

SUBMISSION 10



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The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Palmieri

INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

Thank you for the opportunity to make comment to this inquiry.

The Inquiry follows on from a number of inquiries and reports, which began in the late 80s and continued through the 90s. The emphasis this time around is clearly upon civics rather than a broader approach, which included citizenship in the past.

The two most significant inquiries in recent times have been The Civic Education Study(1999), conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the Youth Electoral Study(YES) conducted under the leadership of Murray Print of the University of Sydney's Centre for Research and Teaching in Civics. The IEA study revealed many interesting findings from its survey of 14 year olds in 28 different countries, but probably the most significant finding could be paraphrased to something like, "students value and like living in a democracy, but just don't like politics". This position is reflected in young peoples' thinking internationally and is certainly not peculiar to Australia.

Another significant finding of the IEA study was that civic knowledge is a good predictor of students' likelihood to vote; and that there is direct link between political knowledge and political participation. It must be remembered, however, that Australian students are aware that they live in a democracy where voting is compulsory and this has a bearing on their intention to vote. Without compulsory voting, participation rates would be significantly less than they are currently.

A key finding from the Youth Electoral Study was that Australian youth report a lack of trust in their political leaders. If, as suggested by Joint Standing Committee Chair, Peter Lindsay, in a press release, "We need to find better ways of inspiring and engaging these groups", the politicians themselves must be included in any examination of how to improve participation in the political process.

What are the implications for Australian Educators?

Follow up work with teachers after the IEA study revealed that 91% of teachers recognized the importance of civics education in preparing young people for citizenship. And young people agreed that good citizenship included the obligation to vote. It is very important, therefore, that schools find space and time in their overcrowded curricula to give civics education the attention it deserves.

Another of the significant findings of the IEA study was that schools that model democratic practice through their ethos and structures are most effective in promoting civic knowledge and engagement. It may be that schools will need support to create the ethos and structures required to develop the 'active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life', referred to in the Adelaide Declaration. Students are much more likely to engage in "active citizenship" e.g. charity fund raising, Clean Up Australia campaign, than matters they associate with party politics. Clearly, this has to do with relevance and a 'feel good' factor for students to be able to give expression to altruistic intentions in practical ways.

Young people don't feel that they have a strong political voice, despite their vote having the same value as older voters. There wasn't much in the 2006 Federal Budget that they could identify with or get excited about. Superannuation seems an awfully long way off! Making civics and electoral education more relevant is a challenge for educators and politicians alike. How do we create the same excitement and urgency about getting your drivers licence as enrolling to vote?

However, young people are too easily written off as apathetic about politics. On such issues as Iraq, refugees, the environment and education funding many young people are eloquent and passionate. The 'what's in it for me?' factor so carefully considered by political parties in their policy creation bears very little fruit when young people ask the question. Schools and teachers can create a climate in which students feel actively engaged in democratic life but outside the school gates young people have far fewer opportunities to be active participants. Former Prime Ministerial aspirant, Mark Latham, advised a young audience with a firm "Don't do it!" if they were considering political life to climb their own ladder of opportunity. This was not exactly a call to arms for our next generation of politicians.

Critical Literacy has been an important aspect of school curricula over recent years. Students, even in primary schools, have become very adept at taking a critical look at the media. Politicians rely heavily on the media to get their message across but they can't escape the scrutiny of savvy young people who are not very trusting of their political leaders. This critical thinking applied to political issues is an important part of a vibrant democracy and its continuation should be welcomed by politicians.

The Discovering Democracy initiative which grew from earlier concerns about civics and citizenship education was well funded by the Federal Government

for a time but it ran out of steam, being taken over by Brendan Nelson's push for values education. The support for teachers and schools which came from Discovering Democracy should be renewed if our young people are to receive the civics education required to turn them into informed voters.

The Australian Electoral Commission provides some high quality programs and resources through their Electoral Education Centres and their website is very informative. Some state and territory electoral commissions also provide education services. However, the coverage is patchy, though supported by Divisional Returning Officers who are supposed to deliver education programs to schools in their electorates. A more concerted, co-ordinated effort is needed, perhaps working in partnership with local schools, to achieve universal delivery of electoral education to city, rural and remote areas, including indigenous communities.

The AEC runs very effective information campaigns and enrolment drives close to election times but these don't attend to the attitudinal aspects of civic education which would achieve the 'inspiring and engaging' of target groups which Peter Lindsay is hoping to achieve.

The Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education should recognize that there has been some excellent work done by schools, teachers, the Curriculum Corporation and the AEC in providing quality civics and electoral education. However, if we do more of the same, we are likely to end up with similar results after the initial flurry of renewed interest once the inquiry is over.

It is time to start taking a fresh look at how to engage the target groups. Not only do schools have to develop students' literacy skills, but they also have to respond to the challenge of 'multi-literacies'. Multimedia and information technologies are prevalent in schools and society at large. Through these new technologies meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multi-modal; written-linguistic modes of meaning interrelate with visual, audio and spatial patterns of meaning. Young people are very attuned to using new technologies and it may be that we should look at the possibilities presented by their use in grabbing the attention of future voters.

Educators across the world are talking about the global classroom, virtual classrooms, cyber schools, e-learning, on-line learning and connectedness. Electronic learning has become a more integral part of education and it creates new opportunities for the exercise of student voice and governance. We often see phone and 'sms' polls being conducted on television. It seems nearly every young person in Australia has their own mobile phone, so we should be examining ways to engage them through this technology.

In New Zealand, the establishment of 'Wallace' awards for good practice in civics education has engendered enthusiasm and provided a means to lift its profile. In the UK, the Electoral Commission, in partnership with MTV have run a "Votes are Power" competition. It is a challenge to 14-24 yr olds to devise a creative idea that will engage young people to 'turn opinion into action'. Major prizes, including Apple Macs, are on offer and entrants can use any medium they choose to get their message across.

The Inquiry would do well to beg, borrow or steal some of these ideas as a means of engaging the interest of target groups in civics and electoral matters.

However, we are still left with the most telling result of the IEA report and the Youth Electoral Survey - young people don't trust politicians. That remains in the hands of Mr Lindsay and his colleagues.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cheryl O'Connor". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cheryl O'Connor
Chief Executive Officer
Australian College of Educators