



Santa Barbara County Education Office

4400 Cathedral Oaks Rd, PO Box 6307, Santa Barbara, CA 93160-6307
Telephone: (805) 964-4711 • FAX: (805) 964-4712 • sbceo.org

Susan C. Salcido, Superintendent of Schools

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For information: David J. Lawrence
(805) 964-4710, ext. 5282

Put ideals into action by voting Nov. 6

By Dr. Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

In just a matter of weeks, November's election will be upon us. Those who are 18 and older will have the opportunity — and responsibility — to vote for representatives including local school board candidates, members of the assembly and congress, and state governor. We will be voting for individuals who will represent us — “we the people.”

How will those voting for the first time make responsible decisions about candidates and propositions? How do any of us make the best choices we can in the voting booth? And how can we have confidence that our choices matter?

The answers to these questions are rooted in an education that provides knowledge about how our government works to impact our lives, the skills required to identify and evaluate the relevant arguments and opinions, and the duty to let our opinions and voices be heard.

To continue to thrive, our democracy requires all of us to do what's best in our neighborhoods and our voting booths. We need to take part in community activities, make ourselves aware of communal needs, vote, and make sure that our votes are well-informed. By knowing the issues and where candidates stand on them, we can assert our values and beliefs about freedom, equality, and equity, and put our ideals into action.

The process involves wading through the invective and gimmicks and slogans in order to determine what policies a candidate actually supports on a wide range of issues. It's not always easy to do, but it's important. Young people who see adults around them make these efforts are more likely to apply the same due diligence.

Every day we see opportunities to volunteer at events and contribute to “change” movements that affect communities nearby and across the world. These are causes that young people and adults can stand behind, and then observe the outcomes first-hand. It is empowering to set out to make a

change, raise funds, or volunteer time and effort for the greater good, and watch those efforts come to fruition. Sometimes change in policy or practice is slow, but the impact can be long-lasting.

The same is true of the choices we make on our ballots. The change we seek can be slow to take hold, but the impact can be long-lasting and life-changing for our families and communities.

In order to help positive changes take place, it is important to understand fully how our government functions, to distinguish between vitriol and respectful disagreement and debate, and to fully appreciate the responsibilities we shoulder as citizens.

Democracy requires that “we the people” vote to secure government of, by, and *for* the people. We must stand up for the common good and support candidates that reflect that vital cause. Thomas Jefferson said, “In a democracy, agreement is not essential, but participation is.”

That is why it is important that we all understand the democratic values that unite us. Schools play an important role in supporting that process. The benefits of learning about our government and our duties as citizens are abundant. Besides fostering a healthy society, it can help teach skills needed for the workplace, including critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, and innovation. Done well, civic education engages students by making classroom learning relevant to real life.

Thomas Paine famously said, “The right of voting is the primary right by which other rights are protected.” That is particularly true at this critical juncture for our nation, in light of the events taking place that impact us all. It follows, then, that educating students about how our government works and the importance and process of voting must be a priority of a society that helps promote participation. That’s how positive change can take place.

All of us, together, can help cultivate that urgent and important sense of civic pride and responsibility in our young people and all voters. Voting is our responsibility and opportunity to put our ideals into action.

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