

## Consumer Choice



Cool Culture children and parents learn about collage with *The Jewish Museum*. Image courtesy of Cool Culture.

**Cool Culture** is based on the idea that all families should be able to participate in cultural activities regardless of their ability to pay. New York City's many museums and other cultural institutions are rich with experiences that stimulate curiosity and create important contexts for learning. Any child who does not have access to these essential learning experiences risks being left behind. Developed by Gail Velez and Edwina Meyers and a planning group of educators, parents, government officials and museum representatives, with early support from **Bloomberg Philanthropies**, **Brooklyn Community Foundation** and **Taproot Foundation** among others, Cool Culture is a partnership among 90 cultural institutions and 480 social service agencies, schools and after-school programs. Cool Culture provides admission passes that enable more than 50,000 lower-income families associated with the social service agencies and schools to attend and participate in the programs of cultural groups. Families are eligible to receive a Cool Culture Family Pass if they have a child enrolled in a participating early childhood program. Cultural liaisons at all participating childhood programs help families learn about and use the pass. Cool Culture represents an investment in the future – ensuring that all children grow up with cultural exposure and that cultural institutions continue to have diverse and growing audiences for their invaluable offerings. For more information, visit [www.coolculture.org](http://www.coolculture.org).

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Civic engagement and democratic participation are tied strongly to socio-economic status, and voting rates parallel income levels. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that people with higher incomes vote in far greater numbers than those with more modest earnings. For example, only 56 percent of people with incomes in the range of \$20,000 to \$29,999 voted in the November 2008 election, in contrast to more than 76 percent of people with incomes between \$75,000 and \$99,999.<sup>25</sup> Those with annual family income above \$75,000 are twice as likely to register and twice as likely to vote as those with family income of less than \$25,000.<sup>26</sup>

These significant differentials in voting rates have consequences for public policy in all realms. It is heartening, therefore, that a growing number of activist-artists and community-based cultural organizations are working explicitly to improve the representation of marginalized communities in the political process. Their efforts take multiple forms – using the arts in grassroots community organizing and nonpartisan voter registration drives, high-visibility concerts during election and ballot campaigns, and other strategies. These arts initiatives stimulate civic engagement and encourage all people to participate in representative government.

## EDUCATION AND HEALTH

Along with voting patterns, educational and health disparities also parallel income trends, as NCRP reports in *Confronting Systemic Inequity in Education* and *Towards Transformative Change in Health Care* and other studies document. There is a close correlation between achievement of a bachelor's degree and median household income.<sup>27</sup> Educational inequality is one of the most important contributors to the dramatic rise in income disparity over the past 30 years.<sup>28</sup> Our public education system is not preparing young people for the global economy, and lower-income and African American youth in