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JOSIAH H. BROWN

Don't mistake a low youth vote for apathy

AS THE ELECTION approaches, disproportionately low voter turnout among young adults is again expected and lamented.

Despite countless campaign appearances at schools and Vice President Gore's presence at an MTV-sponsored event, both candidates are aiming their pitches at suburban parents and seniors — where the votes are. But if election 2000 doesn't promise an awakening of young voters, this year does offer evidence of social conscience and initiative belying my generation's image of apathy and self-absorption.

For years, surveys have revealed that many young people's alienation from conventional politics was accompanied, paradoxically, by their belief in community service — for example, through AmeriCorps. Another trend has seen young leaders go beyond volunteering and actually create nonprofit groups addressing a range of public problems.

If less visible than the youthful private-sector entrepreneurship behind companies like Yahoo and Netscape, this eagerness to apply entrepreneurial energy for the public good is abundant on campus. My classmates dream not of IPOs but of broad social impact, often via the nonprofit route. From Tocque-

ville to Robert Putnam, observers have long recognized the role of these organizations in American life. They can be more nimble than government, or at least complementary in reaching beyond its limitations.

Our generation is continuing this American tradition — in some cases adapting private-sector practices and financing to suit nonprofit missions. Of course, there is no substitute for voting, and how to engage more young people politically remains a concern.

But just because our generation isn't using the electoral process as its primary voice, don't assume we are indifferent to things that matter. We are speaking and acting in alternative ways and crossing public-private boundaries.

In the Boston area alone, my friends Katya Fels, John Finley, and Earl Martin Phalen have started, respectively, a women's shelter, a tuition-free school for low-income children, and an academic enrichment program for African-American students.

Thirtysomething Vanessa Kirsch founded New Profit Inc., a venture philanthropy firm, to back such efforts. In New Haven, Yale students established LEAP for local youth as well as Jumpstart, whose early-childhood work has

gained the confidence of social investors such as New Profit. And 31-year-old Ted Halstead, having already started Redefining Progress to reconcile economic and environmental indicators, is also the founder of a think tank, the New America Foundation, which, with the largesse of high-tech philanthropists, sponsors a cohort of young intellectuals.

This summer I worked with a start-up nonprofit that will bring needed additional talent to school leadership. The group, New Leaders for New Schools, will attract, train, place, and support outstanding principals in public schools, including charter schools.

Cofounders Jon Schnur and Monique Burns head a team comprising a former teacher, a principal, school district officials in Philadelphia and D.C., a McKinsey consultant, and a White House education policy adviser. Only one of them is older than 34. With seed money from Kirsch's firm and John Doerr's New Schools Venture Fund, New Leaders will soon launch nationally — beginning to improve education dramatically for children in schools where its Fellows are placed.

Effective social entrepreneurs tend to share some of the qualities that typify their for-profit counterparts: vision,

tenacity, an urge to create, an ability to learn from mistakes, and a capacity for inventive hard work. They know their markets and focus on delivering distinctive value to customers who, in the education context, include children and parents, taxpayers and school districts.

In the nonprofit world, the conflicting demands of such customers can be hard to resolve. Measures of success are elusive, harder to quantify than a company's financial results.

Often organizations must broker among various private and public entities with multiple goals. Accountability is still important, but it can take different forms. More than private-sector pioneers, social entrepreneurs have to believe in a mission larger than raising a stock price or making a profit.

The young men and women of New Leaders won't stimulate voter turnout, and can't replace government action in education. But if their dedication, good ideas, and resourceful idealism can evolve to meet the tremendous need for school leadership, learning for thousands of children will be transformed.

Josiah H. Brown is a master of public policy student at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.