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Today's kids are ready to get involved



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Claire Gardner

Written by Claire Gardner

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Opinion Opinion Tennessee Voices Kids today get a bad rap. They're not engaged; they're obsessed with their phones; they're self-centered, spoiled and cynical. They don't care. But last Nov. 12, 23 million young people ages 18-29 showed up to take part in the democratic process.

Attempts to disenfranchise young voters by outlawing universityissued student IDs at the polls didn't work. States with new voter suppression laws, like Tennessee's photo ID requirement, actually Most Viewed

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saw an increase in youth voter turnout. Despite the obstacles young people faced at the polls, they were determined to be heard. They stood up, spoke up, and their numbers accounted for 19 percent of the total national voting population.

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So what's mobilizing this generation, the one that's supposed to be too busy texting to notice the world around them? Why did they surprise everyone by waiting in line for hours to cast their ballots (even if they were probably texting while they waited)?

It started in high school.

A national poll of young voters, conducted in 2012 by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, showed a clear correlation between their high school civic education experiences, their

knowledge of campaign issues and their participation in the election. Young people who hadn't voted had less knowledge about issues and reported fewer civic education opportunities in high school. Educating high school students about the democratic process, and the civil liberties issues that affect them, makes for better informed, civically engaged citizens.

What are the issues that affect teens? There are a lot to choose from. In Tennessee, bills being debated at the General Assembly play fast and loose with students' rights, effectively disempowering young people. Like a bill that would cruelly punish students for subpar grades by reducing their families' TANF relief; or an anti-diversity bill that would have severely limited opportunities for minority and female high school students applying to college; or the ever-lurking "Classroom Protection Act" (aka "Don't Say Gay") with a dangerous amendment pending that would take away critical support from vulnerable youths who need to be able to speak with guidance counselors and other trusted school staff about real-life issues they are facing.

In such a political landscape, it is crucial for high school students in Tennessee to increase their civic engagement and cultivate their knowledge of civil liberties. They deserve the chance to expand their understanding of the Bill of Rights, connect to youth empowerment resources and actively participate in community change. It's in Tennessee's best interest for today's students to become tomorrow's leaders, so we must create these opportunities for our teens.

Kids today get a bad rap. They're told that they don't care, but it's not true. They're concerned, passionate critical thinkers who are ready to be involved and serious about taking on the responsibilities of freedom.

You may be right, though. They are on their phones too much.

High school students who want a deeper understanding of their rights in school and beyond are invited to attend ACLU-TN's "Stand up Speak Up: Students' Rights Conference" 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

PHOTO GALLERIES

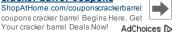




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Wednesday at the Martin Professional Development Center, 2400 Fairfax Ave. in Nashville. The conference is free, but students must pre-register at http://bit.lv/SRC2013.

Claire Gardner is the ACLU-TN community engagement associate and a social work student at Middle Tennessee State University.

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