

2020-2021 TASSP Academic Excellence Award Application

Student No (TASSP office use): _____

Student Score: 18

5. Essay

PROCTOR GUIDELINES:

1. Essay writing must be proctored and monitored by a counselor or administrator.
2. Essay should not contain any references to the student's school name, district, city, or town.
3. Essay should be handwritten in ink. Legibility will be taken into consideration in determining the final essay score. NO additional aids (dictionaries, computers, pre-written outlines, notes, or drafts, etc.) permitted.
4. High school and middle school principals will be reading and scoring the essays.
5. Essay length is limited to the 2 ½ pages provided.

Write an essay on the following topic:

Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." How are education and the democratic process entwined?

Essay will count for 35 points of the final total score.

Please write your essay on this form using the 2 ½ pages provided (front only)

To this day, many of the world's intellectual breakthroughs can be traced back to the heart of ancient Greece. In the famed capital of Athens, for the first time in western civilization, higher institutions took root. Education stretched to greater heights - why we are the way we are and what the world ought to look like. It is thus no coincidence that Athens is also regarded as the world's oldest democracy. Emerging philosophies shaped early conceptions of democratic government, and education adapted to reflect and support this democratization. Although Athenian democracy is starkly different than modern democracy, its origin tells a story that rings true today: democracy and education are extremely interdependent forces.

In both ancient Greece and modern day America, democracy is centered in the concept of government by the people. In order for the people to govern, they must understand and be aware of their political context. This idea is made clear by examining democracy's opposite: authoritarianism. Authoritarian leaders often rely on the ignorance of their people to preserve their power. After all, an uneducated populace is also an impressionable populace, vulnerable to whatever political message is pushed onto them. This tactic demonstrates the strong link between education and political power. Just as authoritarianism uses

that link to thrive on ignorance, democracy uses it to place the power with the people.

In a democracy, the vote is the most sacred expression of political power. However, the right to vote in itself does not guarantee public good. Lack of education to inform voting choices dilutes its significance. If a group of toddlers, for example, were all given an equal say in how to govern the democratic society of toddlers, the result surely would not be a well-functioning government. The toddlers would have little to no understanding of the world, rendering them entirely unequipped to make political decisions. The 'toddler' democracy only gains value when it 'grows up', or gets educated. We cannot make good decisions about what we do not know. Voters ~~cannot~~ must understand the working of an economy to decide what they believe the economy should look like. Otherwise, their vote is not a true reflection of what they desire.

Education encourages and enables independent thought, which is vital to a democracy. Realistically, voter education is not black and white. A voter is not either 'uneducated' or 'educated'. The extent to which voters are aware of the issues they are voting on widely varies. Furthermore, there is no such thing as the perfect education which produces the perfectly informed vote. Yet, this is all a positive. The fact that education can lead people to reach different conclusions about what the government should do proves that it works. It works as a tool to spur independent thought that allows for new ideas and progress in a democracy. Education is multifaceted in that it not only provides a literal understanding of politics, it also sets up the foundational information through which we perceive and understand all political information. Learning about the cruel institution of slavery in US history gives a future voter background information which will inform their views on racial justice. Learning about the environment and energy sources in science gives a future voter background information which will inform their views on environmental and energy policies. While an education need not push political views, it can provide the knowledge a voter needs to begin understanding real world issues. Political issues are complex, and strong education equips voters to think complexly and thus make better decisions about those issues.

Education is a necessary check on power in a democracy. It naturally resists manipulation by sources of political power: media outlets, wealthy corporations, corrupt leaders, lobbying groups, etc. If people are not very educated about policy issues, they are more vulnerable to basing their views on misleading media and corrupt, ill-intentioned agendas. On the other hand, if voters are well-educated from a wide range of sources and across a long period of time, they are less likely to be swayed by high powers and more likely to preserve their independent thought. Thus, education helps ensure that the people's votes are more so a reflection of the people than a reflection of some concentrated power that is trying to benefit at the expense of others.

Just as education affects the quality of a democracy, democracy affects the quality of education. Elected leaders determine educational policy, everything from funding school districts to determining curriculum standards for every K-12 public school in the nation. At the local level, parents vote for school board members. At the state and federal levels, there are education departments as well as congressional bodies who vote on education bills. The democratic process and education depend on each other. Inequity in education, such as underfunded school districts in marginalized communities, plagues democracies by contributing to other structural inequities, such as cyclical poverty that stunts social mobility.

As seen in examining authoritarianism, the right to vote, independent thought, concentrated power, and educational policy, the democratic process and education are entwined in a codependent manner, heavily relying on each other to exist and evolve.