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A Three Pronged Approach to Improving Civic Engagement

Kankakee County, Illinois

Submitted by:

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The Kankakee County Clerk recognizes the importance of engaging first time voters within the electoral process. Evidence from the March 2014 election within Kankakee County confirms that recently enfranchised voters often have the lowest voter turnout. Only 4.9% of registered 18-19 year-olds voted in that election, while nearly 20% of registered voters between ages 40-69 voted. In order to encourage participation among first-time voters, the Kankakee County Clerk has developed a three pronged approach to improving civic engagement. The focus of this approach remains on education, registration, and true participation.

In Kankakee County, the first phase of this approach to improve knowledge and understanding of the election process begins when a student is in middle school. Since 2009, the County Clerk and Regional Superintendent of Schools have partnered to provide an authentic election experience to 3,000 seventh and eighth grade students. This has been much more than a voting project as steps are taken so that teachers can walk students through each step of the election process. Goals of the project have remained consistent: Reinforce the notion that *Every Vote Counts* and *One Person, One Vote*. The Election Project allows teachers to recreate the election process within their classroom through activities that allow students to: Complete a Voter Registration Application; Receive a Voter Registration Card; Complete Entries in a Poll Book. In completing each of these steps prior to the election, the students begin to understand the processes in place to ensure one student, one vote. It also helps students understand the guidelines governing who would be eligible to vote in an election. In addition to being prepared to vote, a great deal of emphasis is placed on ensuring that the ballot questions are relevant to the students and result in some action after the election. In creating the questions, there are two types of questions asked; local questions and region-wide questions. To facilitate this, each school is designated as a precinct. In formulating a region-wide question, a partnership was formed with the Life Education Center (LEC) which provides drug and alcohol resistant programming throughout the county. The LEC sponsors a contest where students create a billboard promoting healthy alternatives to alcohol and drugs. LEC staff allowed the Election Project to become the final step in selecting the winning billboard that would be displayed throughout the county. In doing so the question was both relevant to the middle school voters and would result in an action as the winning bill board was displayed just weeks after the election. The Election Project has increased in popularity and authenticity as time has progressed. In the most recent election of 2013, schools included discussions of campaigning, the function of election judges, and electioneering. Students involvement and discussions are philosophically at a much deeper level, well beyond a simple "Who won?".

Through the second phase of this approach, the Kankakee County Clerk facilitates voter registration for eligible high school students. In order to encourage these first-time eligible voters to become engaged citizens, the Kankakee County Clerk visits local high schools each spring and provides voter registration services. Students have the opportunity to visit a voter registration booth during their lunch period, making registration materials more readily accessible. This year, a new law effective January 1, 2014 allowed certain seventeen year olds the right to vote. According to this law, a seventeen year old is eligible to vote in primary elections if he or she will be eighteen years old on the date of the immediately following general election. In hopes of encouraging seventeen year-olds to register to vote, the Kankakee County Clerk offered voter registration services to high school students in January. This allowed several newly eligible students to register as voters, before the general primary election in March. With the provision of high school voter registration booths, the Kankakee County Clerk successfully registered 66 newly eligible seventeen year-olds in January 2014. Of these

registered seventeen year olds, 19.7% cast a ballot in the March 18th Primary Election. The voter turnout percentage for seventeen year olds was 2% higher than the general voting population at 16.5%.

The Kankakee County Clerk aims to go beyond first-time voter education and registration. In order to promote “true participation,” the Kankakee County Clerk encourages and invites high school students to serve as election judges. The High School Judge of Election Program is an opportunity for civic education and also provides welcomed assistance in the election process. Each year students meeting criteria outlined in the Election Code are offered the opportunity to serve as an election judge within the county. In order to serve as an election judge, the student must be a U.S. citizen and junior or senior in good standing enrolled in a secondary school. Student election judges are responsible for conducting a fair and impartial election in the precinct to which they are assigned. Students who serve as election judges receive hands-on experience in how elections are conducted, as well as training on how to open a polling place, process voters, and close the polls. Similarly with the education phase of our approach, student election judges become involved within the election process on a much deeper level. They begin to develop a lifelong appreciation for the democratic process, and they are much more likely to participate and remain active voters. Based on data that we have gathered, former high school election judges have a higher rate of participation when compared with voters within the 18-29 age group (See Attached Documents). While certain elections have a higher turnout compared with other elections, data shows that former high school election judges continue to be active voters following their service as an election judge. In the February 2008 Primary Election, 50% of former high school election judges voted while only 9.8% of registered voters between ages 18-29 voted. In the following presidential election in November 2008, 68.75% of former high school election judges voted and 36.7% of registered voters between ages 18-29. In each election since February 2008, former high school election judges had a higher percentage of voters cast a ballot than the general voting population within their age group in Kankakee County.

Based on evidence collected by the Kankakee County Clerk, the education, registration, and true participation of first-time voters has an impact on their perception and future involvement within the electoral process. The Kankakee County Clerk aims to continue to implement this three pronged approach in order to further encourage civic engagement among young voters and increase participation.



For Immediate Release

Students cast their votes for *Wise Highs!*

The I-KAN Regional Office of Education once again has teamed up with Kankakee and Iroquois County Clerks Bruce Clark and Lisa Fancher to provide students with a lesson in the electoral process – and healthy lifestyles.

Both Clark and Fancher made available county voting machines so that 7th and 8th graders could cast their vote for the winner of this year's ***Wise Highs*** Billboard contest sponsored by the I-KAN Regional Office of Education's Life Education program.

"The students seemed to understand how the election process works. We are now completing our third election cycle, the first being four years ago," said Gregg Murphy, Region Superintendent of Schools for Iroquois and Kankakee Counties "It teaches students that one vote does really count."

Students learn the entire process –starting with a registration drive, creating poll books -- even providing election judges to assure that the electoral process is carried out to the letter of the law. Just like in a real election, votes will be tallied through the County Clerk's offices.

"This is an excellent way for students to become part of the process," said Brenda Wetzel, director of the Life Education programs. "After all, how many kids get a chance to see the inside of a voting booth before they are 18? It will make the lessons more meaningful and working with both Bruce and Lisa is a wonderful way for our program to connect with the community."

The billboard contest is held annually for 5th and 6th graders participating in the Life Education's healthy lifestyles and substance abuse prevention classes. The design must incorporate the program's theme: "*Choose Wise Highs....Choices You Can Live With.*" The winning artwork is then displayed on billboard throughout Kankakee and Iroquois counties.

The winner will be announced as soon as election results are tallied. For more information, call the Regional Office of Education at 815 937-2950.

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The Election Project Provides 7th-8th Graders With An Authentic Election Experience



Student signing pollbook prior to casting ballot on “Student Election Day.”

2013 Election Project Region Wide Election of the Life Education Billboard Contest Winner



A- Who Needs Drugs



B- Live Everyday



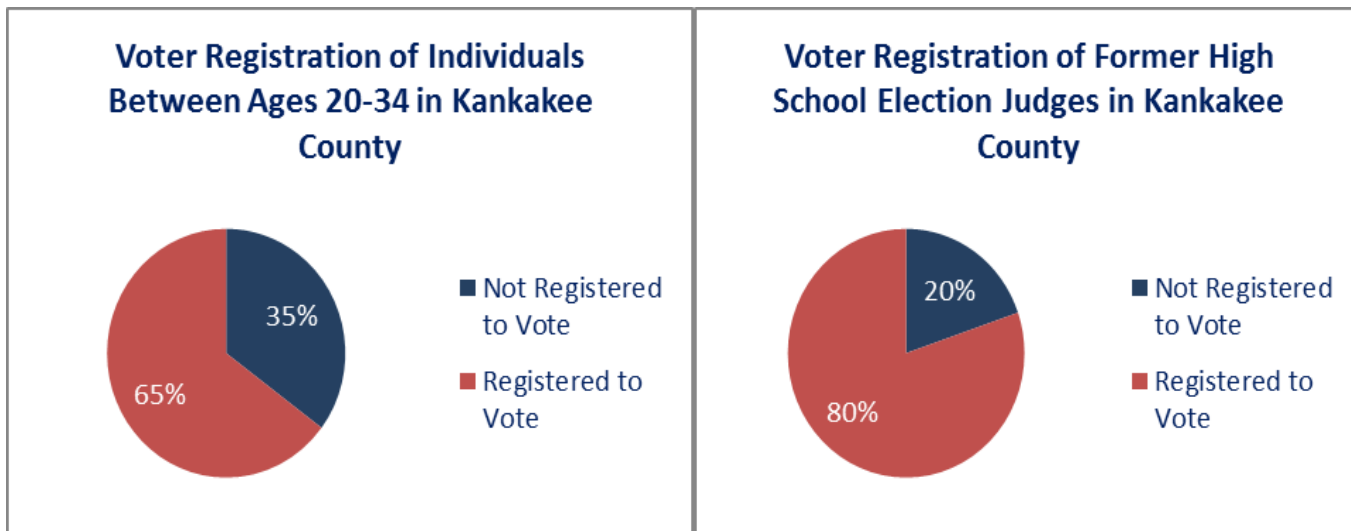
C- Think



D- America's got Talent

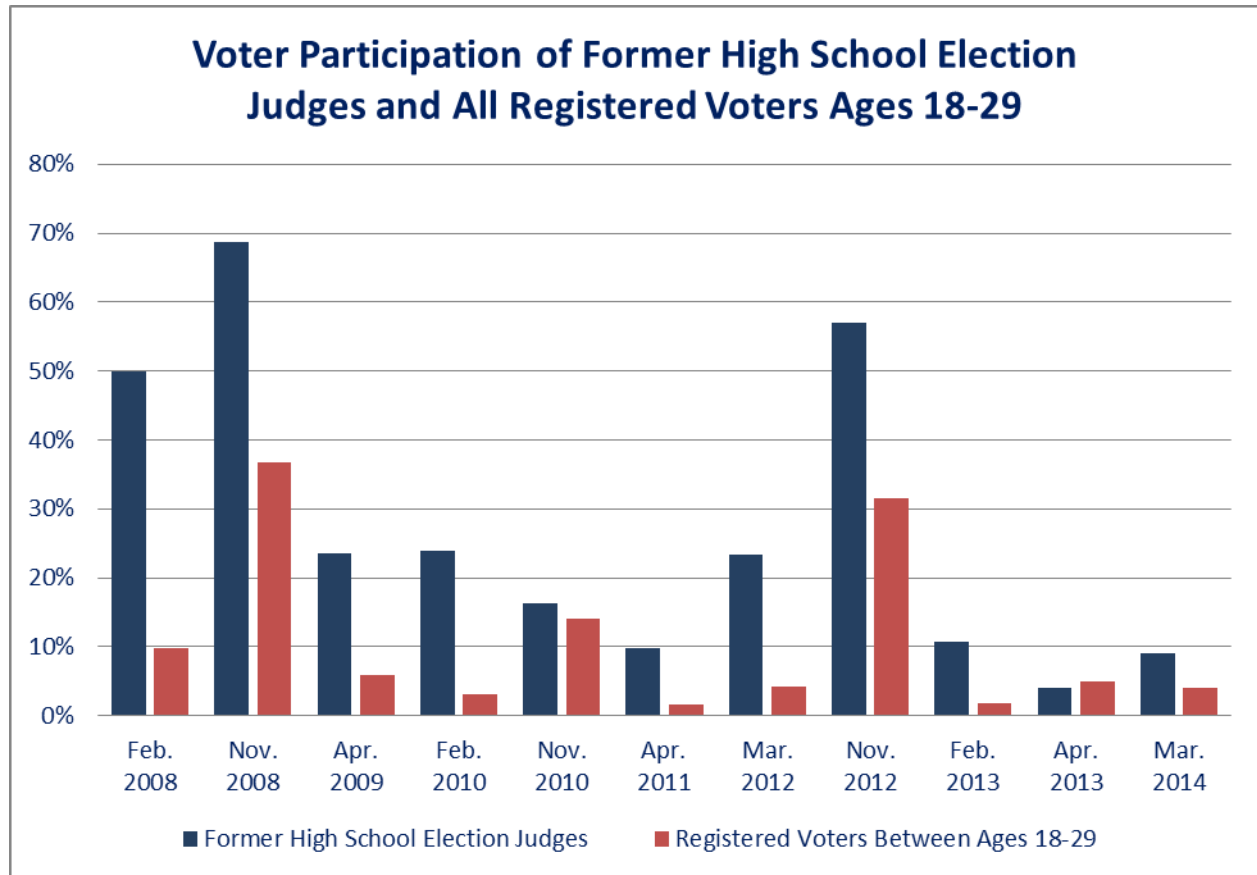


Former Election Judges Are More Likely To Register To Vote



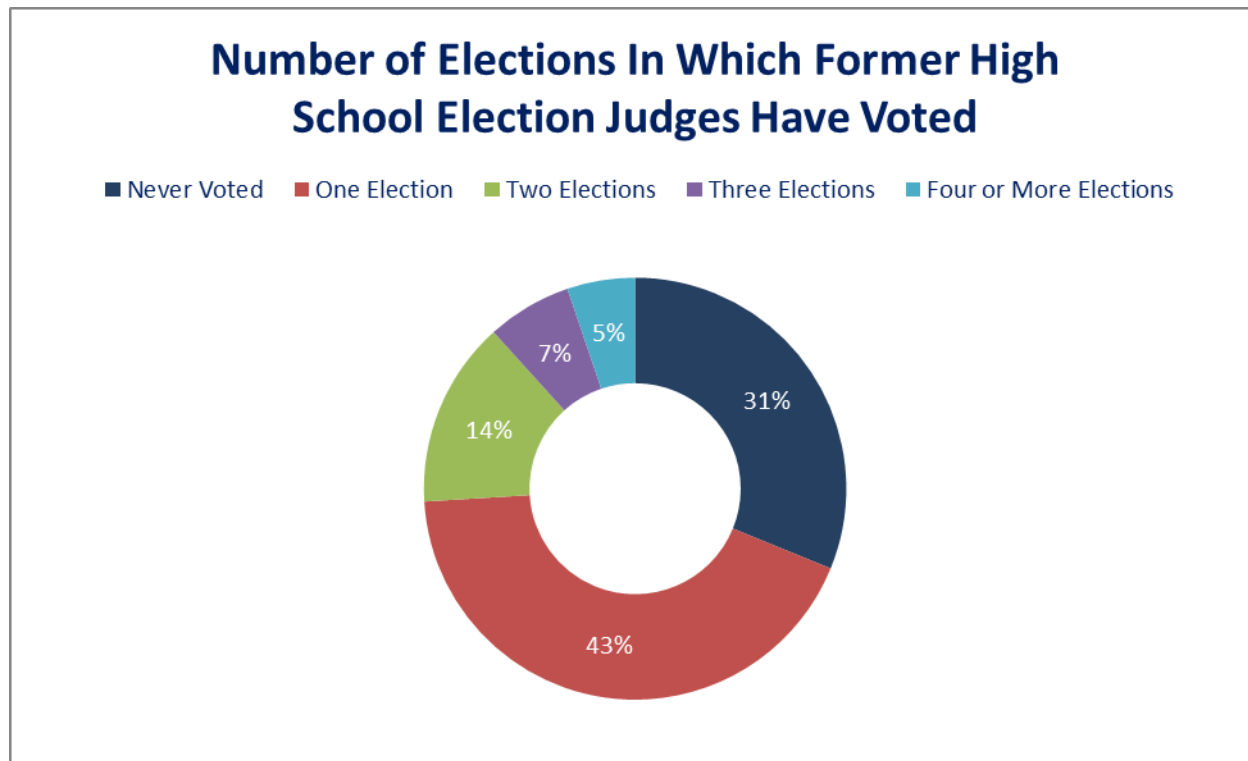
The above graphs compare voter registration between former high school election judges and their peers, ages 20-34, within Kankakee County. Based on information within the graph on the left, 65% of individuals between ages 20-34 are registered to vote. This information was determined based on US Census Data from 2010. According to the graph on the right, 80% of former high school election judges are registered to vote within Kankakee County.

Former High School Election Judges Have A Higher Turnout Rate



The above graph compares voter participation among former high school election judges and registered voters ages 18-29. The graph shows that high school elections judges are much more likely to cast a ballot within an election compared with their peers. For example, in the February 2008 election, 50% of registered former high school election judges cast a ballot while only 9.8% of all registered voters ages 18-29 voted. Although voter turnout fluctuates with each election, former high school election judges continue to vote at higher percentages than the general population of 18-29 year-olds in Kankakee County.

Former High School Election Judges Continue To Vote After Serving As A Judge



The above graph demonstrates the number of elections in which former high school election judges have voted. 69% of former high school judges have voted in at least one election. 26% have voted in at least two elections, 12% have voted in three or more elections, and 5% have voted in four or more elections.

These results are even more encouraging as this population is highly mobile. Yet, these former election judges continue to remain active participants within the electoral process following their engagement as election judges.