

## PROJECT CITIZEN COLORADO

*Citizens – I thought they just sat around and paid taxes – but they have to help make decisions.— Project Citizen student*

Project Citizen Colorado teaches upper elementary, middle, and high school students how to participate responsibly in local and state government. The program provides a much-needed opportunity for young people to DO democracy. Students work together to identify and research a public policy issue in their community, evaluate options, select a solution, and develop an action plan for local government leaders to use in addressing the issue.

A state showcase at the Colorado State Capitol provides students with an opportunity to share their work with other students and experts. Some truly remarkable projects leading to real change have come from this program. Students worked with school board members to improve school bathrooms, proposed school-wide recycling programs, made concrete suggestions for improving student achievement, developed PSAs about clean water, proposed policy changes to reduce the dropout rate at their school, and approached city council to move marijuana clinics away from their school



**Why is Project Citizen Colorado an important strategy for civic engagement?** One of the most important roles of schools is to prepare young people to participate in the civic life of their community and nation. Research by RMC, Inc. documents the authentic and lasting effects of Project Citizen as a strategy for engaging young people in the civic life of their communities and state. Properly implemented, the project is engaging and demanding, as illustrated in these comments from students

- *Sometimes as a teenager, you can be looked down upon. Project Citizen gives you a chance to speak out to make a difference*
- *We learned about rules, laws, ordinances, and policies and what level of government was involved with each one.*

Teachers report that Project Citizen makes the concept of civic engagement relevant and concrete to their students. Because Project Citizen maximizes opportunities to practice literacy skills, the program has gained favor for both civic and literacy outcomes. Students learn how to interact with community leaders, particularly local and state policymakers, on current policy issues. Students practice literacy and research skills, particularly summarizing non-fiction, persuasive writing, and public speaking, all of which can be directly applied to authentic issues that matter to them.

**Why is professional development for teachers an important component of the program?** Professional development must be carefully focused and structured to support the program outcomes. Dr. Diana Hess reports that the quality of teaching is the most powerful determinant of students' access to a meaningful civic education. For this reason, high quality professional development is core to the implementation of Project Citizen Colorado. Project Citizen professional development engages teachers in interaction with policy experts and observing hearings; master teachers provide mentoring. To teach the skills needed to implement Project Citizen successfully, one- and two-day seminars will be held in various parts of the state with co-planning and co-sponsorship by school districts.



**Who participates in Project Citizen Colorado?** As many as 2,500 students—most from schools with a large percentage of students in the free and reduced lunch program—have engaged in the policy-making process annually for the past 20 years. Students have met with principals, made presentations, and/or testified to school boards, state legislative committees, and city councils. They have monitored legislation and added a youth voice to the policy process.