The Jewish Educational Center

COHORT 6

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2023-2024 was the first year in which the Jewish Educational Center, a pre-K through twelfth-grade school located in Elizabeth New Jersey, sponsored a Civic Spirit Club. Our students responded enthusiastically to the idea of participating in a project that would offer them the opportunity to engage in experiential learning and would reach beyond the school's campus into its relevant surrounding communities. From the beginning we tried to develop a Club culture that fostered student control of the project to the greatest feasible extent. As a first step the Club members, a committed nucleus of ten students, developed their project concept and goal. They decided to develop a social/political research project that would increase understanding of political opinions among members of New Jersey's Jewish community and, in particular, attempt to identify any possible relationship between denominational affiliation within Judaism and political affiliation and attitudes. Through this project, they hoped to both increase their understanding of the state's Jewish community and learn valuable research skills that they could use in their college careers and in their adult lives. In achieving this goal they also hoped to meaningfully address the Civic Spirit objectives of increasing a sense of civic belonging to the local Jewish communities and, most importantly, of enhancing the member's civic skills. For almost all of the students, it was their first opportunity to participate in research design and community collaboration and they responded to the opportunity with enthusiasm, hard work, and an observable sense of ownership of the process.

With a proposed project goal established, the Club then gained approval for the project from our school administration. With that approval in hand our Civic Spirit group then studied the research technique, defined the research question, created a draft questionnaire, had the questionnaire reviewed and edited by a collegiate-level researcher, gained school approval of the instrument, developed an interviewing methodology, contacted prospective respondents using lists of congregations provided by the Jewish Federation and initiated interviewing via Survey Monkey.

The questionnaire poses sixteen multiple-choice questions; first, the respondents are asked a series of questions that identify their demographic profile through questions regarding age, gender, citizenship status, education, and denominational affiliation. They are then asked to respond to a set of questions designed to elicit their political opinions and affiliations. Among these questions are queries about

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political party affiliation, the degree of political influence exercised on their children, and the extent to which support for Israel determines their vote. To date, approximately 65% of our target total of 100 responses have been received and tabulated. It should be emphasized that these results are preliminary and may be altered by receipt of additional anticipated data. Thus far, however, it appears that the respondent group is overwhelmingly comprised of natural-born United States citizens and evenly divided between men and women, the majority of whom have graduate educations and are 40 years old or older. The group is currently equally divided in party affiliation between Democrats and Republicans with very few unaffiliated or minor party affiliations reported. The majority of respondents report that policy toward Israel is either always or usually a determining factor in their voting decisions. The majority of respondents to date also indicate that they attempt to influence the political opinions of their children to be consistent with Jewish beliefs. Any or all of these preliminary findings may, of course, be altered by the addition of additional responses.

Thus far, we have distributed 115 interview requests and received 64 completed surveys within two weeks. Our students are amazed and grateful for the unexpected level of support their project has received from the state's Jewish community. We are hoping to achieve 100 surveys before we conclude interviewing. The project is scheduled for completion in May. An analysis of the results will be offered in a written report to both the school's administration and Civic Spirit.

Our boys are grateful to Civic Spirit for giving them this opportunity to learn more about their community and to have a directive voice in their own educations. It's been a great experience for all of us.