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**School
Violence
Prevention
Demonstration
Program**

Center for Civic Education

RAISING RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS

*Research on Allentown School District Civic Education Program Proves
Valuable in Urban Setting*

(Allentown, Pa.) June 3, 2008 – A climate study at Ritter Elementary School assessing the impact of the Center for Civic Education’s School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program (SVPDP) has yielded encouraging results for the Allentown School District. The study conducted by The Development Source, Silver Spring, Md., found that there is a positive correlation between implementation of the program and higher achievement levels on Pennsylvania standardized testing, better student-faculty relations, and a more cohesive sense of community.

The results of the study were revealed during a presentation at Ritter Elementary School on June 3, 2008, Allentown, PA, where ASD administrators, elected officials and special guest, Judge Marjorie Rendell, Pennsylvania’s First Lady, were in attendance.

“We understand that one of our major responsibilities at this level of education is to begin the development of the next generation of American citizens,” comments Myron Yoder,

Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator for ASD. “Students are more likely to succeed in life if they are civically engaged. Civics provides a meaning to students why they should learn how to read, write and do math and science. We are deeply committed to the SVPDP, and our young students are learning the skills and lessons needed to address public problems and become more active community members.”

This is a prevention program, not an intervention program. The SVPDP focuses on academic study and group learning activities that promote increased knowledge and skills, as well as the foundation to becoming engaged citizens. In the 2007-2008 school year, all K-5 classrooms used the SVPDP, reaching 9,500 students, while teachers in the District’s middle and high schools piloted materials.

Ritter, like many of Allentown’s schools, is a majority-minority school with a working-class background and significant academic achievement gaps. The social studies curriculum is able to create, from kindergarten upward, a shared common vocabulary and common understanding of authority, privacy, responsibility and justice. In an urban setting like Allentown, where students represent 41 countries and 24 languages, this style of teaching has vast potential.

“We have already noticed a deeper sense of community and commitment among our students,” says Ritter principal Melissa Marcks, a former teacher and trainer in the program. “They have a warm, affectionate regard for everyone in the building and the property itself, making sure litter and graffiti are removed as quickly as possible. The various racial, ethnic and economically dispersed groups at Ritter blend and interrelate, and we could not be more thrilled with the academic boost it has given our students across the board.”

Dr. Jayme Sokolow, head of the climate study, conducted three focus groups with parents, two with Ritter students and two with Ritter teachers to attain feedback on what effect the program implementation is having. The consensus among the teachers is that SVPDP has helped them teach social studies more effectively, with students grasping

American history and governmental concepts better. They have also noticed an increased understanding of the concept of authority.

Students in the focus groups were very specific in the values and lessons that their 2006-2007 social studies curriculum had instilled. Many talked of the concepts and meanings of sharing, respect, non-violence, justice, responsibility, privacy and authority. The elementary school students also believe that the program has helped them develop better relations with their teachers, family and friends through greater self-respect and control.

Perhaps an area for improvement in the implementation of the SVDPD program is communication with parents in the Ritter community. Many in the focus groups are unaware that it is a special program, instead equating it with standard social studies curriculum. Aside from this point, the parents are happy with the lessons their children are being taught and pleased that they are acting more responsibly, both at home and on school property.

"Students often feel disenfranchised," comments Maria Gallo, national director of the Center for Civic Education program. "The program helps students understand that they are part of the process. They can have a voice and affect change. It provides them with the skills necessary to work together and with their community leaders, which so important for their future as well. They become invested in their community and take ownership of their environment. It is this investiture that helps students be proactive in their schools."

The study found that Ritter has had particular success with the program due to three factors: realistic content and balanced, nonpartisan treatment of issues; the use of community resources to connect students to the world outside their classrooms; and engaging teaching strategies that focus on class discussion over lecture, small group learning, and role playing or debating.

Studies of the School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program have also shown equally encouraging results at three other ASD elementary schools: Cleveland, Jackson and Jefferson. Civic education boosts academic performance across the board and builds civic-minded and responsible citizens. At Ritter, students are being educated to believe that civic and political participation can improve their neighborhoods, city and nation. They are learning that public institutions are likely to work better when citizens participate in public life. More importantly, ASD students are being given the knowledge and skills to effectively engage themselves in these areas. While the study focused on Ritter, the results extend to all of the elementary schools in the Allentown School District because SVPDP is the district-wide social studies curriculum for elementary civic education. Certainly, the SVPDP should be looked at by other schools and other urban-based school districts across the country. Producing more responsible community members must start young.

About the School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program

This program, funded through a grant from the US Department of Education, began in 1999 with middle school students in seven large urban school districts. Since then, it has expanded to encompass elementary and high school students in urban, rural, and suburban areas. School districts volunteer to participate in the program and receive textbooks, teacher guides, supplementary materials, training and ongoing support from the Center for Civic Education, along with modest financial support. The program, compatible with *No Child Left Behind* Act, believes that civic responsibility by students will foster academic success. Formal, professional development activities are available for teachers throughout the year, and students complete simulations of a Congressional hearing and a portfolio about a public policy problem. www.civiced.org

About Allentown School District

As the fourth largest of 501 districts throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Allentown School District educates approximately 18,300 students in 22 pre-school, elementary, middle and high schools located throughout the City of Allentown. It employs over 2,000 administrators, professionals, staff members and employees. More

than two-thirds of ASD's students take part in a district-wide free or subsidized lunch program.

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