

## 2017 PSR/Sacramento Essay Contest Submission

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“Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.” When our founding fathers penned the Declaration of Independence, they envisioned a new nation ruled by the will of the people. They were no longer willing to live in a society that was governed by nobility and the whims of a few. They wanted freedom. They realized that without education, there is no freedom, and without freedom, a democracy cannot exist.

The most effective way citizens can participate in a democracy is to vote. However, certain groups of people, such as impoverished or incarcerated citizens, do not or cannot vote. The United States of America has the highest incarceration rates of any other country. According to the Bureau of Justice, 68% of state prison inmates do not even have a high school diploma. This is an issue especially for minorities, who are overrepresented in our prison populations. African Americans make up 13 percent of the US population but make up 37 percent of the jail and prison population. This disparity is partially caused by the achievement gap, the persistent underperformance of African American students and other minority students on standardized tests and in educational achievement. It begins in kindergarten, continues through high school, and ultimately is a predictor of poor life outcomes such as poverty, unemployment, and incarceration. This injustice in education threatens our democracy and contradicts our fundamental values of equality and freedom. If you are incarcerated, you can't vote. If you are poor, uneducated, or have a felony record, you are unlikely to fully engage in the political process and truly be a part of our democracy.

Not only is it important to be able to vote, but it is also essential to be an informed voter. In the last election, we witnessed failure of the populous to educate themselves. Many voters now regret that they didn't understand that the Affordable Healthcare Act and Obamacare were one in the same. They may have inadvertently voted against their own best interest. Without the capacity to analyze and understand the different options, voters are reduced to making blind choices or relying on outside influences to tell them how to vote.

Education does not only teach science, math, and literature, but also critical thinking and social skills. Education teaches us to think beyond the known to discover the unknown, and is the key to eliminating inequality, discrimination, and poverty. Whenever there are attacks on education, or where we find great disparities in the standard of education each child receives, we must fight for a high-quality education for all. For continued success in our democracy, we must do as our founding father Thomas Jefferson said: “Educate and inform the whole mass of people. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”