

Equipping students to seek change

By Lisa Thornton

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Daniel Helms realizes teenagers know how to argue. He sees proof every day in his social studies class.

Whether it's imploring a teacher to give full credit for a late homework assignment or to dole out bonus points to compensate for a low grade on a quiz, or even to balk at the unfairness of assigned seating, teenagers can put forth great effort defending their cases.

So why not put that natural talent to good use?

Since January, Helms, a teacher at Northwest Cabarrus High, has engaged his sophomore students in the Civic Action Project, a more hands-on approach than using the textbook that sophomores in civics class used.

In CAP, students learn how to create arguments to change public policies they believe aren't effective.

"I think there is this element of, 'We can't make a change,'" Helms said, referring to student attitudes toward authority. "But I don't think anyone has ever told them 'Hey, you can try, and you can see what will work.'"

Helms said knowing they can make a difference is one of the best lessons he can teach students.

CAP was created by the Constitutional Rights Foundation as a means to persuade students to complete a civic action process from start to finish. The N.C. Civics Education Consortium, an organization sponsored by UNCChapel Hill, trained Helms in the curriculum.

During the first several weeks of class, students learned lessons in public policy, such as the proper channels to use when trying to change it and the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

Then Helms sets them off to change the world.

"Students know more about arguments than we give them credit for. They know what is logical. They know how to twist logic for their advantage, and they know when what someone is presenting is illogical," he said.

"It's just a matter of taking what they already do and putting it toward something they haven't considered arguing."

Some students chose to argue against the school's tardy policy. Others, such as Kelsey Keller, 15, a sophomore in Helms' class, thought the school budget need their attention.

"Cabarrus County is getting so many tax cuts for schools, we wanted to help raise money to keep some classes and some clubs going," she said.

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The process, Kelsey said, was riddled with obstacles.

"At first we tried to find ways that we can raise the school money, but all of them were really costly, and there were too many risks," Kelsey said. "It was really hard to raise money to save classes."

Realizing they had taken on too large a project, Keller's team refocused on a more manageable goal: They began teaching clubs how to keep themselves afloat by holding fundraisers previously proven to be successful.

"I think we know what we can do now," Kelsey said. "When we were younger, it's 'You can't do this. You can't do that.' But you really don't know what you can do.

"Now, if I disagree, I can do something about it. I don't have to sit back and watch it fold out."

That's the very lesson Helms hoped his students would pick up.

"Knowing that you can go and talk to the mayor, you can talk to county commissioners - if there's a need that you see in your neighborhood, there are people who can address it," he said.

"That's a skill students need for the rest of their lives."

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