

Maine East honored for civics efforts

October 03, 2013 | By Elizabeth Owens-Schiele, Special to the Tribune



Maine East High School in Park Ridge has been recognized as an Illinois Democracy School by the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, an honor the recognizes the school's efforts to provide civic learning for a diverse student population.

Maine East joins Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Carbondale Community High School in Carbondale, John Hancock High School in Chicago and Josephinum Academy in Chicago as the recently announced Democracy Schools.



Each high school will get \$5,000 from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation for its school-wide civic assessment demonstrating the school's commitment to living a mission of civic engagement.

"The most important thing about this recognition is making us look at what we can do to improve the experience of students and how they can be citizen participants in overall society," said Carl Brownell, social science

department chair at Maine East High School.

Brownell, the architect of the school's civic program, who joked there was some "peer pressure" as the recognition already has been given to Maine South and Maine West.

"Most of our students are coming from a background as immigrants, or their parents are, and this is at some level new to them and their family," Brownell said. The meaning of being a U.S. citizen "is something a lot of them are still navigating and figuring out their place and how to have an active role."

Maine Township High School District 207 is one of only three school districts and a total of 22 schools statewide recognized since the inception of the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition's program in 2006 for a commitment to teaching civics and community engagement.

Shawn Healy, civic learning and engagement scholar at the McCormick Foundation and chair of the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, said his organization believes one of the central purposes of schools is to prepare young people to be citizens in a democracy.

This preparation for civic life is critical, particularly since Illinois is ranked 47th of 18-29 year olds voting regularly in local elections, according to the 2012 Civic Health Index collected by the National Conference on Citizenship, Healy said.

"Maine East is unique in that it is incredibly diverse and the majority of students speak a language other than English," Healy said. "At the school, there is a deep commitment to civic learning across the curriculum and they excel in direct instruction with a required government course and teaching controversial issues."

Healy said the school also stood out for its "vast extracurricular activities where students practice civic engagement."

During the year-long application process for the designation, Brownell said a student survey of 280 senior students was conducted, led by a core group of teachers and analyzed by a select 12-student panel.

The panel was asked to think analytically, emphasize the school's strengths and critically examine what the high school could improve upon inside and outside of the classroom.

"The areas we would like to improve upon are having connections with the

community and helping students see civic participation in the community," he said.

With the stipend, Brownell said he hopes to recruit community speakers and alumni to come to classes and talk about politics.

Through the assessment, the group also determined that although the high school did not have an organized community service program, more than 60 percent of the students surveyed did some type of community service through a church, mosque, synagogue or community center, he said.

"We need to leverage that better and not ask students to do more, but be reflective, or tie it in to a more organized project helping to reach out to a particular group," Brownell said, noting many of the students volunteered in nursing homes, community or culture clubs, as well as participated in food drives and church mission trips.

"Everyone agreed upon a feeling [that] we have wonderful students here at Maine East, but they don't feel empowered enough to speak up," Brownell said, recognizing issues of bullying faced by students at Maine West last year. "We want to be more encouraging and inclusive in all aspects of school life."

A recognition ceremony for the Illinois Democracy School designation is being planned for this fall when Maine East will receive a banner for public display and a certificate signed by Gery Chico, the chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education; Thomas L. Kilbride, the chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, and the school's state legislators.

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