

This is a transcript from a commentary by Aleta Margolis that aired on WAMU 88.5 FM on Tuesday, February 5, 2008

Super Tuesday: Democracy, Education, and the Vote

Today voters in 24 states will select the presidential candidate they hope will lead us to a better future. And today more than 75 million students will head to schools in *every* state to continue preparations to *be* the future.

It may be more than a decade before most of them vote, but all students will grow up to become part of our democracy.

What does it take to be part of a democracy? More importantly, are our nation's schools preparing young people to do that?

On its surface the voting process is simple, requiring voters to read candidates' names, then push a button or fill in a paper ballot—or, in the case of a caucus, raise their hands and move to one side of the room.

Below the surface, however, casting a vote is a highly complex process requiring careful thought and analysis.

In choosing a candidate, we must sift through increasingly large piles of information to separate fact from fiction, façade from true intention, and jargon from solid belief.

We must compare and contrast viewpoints, and use our imaginations to envision how a chosen candidate might govern. Voters participating in a caucus must debate, voice opinions, persuade others, listen, and arrive at compromises.

Are students getting the chance to develop these skills in school?

In this era of high stakes testing and scripted curricula, there is heavy emphasis on memorizing information but too little focus on understanding and applying that knowledge.

Ask the following about your neighborhood school:

- If a student can fill in the right bubble on a multiple choice algebra test, can she also explain the purpose of algebra outside the classroom?
- If a student can list the steps in the electoral process, does he also possess the skills to debate its benefits and drawbacks?
- If students are raising their hands to answer questions, are they also *asking* questions about what they're learning, the policies that affect them in school, or their roles as young Americans?

Schools ought to be places of inquiry and understanding, not just spaces for demonstrating a basic recall of facts.

If we don't take this responsibility seriously, we risk creating a generation of young people who aren't equipped to think critically or participate fully in the democratic process. They may be good at pushing buttons, or raising their hands – but civic engagement demands a good deal more than that.

After the political smoke of this presidential election has blown over, there will still be more than 75 million students going to school each day, preparing to become our future candidates and voters.

If we are to preserve and strengthen our country's democracy, it's incumbent upon all of us to make sure our young people are well-prepared to do just that.