

SCHOOLS

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Stevenson's civic learning focus earns democracy award



Lincolnshire-07/03/13, Wed./Stevenson High School Matthew s Giddens, 17, of Buffalo Grove, poses w ith Governor Pat Quinn after bill signing Wednesday at Stevenson High School. | Joe Shuman~For Sun-Times Media

Laura Pavin | For Sun-Times Media | @LauraPavinNews

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Stevenson High School is one of only five schools in the state — and the only one in Lake County — to be named an Illinois Democracy School by the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition.

Upon successful completion of a school-wide assessment, Stevenson earned both the title and a stipend earlier this month from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation to invest in high-quality civic learning initiatives.

In particular, Stevenson's social studies teachers have been working to bolster the school's civic learning efforts with voter registration drives, visits from elected officials and candidates, and issue-based student input forums.

Though school leaders haven't yet decided how it will use the stipend, Stevenson social studies director Brad Smith said its Democracy School Committee is considering a couple of ideas.

"So far, we've done a phenomenal job of registering students to be voters; and since the vast majority of our students go to college, we were thinking about reaching out to them to assist with the absentee voting process," Smith said.

The other ideas, Smith said, involve funding co-curricular involvement with the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago and supporting the activities of the school's Political Action Club.

Smith noted that Stevenson has been a leader on civic issues and involvement for years.

"We are wonderful at preparing students for college and the professional world, and we will continue to be very overt in expanding to help improve civic engagement," he said.

An informal presentation and announcement about the stipend is expected to be held at the school in November.

Governor Pat Quinn paid Stevenson a visit in July to sign legislation that government teacher Andrew Conneen began pushing for almost a decade ago. The new law allows 17 year olds the right to vote in the primary election, should they turn 18 in time for the general election.

Many Stevenson students and faculty joined Conneen over the years to lobby state legislators.

Quinn praised the school for its work during his July 3 visit, saying the new law "will encourage young adults to take on their civic duties as soon as possible and make their voices heard in all Illinois elections."

The state Senate passed a resolution two years ago that commends schools for taking steps to earn the Democracy School distinction, and encouraged all secondary schools in the state to do the same.

The resolution, called Senate Resolution No. 149, requires each school district's report card to note which of its secondary schools are Democracy Schools and which are not.

In addition to Stevenson, the four other schools recognized by the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition this year were Maine East High School in Park Ridge, Chicago's Josephinum Academy and John Hancock College Prep High School, and Carbondale Community High School in Carbondale.

Since 2006, 22 high schools have earned the recognition.

"The committed students, teachers, administrators and school board members of these five schools should be commended for living their civic mission and joining the growing ranks of Illinois Democracy Schools," said Shawn Healy, chair of the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition.

To become a Democracy School, a high school's faculty and administration must form a team to perform a school-wide assessment evaluating civic learning across the curriculum, extracurricular opportunities and school governance.

According to the McCormick Foundation, schools must provide formal instruction in U.S. Government, history, law and democracy; structured engagement with current and controversial issues; service learning linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction; extracurricular activities that encourage greater involvement and connection to school and community; authentic opportunities for student leadership and decision-making; and participation in simulations of democratic structures and processes.

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