



## Pittsburgh-area high schoolers try to get peers registered to vote — and stay engaged in politics

At an event last week, students were provided tools to register themselves and to carry the message to their friends



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A local district magistrate race taught Obama Academy Sophomore Orli Trumbull that political engagement can happen at any age.

Last year, when Orli was 14 and “a little scared,” she canvassed for Philip Roberts who ran for magistrate in Highland Park. She even convinced her “very politically engaged” parents to support him.

Mr. Roberts didn’t win, but the experience made an impact on Orli.

“I didn’t think, because of my age, I had the ability to convince people to vote for my candidate,” she said at the Allegheny Youth Vote Huddle event Friday afternoon at the Carnegie Library in Oakland. “[But] I learned that as a 14-year-old freshman in high school, I can have an impact on my community. I learned that you’re never too young to become civically involved.”

Orli is part of a growing number of young people who are trying to make sure their peers register to vote when they turn 18 — and beyond that, working to make sure that even youth who aren’t of voting age stay engaged in politics.

The number of 18-year old registered voters in Allegheny County is under 30%, according to the Civics Center, a nonpartisan group dedicated to making voter registration part of high schools across the country.

## Youth voter registration rates low among Allegheny County schools

None of the Allegheny County school districts have a voter registration rate for 18-year-olds above 50%. Groups like the Civic Center are engaging other high schoolers to help encourage their peers to register to vote ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

### Top 5/bottom 5 school districts for voter registration

1	South Fayette Twp.	47.5%
2	Pittsburgh	43.5%
3	West Jefferson Hills	37.3%
4	Northgate	35.6%
5	Keystone Oaks	34.1%
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41	Clairton City	10.8%
42	Duquesne City	10.5%
43	Fort Cherry	<10%
43	Norwin	<10%
43	Penn-Trafford	<10%

Source: The Civic Center

Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Public School District Superintendent Wayne Walters called that number “alarmingly low” at the event Friday.

“Imagine if it was 70%,” he said to the room of about 45 students, “Some of the things that bother you and impact you could be changed, with just your will, just your determination. But... you have to act to make change.”

The interest in voting is there for young people, according to Alberto Medina, the communication team lead at the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University in Massachusetts. CIRCLE is a nonpartisan research organization that tracks youth civic learning and engagement.

“We really have been living sort of in a new era of higher youth voting and higher engagement,” Mr. Medina said.

Youth turnout jumped from about 39% nationally in the 2016 presidential election to about 50% in 2020, according to CIRCLE data. The organization also saw an increase in young voter turnout from the 2014 to 2018 midterm elections, which statistically have lower turnout than presidential years.

Turnout is one thing; registration rates are another.

According to county election data, only about 3.4% of the county’s nearly 903,000 voters are under age 22.

To get more youth voters registered, political engagement groups like The Civics Center and PA Youth Vote, another nonpartisan group with the focus of educating youth on civic engagement, have been focusing their efforts on schools.

Those two groups, along with other local community organizations including the library, the Pittsburgh section of the National Council of Jewish Women and the League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh, hosted the Allegheny Youth Vote Huddle on Friday to provide students with the tools to not only register themselves to vote when they are 18, but to carry that message to their friends.

In Allegheny County, no school district has a voter registration rate for 18-year olds above 50%, according to data from The Civics Center. Three

in surrounding Washington or Westmoreland counties but serve small portions of Allegheny County — have rates below 10%, their data show.

South Fayette Township has the highest youth registration rate in Allegheny County, with 47.5% of 18-year olds registered, as of the end of last year.

A preliminary survey done by CIRCLE with voters ages 18 to 34 found that 57% of them intend to vote in this year's presidential election.

One of those could be Trinity Manison, a senior at Pittsburgh Milliones. She turns 18 in two weeks, and for her, voting is a privilege.

"Mostly because my ancestors weren't able to," said Trinity, who is Black. "It's a personal thing for me because I'm doing it because others couldn't, that look just like me."

Not only that, Trinity said, but she also feels that by voting she "has the privilege to make a difference."

"If you choose not to [vote], you can't complain about anything that goes on because you didn't do anything about it and you had the opportunity to," she said. "I always encourage people to vote."

But young people face a number of barriers to registering, not least of them their age: "18, when you think about it, is really the worst possible time in a person's life to age into the electorate," Mr. Medina said. It is a huge transitional period in young people's lives, he said, when they may be moving away from home for work or school to places that have completely different voter registration laws.

In Pennsylvania, you can register to vote so long as you will be 18 on the next election — even if your birthday is on election day, you can vote.

The registration process itself can oftentimes be a barrier to young people, Mr. Medina said. Not knowing or understanding the registration process can sometimes lead to people deciding not to register.

The state legislature is considering a bill that would allow young people to pre-register as young as 16. If passed, the law would allow the Department of Transportation to alert 16- and 17-year-olds that they are eligible to pre-register when they apply for a driver's license.

Breaking down barriers to registration was one of the goals of the event at the Carnegie Library.

"Our research shows that [young people] vote at high rates once registered," said Laura Brill, the Founder and CEO of The Civics Center, in a press release. "Along with our partners, we're ensuring students have the information and resources they need to engage their classmates and run voter registration drives this Spring."

Yet, many of the students attending Friday's event were below the voting age.

"It's not constrained to voting," Orli said. "It's about having conversations with people you care about, about issues that you care about and informing your peers."

In small groups, the students discussed things like gun violence, police reform and reproductive rights and what they saw as some solutions to those problems. A majority said they didn't feel their current elected leaders knew what issues teens care about.

“Just because we’re teenagers and we aren’t fully developed, we still have these really strong opinions that need to be talked about and need to be brought up,” said A’Lani Hutson Jarrett, a sophomore at Pittsburgh CAPA.

She said often there are shootings near where her mom works and she wants “to be able to change that in some sort of way.”

“Young people are such issue focused voters,” Mr. Medina said. “That’s really what drives them to participate, is wanting action on issues they care about.”

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