

Empowering Students to Become Involved in Government
Ventura Adult School

Sometimes a teacher energizes a class. At other times, students energize the teacher. Occasionally, both energies combine to create a synergy. This occurred in Steve Thompson's intermediate-advanced EL Civics class at Ventura Adult Education in the spring of 2006 — teacher and students worked together to the benefit of their community.



Steve and his students worked on an EL Civics objective they had chosen as a class: "Students will be able to access information in order to actively participate in school and local government activities." The class took a tour of City Hall and spoke to a member of the City Council, which empowered the class to speak with local officials on other matters. As a result, when an activist from CAUSE (Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy) spoke to

the class about the Children's Healthcare Initiative, students asked in-depth questions and became inspired to get involved and make a difference. They found it unconscionable that more than five thousand children in Ventura did not qualify for health insurance. The students researched the issue and learned that the County Board of Supervisors would be addressing the topic in a future meeting. The students wrote letters to either a government official or the editor of the newspaper, but they decided not to mail the letters. Instead, they selected two speakers to represent their collective voice and to hand-deliver the letters to the Board of Supervisors. All the students helped the speakers prepare their presentations.



One speaker, Magaly Espinosa, said, "I couldn't sleep the night before... When we went to the Board of Supervisors, I feel a lot of nervous, then the secretary called my name, I felt more nervous!" Magaly did a beautiful job, and the whole class was there to support her. She marks that morning as pivotal in her life. "I felt some new strength in myself. I felt brave because it was my first time to speak with special people. When I finished my speech, I felt a lot of power inside of me because I feel more comfortable. I continue to feel more sure of myself."



The other speaker, Marcelino Ortiz, added the experience to a portfolio of increasingly notable achievements in communication: he worked one summer as a disc jockey at a local radio station and now has a permanent

job as a journalist with a countywide newspaper.

Members of the Board of Supervisors thanked the students for their comments and congratulated them for becoming involved in the democratic process. Although the Children's Healthcare

Initiative has not yet passed in Ventura, the students have become more aware of local issues and of their ability to make a difference in the community — affecting the lives of their classmates as well as other community members. The activist from CAUSE stated that, “student efforts were critical in the process” of acquiring health insurance for all children in the county. Mary Lou Torres, a student in the audience who supported the speakers and who sent a postcard to a Board member, summed up the way she and her classmates now feel: “We can make the difference.”

