Case Studies of Student Election Judge Programs

From April to June of 2019, Minnesota Civic Youth, in partnership with the City of Minneapolis Department of Elections and Voter Services and the League of Minnesota Cities, surveyed elections officials across Minnesota about their work with student election judges. In addition to gathering information on the scope and scale of high school election judge programs, we hoped to capture details and examples from different student election judge programs across the state. To effectively gather this information, we conducted in-depth telephone interviews with election officials from five jurisdictions in Minnesota. In one case, where the program was run through a collaboration between two jurisdictions and a non-profit, we spoke with a representative from each of the three.

We chose to focus on programs in Hibbing, Ely and Morse, Saint Louis Park, Minneapolis, and Blue Earth County, because each had distinct characteristics in its program. Programs in Hibbing and in Ely and Morse were selected for how they trained and placed students – Hibbing differentiated between students ages 16-17 and those age 18, training them differently and giving them different jobs; Ely and Morse recruited groups of students and veterans to be trained together. Blue Earth County was chosen because for its program in which students or organizations adopt a precinct and pool their earnings for a cause chosen by the group. Finally, Saint Louis Park was selected for the 10-month student education program they offer as an enhancement to its student election judge program.

Certain themes came up repeatedly in the interviews, many of which echo our survey results.

Relationships (particularly with schools) appeared to be the most important part of building a successful student election judge program. This was true in smaller communities, where election administrators at times personally knew school administrators or teachers, as well as in larger ones, where strong relationships helped administrators build credibility over time to better support recruiting. This highlights two key parts of relationship-building: (1) stronger relationships and recognition were necessary to the program's success, and (2) developing relationships is a longer-term process not achieved in one election cycle.

These same relationships also presented obstacles at times. One challenge was that a lack of relationships, or the loss of a previously strong relationship (often due to retirement or an individual leaving a position), can make building or sustaining a program challenging. Suggestions to address this included trying to build and maintain multiple relationships, to be less dependent on just one. Building these relationships is not always easy, though. Elections administrators sometimes struggle to convince teachers and school administrators to replace sequenced curriculum for a civics lesson from an elections administrator, or to allow students to miss class to serve as judges. Getting support in coordinating student paperwork and permission forms, or even getting schools to engage with elections administrators, also

presented challenges. Nonetheless, these relationships were still seen as valuable and worth the effort.

The experience of working with students also came up often – both the many positives and the common negatives. Administrators consistently highlighted the amount of energy and excitement that student judges brought to their work, their skill levels (particularly with technology, but in their overall ability to handle work as well), their ability to work well with voters and other judges, and the extent to which they made voting precinct staff look more like the voter base. They struggled, though, with the need to "babysit" at times, particularly in terms of getting students to turn in paperwork on time. This also meant occasionally needing to ensure students were doing their jobs. Students who returned their forms and attended training typically did well in their judge roles, and performed similarly to adults.

Curriculum also came up again, reiterating that students are generally able to handle the same training as adults. When they changed their training at all, administrators simply added components to make material more active and engaging—a strategy that would be effective for adult judges as well. Examples of this include bringing voting machines to training for students to practice using before election day, adding more civic engagement components to contextualize the process, using more visual materials, or incorporating games or discussion questions into training material.

Hibbing: Multiple roles for students

The student election judge program in Hibbing is different from most Minnesota programs in that it distinguishes between 18-year-old and 16- and 17-year-old high school students. The 18-year-olds are trained side by side with adults and serve as team judges. They also complete extra training in addition to the standard curriculum, emphasizing the importance of election judges in upholding free and fair elections. The 16- and 17-year-olds are trained separately and do not serve as judges.

According to Candie Seppala, Hibbing's Council Executive Assistant, the separation in duties is rooted in the belief that older students are better prepared to handle any confrontations or aggressive behavior they may encounter with voters at the polls. This belief lead Hibbing to develop a training for youth that specifically elaborates on these issues.

Seppala highlighted the efforts to ensure that younger students still have a valuable educational experience without being judges. For the 16- and 17-year-olds, training focuses on how election systems work, the implications of those systems, and the importance of election judges in ensuring that all voters have full and equal access to exercising their voting rights, rather than emphasizing the mechanics of being a judge. This training is held in the late afternoon on election day so it doesn't significantly conflict with school but still allows students to help with elections.

Younger students also often serve as “runners” between different precincts to help complete tasks and speed up the ballot counting process or help enter data. They get to observe election judges working and understand the roles of challengers without the possibility of having to respond to a confrontation. Because younger students don’t serve as judges, Hibbing can make exceptions to the 16-year-old age minimum and occasionally allow 15-year-olds to help with the election without serving as judges.

Students of all ages are trained on technical processes through mock check-ins and mock voting, so they know what ID is necessary to register or to vote and how to correctly fill out a ballot. Judges of all ages, along with younger student volunteers, are also trained on using the voting machines and other technology. This stands out as a recognition that younger people are not fundamentally less capable than older ones, and that all can benefit from more detailed and hands-on training.

Ely and Morse: The Power of Partnerships

The City of Ely and Morse Township in Northeast Minnesota offer a student election judge program in partnership with Walking Civics, a civics-focused nonprofit. Ely is located within Morse Township, and both are encompassed by the same school district. Walking Civics, the program’s nonprofit partner, recruits local high school students and armed services veterans to be trained and serve side by side as election judges. This three-way partnership helps build a strong program that has received national recognition.

Cole Kleitsch of Walking Civics and Morse Elections Clerk Nick Wognum said that that while their program may look different on the surface, it still sees many of the same obstacles and benefits as more traditional student election judge programs. Ely City Clerk and Treasurer Harold Langowski echoed this sentiment, and along with Wognum, saw relationships as integral to the program’s success in recruiting both students and veterans. All three emphasized the importance of the relationships built between students and veterans.

The program is designed to build connections where they might not otherwise exist. Its philosophical foundation—that service in the military and as election judges are both important acts of service to one’s community and country—lets students see local civic engagement as related to the veterans’ military service. In addition, Langowski saw the program as building on the same foundation as others, preparing high school students for a lifetime of civic participation through voting, service as judges, and more, saying, “If you don’t vote when you’re 18, what will get you to vote when you’re 19? When you’re 20?”

The program is also grounded in the community’s history of service and engagement. Relative to other communities across Minnesota, Ely has always had very high voter turnout and military service rates. Using the notion of service in its many different forms, Ely and Morse’s training emphasizes the importance of judges in upholding the integrity and accessibility of the election

process. This responsibility was in turn tied to veterans' service in defending free and fair elections in the United States. Kleitsch articulated part of this idea as saying to students, "You're going to learn how to be of service, and you're doing that next to the best example of service possible." He said, "You're not launching missiles, but we are counting on your integrity to make this process work."

Wognum, the Morse Elections Clerk, provided perspective on the more technical and administrative side of the program but emphasized the same themes as Kleitsch, and particularly the program's connection between military and student judge service. Relationships are important for Wognum as well, both in recruiting and connecting students and veterans. To recruit, the program relies on support from the principal of Ely Memorial High School and the leader of the local honor guard. The school helps collect permission forms, coordinate trainings so they fit student and school schedules, and find training space. Langowski echoed this emphasis on relationships, particularly acknowledging Kleitsch's role in working closely with the schools to build mutually beneficial relationships that would last between election cycles. He saw this relationship as being important in facilitating his own role in helping train and place judges and ensuring they were fully prepared to serve.

Kleitsch, Langowski, and Wognum all emphasized how much of the program's success came from their own collaboration, individually expressing gratitude for the unique work each had contributed, as well as for the support of other elections staff, including Casey Velcheff from the Ely Clerk's Office. Each saw the contributions of the others as having been invaluable to seeing the program come to life.

To build connections between students and veterans, trainings include time for the two groups to get to know each other, having veterans share about their service at the beginning of training. Time for unstructured conversation also helps build connections over shared experiences and interests, like a veteran and a student who realized they played on the same high school basketball team decades apart. To accommodate different learning styles, they offer multiple ways for people to participate in trainings, bringing voting machines into training to let students learn to operate them before election day. This, combined with the relationships built during training, helps make election day itself less intimidating to first-time judges.

In reflections, both students and veterans, as well as the principal of Ely High School, expressed appreciation for the new connections and strong sense of civic engagement and service to community that the program helped build. Students came away feeling strongly about the importance of serving their community as election judges and in other capacities, and adults were happy with the quality of students' work and the connections they built. The varied ages of veterans also brings a range of experiences to training, helping them to better connect with students. Their different experiences with voting also brings valuable perspective. Some who served when the national voting age was still 21 had returned home from service before they

were even old enough to vote, giving them a unique perspective on the importance of young people voting.

All these factors combined to garner Ely and Morse the national recognition they have today. In February 2019, the US Election Assistance Commission announced that the City of Ely and Morse Township had been recognized as winners of 2018 Clearinghouse Awards, or Clearies, under the category Best Practices in Recruiting, Training, and Retaining Election Workers.

Blue Earth County: Adopt-a-Precinct

To create a sense of community for students while also increasing student involvement and follow-through, Blue Earth County in South Central Minnesota offers an Adopt-a-Precinct program in addition to their normal election judge program. Community groups, such as nonprofit organizations or class groups, can choose to “adopt” a precinct, serve together as judges, and pool their wages toward a common cause. Groups have included an organization that helps seniors stay in their homes as they age and a class group raising money for a trip to Washington, D.C. Blue Earth County also offers groups the opportunity to have their training come to them, which for students means a training at their own schools with their friends.

To recruit students and class groups for this program, elections staff partner with schools in two ways. One method is to present a civics curriculum on broader systems and current election issues (such as the impact of voter turnout on representation), and recruit students then and there. Alternatively, Blue Earth County also offers the civics curriculum as a stand-alone program, where rather than recruiting election judges on the same day, they follow up about student interest later. This curriculum is distinct from election judge training itself, where students go through the same curriculum as adults.

Michael Stalberger of Blue Earth County Elections, sees this program as an opportunity to positively take advantage of peer pressure when working with students. The program’s close relationship with schools also helps decrease common issues with student follow-through on turning in paperwork and attending trainings, as it creates a more school-like environment and greater incentive for participation.

In spite of these benefits, Stalberger recognizes that the program is heavily dependent on relationships and on establishing credibility through word of mouth, as well as on the ability to convince teachers to allow class time for elections staff to present their civics curriculum and recruit. And while follow-though on paperwork improves with this model, students continue to need extra guidance or supervision at times. He acknowledges that many of the challenges in working with students also exist with adults, but points out that we may have a greater desire to correct and support students because they are younger.

To both help build relationships with schools and begin recruiting judges, Stalberger described working backward with one school, where for the school district elections (typically run by the

school clerk), he pushed for students to be hired as judges. This opportunity let schools see what students can gain from being judges, and what they are capable of in the role.

To get students invested in public policy, they have focused conversations on local issues, such as school or public park funding. They talk to students about issues in the context of things they can connect with, such as their school's need for a new gym. Student and adult judges working together also allows the two to learn from one another, such as adult judges who are less confident with technology paired with student judges who need to be taught that some apprehension can be good, or adult judges with more experience paired with students who need a confidence boost. To ensure all judges feel fully prepared, they are also trained on all the equipment used at the polls.

Stalberger particularly saw room for improvement in collecting permission forms and finding transportation for students to polls on election day. He is exploring how multiple forms could be streamlined into one or submitted electronically. Transportation issues are more complex. Early-morning commutes on election day present an obstacle for students who don't drive or don't have family who can drive them, and best practices dictate that head election judges should not drive students. To reduce this obstacle, he is trying to find ways to coordinate transportation before 2020, particularly looking to schools to support doing so.

Saint Louis Park: Year-round engagement

Where most election jurisdictions that offer high school students the opportunity to be trained and serve as election judges offer only short-term opportunities during election seasons, Saint Louis Park offers students a 10-month ongoing program. Starting with a successful student judge program, election officials added to it based on interest from past student judges and adults who worked with the program. The strength of their existing student election judge program in turn helped grow the program, particularly through name recognition and existing relationships with schools and past student judges.

Talking about his office's desire to engage with students beyond the election season, Elections Specialist Robert Stokka highlighted the goal of making the program as accessible to students as possible. While many participants had previously served as election judges, the 10-month program expands beyond past student election judges, and is open to students in grades 9-12 rather than 16- to 18-year-olds. Saint Louis Park typically has far more trained adult judges, in addition to any student judges, than it has the capacity to place, making it possible that not all students will get to serve as judges. This makes the 10-month program a valuable alternative for any students who are unable to serve as judges. Additionally, each meeting is held at a different location to be more geographically accessible to a larger range of students. In scheduling the program, though, they did have to be intentional about timing, as many students had other obligations during the year.

The program itself goes beyond elections in its focus – students learn about different levels of government (from municipal to state and federal) and their different responsibilities. They volunteer at local civic events such as National Night Out and mock elections in schools. Meeting are kept engaging using hands-on learning activities, like a board game designed to teach about Ranked Choice Voting, matching activities connecting policy questions and different levels of government, and true/false questions about voting statistics. Through this extended opportunity, students get a deeper dive into local government and civics, and the curriculum introduces them to some of the job opportunities that may exist for them in government further down the line – elections administration included.

When asked what he saw as the largest obstacle to the program's success, Stokka said that the hardest part was simply building up attention and getting people excited. This meant that, when programs were just starting off the ground, jurisdictions needed to remember not to go in with an attitude of "hi, bye," and leave without follow-up. Instead, officials should recognize that it will take time not just to get the word out about their programs, but to establish credibility. One way that Stokka highlighted to begin doing this was through student newspapers, which take information directly to students.

Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services: Peer recruiting of students

Minneapolis has been working with student election judges since 1991, and has been recognized nationally for its work with a U.S. Education Assistance Commision "Clearie" Award. For most elections, high school students make up 20 percent or more of Minneapolis election judges, and they come from a growing number of high schools. The program has working partnerships with 17 high schools and draws applicants from nearly 40. As one of the largest jurisdictions in the state, it is one of the few with a seasonal staff position dedicated to coordinating the student program.

Like the majority of student election judge programs in Minnesota, Minneapolis currently trains student judges alongside adult judges using the same curriculum, and pays them the same rates. "It's a philosophical decision," according to Student Election Judge Program Coordinator Caryn Scheel. "They are doing the same work as adult judges, and feel better prepared for Election Day after experiencing hands-on training with their adult peers." It also helps with the logistics of training hundreds of student judges from so many different schools.

More than any other single factor, the success of the Minneapolis student election judge program can be attributed to the strength of its school relationships. Many of the school advisers have been partnering with Elections & Voter Services for years, and their schools have developed a culture where being a student election judge is an experience that students look forward to. As a dedicated staff member, Scheel can focus on maintaining and strengthening

relationships with the public, charter, and private schools she works with, navigating the different participation requirements at each school.

Most student recruitment takes place within the schools, with the assistance of a teacher-adviser within each school (typically a US government or social studies teacher, or at times a member of student support staff). In 2018, Minneapolis piloted a program to turn over responsibility for recruiting to experienced student election judges, working as Elections Ambassadors. This offered three immediate benefits, according to Scheel. “First, there have always been students who really enjoyed their election experience and wanted more in-depth engagement opportunities. This helped address that desire. Second, involving students can shrink the administrative burden for staff. Students are often better than teachers at knowing how to promote a program to their peers.” And finally—it was highly successful. Minneapolis increased the number of student referrals from friends, receiving almost 800 applicants for 400 available openings. According to Scheel, 2018 was the first year Minneapolis was unable to place all of the students who wanted to work, and she worked to refer them to other election jurisdictions near where they lived or went to school.

Beyond their ability to help recruit, student election judges are valued for many other reasons: their bilingual language skills, their technology savvy, and their desire to welcome voters from their own diverse communities. Post-election surveys show that the youth value the experience and believe they gain civic and workplace skills. Most important, however, they experience their city and their government in new ways—and talk to their friends and families about it.

Minneapolis will formalize and expand the Election Ambassadors program for the 2020 elections, expanding it to include more intentional learning for participants, as well as opportunities to direct and participate in other civic projects.