



## TYLA Galvanizes High School Seniors to Vote

Addressing a group of high school students recently, **Clint Harbour**, a TYLA director from Austin, asked them if they thought voting really mattered.

“Yes,” a young woman answered emphatically. “Because we have to deal with things. The president really affects us.”

The student, who is 17 years old and will not turn 18 in time to vote in the November elections, represents one of two groups TYLA is targeting with its VoTexas initiative.

“We’re primarily aiming at high school students who are turning 18 and eligible to vote for the first time,” said **Kirsten Cohoon**, co-chair of the TYLA Law-Focused Education Committee. “But students not old enough to vote might have parents who don’t vote. We’re hoping those students will be inspired to go home, talk to their parents about voting, and encourage their parents to register.”

Harbour, another co-chair of the Law-Focused Education Committee, said TYLA’s goal is to make voting a habit for the students early on. “If we get students involved when they first get the right to vote, there is a good chance they will

remain voters the rest of their lives,” he said. “Research suggests that voting behavior at an early age carries through.”

TYLA designed the VoTexas curriculum to be implemented over the six weeks leading up to the general election, with an ideal starting date in early October, but the timeframe is flexible and the lesson plans highly customizable.

“From the perspective of teachers, they can implement as much or as little of the curriculum as they desire,” Harbour said.

VoTexas is one of TYLA’s acclaimed “off-the-shelf” education programs — a fully developed set of education materials available at no cost to educators. More important, TYLA’s army of volunteer lawyers stands ready to go into classrooms and serve as program moderators.

“We want to get our young lawyers into the schools,” Harbour said.

TYLA Secretary **Mary Reveles**, the executive committee member who oversees TYLA’s programs involving public service in schools, said teachers can implement the program on their own, but that most prefer to take advantage of the energy

and resources attorney volunteers bring to their classrooms.

“TYLA volunteers will provide voter registration cards so we can register students on the spot,” Reveles said. “We can also call local voter registration officers and have them bring a sample voting booth to the school, arrange for candidates to visit, or ask members of the Young Democrats and Young Republicans to debate issues in front of the class.”

Reveles noted that VoTexas provides TYLA affiliates a great opportunity to gain publicity and offered TYLA’s services to draft press releases.

The VoTexas curriculum, which was launched in 1996 and updated prior to the 2000 and 2004 elections, consists of six model lesson plans: (1) a history of the right to vote; (2) a history of voter registration; (3) candidate research for a mock debate; (4) an introduction to political parties and primaries; (5) a mock debate; and (6) a mock election.

The first unit, which focuses on the historical roots of the right to vote, provides students with a fuller understanding of the role the right to vote has occupied in U.S. history.

The diverse classroom activities for the unit include dividing the class into groups that are assigned different voting goals — such as ensuring that no convicted felons are permitted to vote or encouraging minority communities to vote — and then discussing whether the procedures the groups come up with violate the Voting Rights Act.

Another activity involves having students conduct Barbara Walters-style interviews with suffragettes such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Susan B. Anthony.

Perhaps the most jolting of the activities involves having students take a mock literacy test patterned after a test used in Selma, Ala., in the 1960s. On a sheet of paper, students are asked to spell five words, including “emolument,” “despotism,” and “capitation.” In 1964, an African American who misspelled a single one of the words would have been denied the right to vote.

A compelling history of the women’s suffrage movement in Texas is included in the voting rights unit, as well as a series of case studies based on landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions: *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections* (1966), which concerned poll taxes; *Minor v. Happersett* (1875), which upheld the right of states to exclude women from voting; and *Baker v. Carr* (1962), which declared Tennessee’s system of apportionment unconstitutional.

The second VoTexas unit explores the history of voter registration and discusses registration requirements in Texas. Students are encouraged to brainstorm ways to increase registration and asked to create a registration form they think is appropriate before comparing it with the registration form actually used in Texas.

Harbour said some teachers might want to organize a mock voter registration drive in their schools through which students would register other students to vote.

In addition to providing a history of voter registration, the curriculum offers students a look at current registration laws, especially in Texas, with discussions of the “motor voter” initiative, agency-based registration, and the jury wheel pool.

In the third week of the VoTexas curriculum, students

research candidates and prepare for a mock debate. They identify who will play the candidates, select staff members to negotiate the debate format and help the candidates prepare for the debate, select a panel of questioners, and designate the issues to debate. Students can bring in newspaper and magazine articles or Internet research to create voter guides assessing the candidates’ positions.

Political parties and primary elections take center stage in the fourth VoTexas unit, while the final two units are devoted to a mock debate and a mock election.

The mock election introduces additional concepts such as early voting, election days, polling places, voting machines, and election judges, and spurs discussion on voter turnout.

*Beginning in mid-September, the entire VoTexas curriculum will be available to download in PDF format from the TYLA website, [www.tyla.org](http://www.tyla.org). TYLA is mailing copies to school districts and local affiliates. For more information about the program or to request written materials, contact the TYLA office at (800)204-2222, Ext. 6429.*

The VoTexas program, Cohoon emphasized, is completely nonpartisan. “If Clint and I can work together,” she joked, “you know it’s nonpartisan.” Harbour, a litigator with Crampton & Associates, P.C., in Austin, is a self-described “diehard, lifelong, yellow-dog Democrat from Southeast Texas.” Cohoon, as associate with the Houston office of Bracewell & Patterson, L.L.P., is an equally proud Republican.

“We’re just trying to get high school seniors to vote,” Cohoon said.

In terms of logistics, Harbour said the hardest part of implementing the project is getting invited to schools. As a result, TYLA is leaning on its network of young lawyer affiliates to serve as local contacts. “The more local affiliates involved the better,” he said. “The pitch sounds better coming from a local attorney. A letter coming from me in Austin may not mean much.”

Harbour encourages young attorneys to “write a letter or call someone you know and say, ‘I read about this program and I want it to come to my school.’”

TYLA President **David McAtee** encouraged the affiliate presidents and presidents-elect gathered at the Local Bar Leaders Conference in August to participate in the program. “We are putting VoTexas on the front burner,” he said. “And we would love to get each of you involved.”

The students Harbour spoke to in Austin were adamant that voting matters. They were equally vehement that people should not vote unless they are informed. “When I am old enough to vote, I’m absolutely going to make sure I’m informed,” one of the young men said.

But asked if they considered themselves informed, most said no. They see snippets of campaign coverage on TV and occasionally read newspaper articles assigned for their government classes. With the help of TYLA’s energetic volunteers and VoTexas curriculum, fewer 18-year-olds will consider themselves uninformed this fall.