective action.

Examples of this engagement include students starting (and continuing!) the *Yearly Wingra Duck* yearbook, planning and facilitating a student-led unit, leading morning discussion times, and planning social events on the Sky's Social Committee.

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Students have also come up with ideas to meet particular needs they see by starting groups, such as Kids for Peace; a chapter of the Gay, Straight Alliance; a Kids' Discussion group; Playground Participatory Action

Research group; Debate Club; Roses for Charity; Play Pumps; and Dungeons and Dragons.

We believe that individual civic engagement is essential for the success of our national democratic project and for living a healthy and productive life.

With this kind of democratic schooling, we hope that, rather than feeling pessimistic about our government, Wingra students will feel empowered to make changes they want to see in the world.

Like the Wingra song says, whatever you make of it, depends on you! ...depends on you!