2012 Professional Practices Program

Student Election Judge Program

Douglas County, Colorado

Submitted by:

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A Professional Practice Paper

Original whitepaper by the Douglas County (Colorado) Clerk and Recorder's Office in association with the Douglas County School District

Background
As elections technology becomes more complex, counties find that they need larger polling places and more poll workers who are savvy with technology. Many large venues suitable for a polling place are either reserved or cost prohibitive and recruiting poll workers from the younger generations is a difficult task.

The Douglas County Student Election Judge Program was set in motion in 2007 with a simple vision: To create a sustainable, repeatable approach to polling place elections where the County and School District work cooperatively to achieve mutually beneficial goals to the betterment of voters and students.

Among these mutually beneficial goals were to utilize high schools as polling places and engage high school students as poll workers.

Tips for Success
The Douglas County Clerk and Recorder, Jack Arrowsmith, searched for similar programs both locally and nationally. Finding none, Mr. Arrowsmith and his staff set out to design the program from the ground up and offers these suggestions for designing a similar program.

Check State Laws - At the time this program was conceived election laws allowed only one student judge per precinct, so Mr. Arrowsmith helped legislators create new statutes to allow one student judge per adult poll worker.

Early Engagement - Between multiple locations and administrators, school breaks, and concerns about student and facility security, early engagement of the School District helped to assure that all parties' needs and concerns were addressed. For example, the School District scheduled teacher a in-service day on Election Day so that students would not be attending classes, making the schools available for our use.

Utilize the Media - The local media was brought into the process very early to highlight the collaboration of the two entities and to illicit citizen feedback.

Involve the Student Body - Two students from each high school's student government program were recruited to create a planning committee. The success of this committee cannot be overstated as it not only garnered buy-in from the students, but also resulted in many new ideas and concepts.

Multi-Level Administration - In addition to district level administrators, the Clerk's Office had a liaison and sponsor at each high school. The liaison assisted with staff communications, planning and logistics while the sponsor helped to communicate with students and parents, and kept track of deliverables.
Follow Up - Due to the complexities and distributed nature of the school district administration hierarchy, it was important to follow up often with the school district and individual schools to verify that the project was on track and that the message was consistent. Of equal importance is to follow up after each election to make improvements to program, learn from the experience, and build a knowledge base.

Address Incidental Laws - In Douglas County, there were no curfew laws that would interfere with students participating in this program, but that may not be the case in all jurisdictions.

Outcomes
Nine high schools were utilized as Election Day polling places with only a few minor problems. Both the County and the School District recognized rich rewards.

From the County Clerk’s perspective, the high school polling places got positive reviews from voters and poll workers. Due to the mere size of the high schools and the amount of equipment and poll workers they could accommodate, voter capacity at these sites far outpaced any other polling place. The schools are comfortable and secure, ADA compliant, technology friendly, and have adequate parking all at a location known within the community.

From the School District’s perspective, they were able to showcase their facilities and utilize them in a way that benefited all taxpayers, not just those with children in school. The students who participated as a student election judge earned money towards their selected school program and earned time towards their community service graduation requirement.

Perhaps most importantly, the High School Election Judge Program was a tangible example of local governments collaborating on a mutually beneficial project to provide essential services to the taxpayer.

Questions about this program can be directed to Jack Arrowsmith, Douglas County Clerk and Recorder by emailing jarrowsm@douglas.co.us or Pat McGraw, Innovation and Development Officer for the Douglas County School District by emailing jpmcgraw@dcsdk12.org.
Elections are a double edged sword. On the one hand, they are the cornerstone of democracy, a basic right of our citizens, and one of the most direct methods that citizens can participate in their government. On the other hand, they have become highly dependent on technology which makes them more and more expensive each year. I saw it as the responsibility of the Clerk's office to find a way to reduce costs while not lowering services to our citizens.

From the outset, the Student Election Judge Program seemed to be the right fit: Government agencies collaborating for the betterment of its citizens, to improve a crucial government service, and to lower costs of providing those services.

I met with the Pat McGraw, who was the School District Chief of Staff at the time, to come up with a thumbnail of how the program would look. We were presented with several challenges ranging from statutory limitations and security concerns to administrative overhead and getting the students excited about participating.

After Pat and I had addressed our collective concerns and goals, we began the process of disseminating the information to the individual schools and their respective staff members. It turned out that communicating with each school administrator had its own set of challenges: Information would sometimes be distorted, would not get into the right hands, or would be omitted all together. We decided to bring a representative from each school to the table so we could be sure that we were communicating effectively.

Engaging the student body wasn't as difficult as we had originally feared. The opportunity to earn money towards the school program of their choice and earn community service time towards their graduation requirement was incentive enough for these young people to not only be engaged, but enthusiastic.

Bringing young poll workers into the picture had many benefits. First, they are very savvy with technology, quickly learned how to use the elections systems, and helped mentor our more seasoned poll workers. Second, their energy and enthusiasm was a welcome addition to the polling places and added a new dimension for both poll workers and voters visiting the polls. Third, they were able to learn about civics through real-world circumstances. Lastly, even after graduation some of our Student Election Judges continue to be involved in the election process, which is good for everyone.

I am very happy with the outcome and results of the program. It was a lot of work and took a lot of planning, but I believe it's a worthwhile endeavor for any county to embark upon.”
When Jack Arrowsmith first brought the concept of this program to my attention, I was excited because of the opportunities it presented to both of our organizations. After Jack and I had developed the framework for the program, we turned it over to a council made up of the student body to manage and implement.

Our students benefited in all aspects: Many were involved with (and learning from) planning and implementing the program while others were participating directly as Election Judges. Even those students who chose not to participate benefited because their school program received some of the revenue.

The Student Judge Program was also a fantastic way to engage students in Responsible Citizenship, a cornerstone of what our district teaches, in a real world setting and environment. This really was a learning experience that most teachers dream about.

As with most school districts, we were looking for alternative funding sources for some of our programs to help offset some pretty big budget cuts. Most of our students who participate in school programs also participate in fundraisers where the entire effort might produce a few thousand dollars in a given school year. In its first year, the Student Election Judge Program brought over $16,000 to the school district as a result of a few days effort.

The School District also saw this as an opportunity to share our tax-funded facilities with all county citizens, not just those who have kids in our schools. It's not often that we get an opportunity to safely open our facilities to the public so we jumped when we had the chance to do so.

We took one of our teacher in-service days and moved it to Election Day so as to impact the school calendar as little as possible. This also had the added benefit of giving our teachers a greater opportunity to make it to the polls and cast their own ballot.

Historically, the County and the School District haven't always seen eye to eye. While there has never been overt disagreement or disputes, the level of cooperation and collaboration was lacking. The success of this program strengthened the strained relationship between our two entities and has lead to prosperity in other areas as well.

Most government administrators can probably relate to bad press about all levels of government. Because we engaged the press early on and involved them in the details, we enjoyed very positive press coverage throughout the process.

I cannot overstate the success of this program and suggest it as a model for every school district to take to their local Elections office.”
Managing an election is like few other things. There are so many moving pieces, each one as important as the last, and a misstep in any area occurs in the public eye and damages the reputation of the County. As a result, I am constantly on the lookout for ways to simplify our elections without sacrificing service.

The Student Election Judge Program started out as a simple question: What if we could use the high schools as polling places? From this initial question, the program has grown and produced fantastic and sometimes unexpected results.

For me, one of the big benefits is that I can communicate with nine polling places with a single email. This saves time, energy, effort, and allows me to focus on other tasks. In a word, it added simplicity.

We noticed simplicity bleed into other areas of the election process as well: Because six of the nine high schools are identical the time we spent planning the logistics of equipment setup and poll worker staffing was slashed, processes and procedures began to be more consistently applied from site to site, and emergency management plans were more easily replicated. This has saved hours of staff time and allowed us to be more effective in other areas.

We also enjoy a long-term agreement with the School District. The 2012 Election will be the third election in which we have used this program and it is a relief to know that, from year to year, we have a strong partnership with the School District and that we can count on nine large, secure polling places regardless of other factors.

There have been many benefits to the County, the School District, and our citizens but I think the biggest impact has been to my staff, our processes, and the efficiencies that we've gained.”
This supporting document is a video and can be found at:

http://player.vimeo.com/video/32938697