

**ACT Electoral Commission submission to the
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Inquiry into the delivery of electoral education**

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Submission by the ACT Electoral Commission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry into the delivery of electoral education

Terms of Reference

The focus of the inquiry includes and is not limited to examining:

- electoral education services provided to schools, students and teachers;
- the teaching methodology and results of the national Civics and Citizenship Curriculum; and
- evolving technology and new platforms for delivering electoral education.

Introduction

This submission is provided to the Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in response to its inquiry into the delivery of electoral education. The submission outlines the ACT Electoral Commission's current electoral education programs and its anticipated future direction in electoral education.

The key objectives of the Commission's electoral education program are:

- To ensure that the voters of the ACT know at election time when the election is to be held, where and when they can vote, how to vote and when a timely, accurate and transparent result is expected; and
- To facilitate school and community programs that place elections within a civics and citizenship framework, illustrate the process of the Hare-Clark electoral system and encourage enrolment.

In 2013/2014 Elections ACT (the office of the ACT Electoral Commissioner) conducted a strategic review of the electoral education program, with a view to preparations for the 2016 election. Following this review, Elections ACT adopted the following education and communication strategies:

- Increase the reach of adult voter education in order to achieve improved electoral knowledge in relation to ACT Legislative Assembly elections;
- Become an integral part of the teaching of civics & citizenship to young people in the ACT; and
- Develop students' understanding of ACT elections and electoral engagement, with specific reference to the Hare-Clark system, in the context of the draft *Australian Curriculum F-10: Civics & Citizenship*, thereby assisting the formation of habits of informed, engaged citizenship.

Given the Committee's terms of reference for this inquiry, this submission focuses on the Commission's education programs aimed at school students. For more information on the Commission's general information resources and information campaigns, the Committee's attention is drawn to the Commission's website, www.elections.act.gov.au, and its Annual Reports.

Electoral education currently provided by the ACT Electoral Commission

Elections ACT staff provide ongoing electoral education services to school, community and professional groups. This aspect of the education program is aimed primarily at raising community awareness of the ACT's electoral system. Elections ACT employs two dedicated electoral education/information officers, including one officer with formal teaching qualifications and experience. Other Elections ACT staff may also assist with the conduct of electoral education sessions. The school-based aspect of the education program is directed towards Year 5 through to senior secondary-aged students and it is aimed at increasing knowledge of the ACT's electoral system and the compulsory nature of enrolment and voting in Australia.

The electoral education services offered to schools and teachers are outlined below.

Face-to-face sessions

- Elections ACT's education sessions are often conducted in cooperation with the Legislative Assembly Education Officer in the Assembly building. Participants at these sessions experience a mock Hare-Clark election, as used for the ACT Legislative Assembly elections, from voting through to the count of the vote.
- Outreach education sessions are also offered to schools using the same materials. There has been a recent reduction in the number of schools accessing the in-house education service. Feedback from teachers indicates this is largely due to the increase in transport costs across the ACT and timetabling difficulties for teachers. Elections ACT staff are currently working towards conducting more outreach programs with both school and community groups.

Printed Materials

The Commission's ability to deliver face-to-face electoral education is limited by its small size and budget. As a result, the Commission has developed a range of materials aimed at empowering teachers and students to conduct their own electoral projects without direct facilitation by Commission staff. Materials are made available, free of charge, on the Elections ACT website and include:

- Detailed fact sheets covering a variety of topics – in response to the Australian curriculum focus on electoral education in the upper primary years, a range of fact sheets has been developed specifically for this age group in addition to those aimed at the general population;
- A series of documents to guide teachers through the electoral process enabling them to run their own school elections, including: instructions on the election process, the voting system, election day and counting the votes; templates for the nomination form and ballot papers; and a scrutiny sheet with built-in formulae to perform the calculations necessary under the Hare-Clark system; and
- A curriculum mapping document linking current Elections ACT education resources to the draft *Australian Curriculum F-10 – Civics and Citizenship*.

To view these, visit

http://www.elections.act.gov.au/education/electoral_education_resources.

Online Resources

The Elections ACT website incorporates a wide range of information resources that can be accessed for school and community education purposes.

In 2014, three new education resources were developed for school and community education. They are:

- A ten-minute, modular video covering active citizenship, voting in the ACT, how to make your vote count and the Hare-Clark electoral system, which is available on the Elections ACT website and via Elections ACT social media channels for easy access by teachers and students using the internet in their classrooms;
- Two short videos that illustrate the casting of a formal vote and voting electronically, primarily intended to be played in polling places at election time but also of value to classroom teachers to illustrate these topics, with the video on casting a formal vote being of particular use in assisting students during school/class elections; and
- A package of interactive activities suitable for both primary and secondary students, also available on the Elections ACT website and used on Elections ACT social media channels; the activities include an interactive voting activity illustrating the correct way to fill in a ballot paper, a polling place labelling activity for familiarisation purposes, a sorting activity to encourage discussion of compulsory voting, an interactive quiz, a find-a-word and a crossword.

To view these, visit

http://www.elections.act.gov.au/education/electoral_education_resources.

For the 2015 redistribution of ACT Legislative Assembly electoral boundaries, an innovative online mapping tool was developed to facilitate public submissions to the redistribution process. Using this tool, members of the public could draw their own boundaries and check they complied with statistical requirements. This tool is still available on the Elections ACT website in demonstration mode for educational purposes. See

<https://www.elections.act.gov.au/redistribution>.

Elections ACT also has an active social media presence aimed particularly at young people, with Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Other Education Services

Elections ACT provides a range of additional electoral education services that includes:

- The provision of advice and support for running school elections, such as student representative council elections, with encouragement to use the Hare-Clark system with the aim of building skills within schools and contributing to students' experience of the democratic process;
- The loan of electoral equipment, such as voting screens, ballot boxes and seals, for school elections;
- The provision of information on Elections ACT education resources and services, presented at teachers' professional development days, which are attended by teachers from a range of schools and colleges, both government and non-government; and

- Collaboration with the ACT Legislative Assembly, the National Archives, the Museum of Australian Democracy and the Australian Electoral Commission to plan and present the ACT Schools' Constitutional Convention, an annual national initiative organised in each state and territory and culminating in the National Convention held in Canberra annually.

Schools Vote ACT proposed initiative

Discussions are currently being held with the ACT Education and Training Directorate concerning the feasibility of a civics and citizenship initiative, Schools Vote ACT, that Elections ACT is proposing for implementation in ACT schools in 2016. This program would be intended to develop in school students the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for future participation in the democratic process, including voting in ACT Legislative Assembly elections.

The proposed Schools Vote ACT program would involve participating school students voting in a parallel election for the actual candidates standing in the October 2016 Assembly election. As this type of parallel election is only possible in a general election year, a program of this kind can only be held once every 4 years.

The proposed program would provide a structured framework and experiential learning, allowing students to examine and understand the processes and structures of democracy, investigate and discuss election issues and formulate opinions in the lead up to the election. Results of the student vote would be publicised on the Elections ACT website and social media platforms following the declaration of the official results for the Legislative Assembly election.

The program, with outcomes linked to the *Australian Curriculum F-10 – Civics and Citizenship*, will be offered to both government and non-government schools, Years 4-10. It will also be offered to Years 11 and 12 should schools wish to participate. However, no direct links to the Australian curriculum currently exist for senior secondary years.

Elections ACT would provide participating schools with:

- Resource materials including lesson plans, an elections operation manual, ballot boxes, voting screens and ballot papers;
- Information and training sessions for teachers prior to commencing the program, and ongoing advice and assistance; and
- A dedicated Schools Vote ACT website and social media posts to publicise election activities and stories provided by schools.

It is proposed that schools would implement the program to the extent considered appropriate to meet the needs of the students and fulfil curriculum requirements. Possible approaches could include:

- A whole-school approach with all year levels participating;
- One or two year levels only participating such as Years 5 and 6;
- Delivery of the full program, developing students' understanding of the democratic process and their role in it; using the media to learn about party platforms, local candidates and election issues; sharing their new-found knowledge and interest with peers and family; and culminating in voting at the parallel election;

- Delivery only of those lessons that focus on the structures of government and the mechanics of an election followed by participation in the parallel election;
- Delivery of selected activities from the teacher resource that complement existing teaching units; and/or
- Additional activities aimed at increasing awareness and enthusiasm in the school community such as inviting candidates, electoral officials or journalists as guest speakers; eliciting local media coverage of the school's participation; and/or publishing news of school events on the Schools Vote ACT webpage.

On the designated Schools Vote days students would take on the roles of polling officials and set up a polling place within the school. Participating classes would attend and vote for the candidates in the school's electorate. At the close of voting, students would take on the role of polling officials to conduct a count of the first preference votes.

Ballot papers would then be collected by Elections ACT and transferred to the scrutiny centre for consolidation with those from other participating schools in the electorate for the count of further preferences. All results would be confidential until after the official Legislative Assembly election results had been declared. The results of Schools Vote ACT would then be made public, allowing teachers to work with students to discuss and interpret differences between these results and those from the official election.