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## PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS NEED A POLICY FOR VOTER EDUCATION AND REGISTRATION

By Coleman Poses & Thomas Quinn

Asbestos and lead threaten the air that students breathe and the water that they drink in many of our Philadelphia schools; while the State, the Parking Authority, and wealthy non-profits shortchange our school district by hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Good politicians can address each of these problems through the legislative process, and every citizen over 18 can help to elect them. The School District of Philadelphia should be doing everything in its power to encourage the City's citizens to participate in the election process, starting with voter registration. According to the most recent census estimates and voter registration data, there are over 80,000 unregistered citizens within our City's boundaries. It is therefore puzzling that the District has no policy to assure that all 8,000 eligible students have the opportunity to register to vote.

During the past year, school district staff have taken a number of admirable steps to make voter registration more accessible to students. With the help of The Committee of Seventy, the League of Women Voters, and Rock the Vote, the district has provided training to many high school social studies teachers in voter registration, and has developed a voter registration resource packet. Philly Youth Vote, the City Commissioners, and a number of other volunteer organizations have also partnered with the district to register students. The driving force behind this work is the individual teachers, students, and community advocates

in many schools. What is missing is a citywide policy enacted by the Board of Education that would guarantee nonpartisan voter education and registration in every high school, every year, that should permanently raise voter turnout in the city. Such a policy might contain all of the elements that the District had implemented in the past year along with the identification of young adults and engaging them around voter registration.

Every school district in the State – especially Philadelphia - possesses the technical capabilities to implement such a policy. Issues regarding confidentiality and the screening of volunteers to work in the schools also have feasible solutions. The only missing ingredient is the will of the Philadelphia Board of Education to make it happen. Last April, Dr. Maria McColgan, the chair of the BOE's Policy Committee, stated that her group would be considering such a policy. That was the last time that Dr. McColgan used the terms "policy" and "voter registration" in the same sentence, despite several requests from students; teachers; the acclaimed author, former SRC member, and [Vote That Jawn](#) founder Lorene Cary; and David Thornburgh, President and CEO of the [Committee of Seventy](#).

John Dewey, the twentieth century education philosopher, stated that "The purpose of education has always been to every one, in essence, the same—to give the young the things they need in order to develop in an orderly, sequential way into members of society."

Hopefully, the Mayor will take this purpose under advisement while considering the composition of the new School Board, because we can't say that we are

teaching civics adequately to our students if, by our inaction, we are depriving them of their greatest entitlement and responsibility as citizens – the right to vote. When 8,000 students [march on ballot boxes](#) every year, we may finally see lead and asbestos cleaned from their schools.

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