

SUBMISSION 83



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

Inquiry into civics and electoral education

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into civics and electoral education.

The ACT Electoral Commission's submission is attached.

If you would like further information, I can be contacted at elections@act.gov.au or on 6205 0033.

The Commission would be happy to invite members of the Committee to observe and/or discuss our electoral education activities in the ACT. Commission staff would also be available to give evidence at a public hearing.

The Commission welcomes the Committee's evaluation of current approaches to civics and electoral education in Australia and looks forward to its report on this inquiry.

Phillip Green
Electoral Commissioner

15 June 2006

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

Inquiry into civics and electoral education

Introduction

This submission is provided to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in response to its inquiry into civics and electoral education. The submission outlines the ACT Electoral Commission's current electoral education programs and proposes some new approaches in the teaching of civics and citizenship to be used in the future.

One of the primary functions of the ACT Electoral Commission (the Commission) is to promote public awareness of matters relating to elections and the ACT Legislative Assembly by conducting education and information programs¹.

The Commission's overarching mission is "to provide the ACT community with high quality electoral services that ensure fair and open elections and referendums". One of the Commission's three high-level goals is "to provide high quality information, education, advice and services related to the electoral process".

Electoral education and information services are seen by the Commission as crucial to the democratic goal of ensuring fair and open elections. The Commission's education and information strategy essentially follows three strands:

- Electoral education primarily aimed at students, intended to develop an understanding of electoral and parliamentary processes and an appreciation of the importance of participation in the electoral process.
- Publication of extensive electoral information resources on the Commission's website www.elections.act.gov.au and in hard-copy form, aimed at students, teachers, political participants, the media and the general public.
- Public information campaigns aimed at informing the general public and special needs groups about an imminent Legislative Assembly election or redistribution, with an emphasis on creating and maintaining an understanding of the ACT's specific electoral arrangements.

¹ *Electoral Act 1992* [ACT], section 7(1)(c).

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 election information campaigns, the Committee's attention is drawn to the Commission's website and its Annual Reports.

Electoral education currently provided by the ACT Electoral Commission

Since its establishment as a full-time entity in 1994, the Commission has pursued a vigorous electoral education and information program. Activities undertaken include:

- Presentation of education sessions at the Legislative Assembly, including mock elections, in conjunction with the Legislative Assembly education officer.
- Presentation of education sessions at primary and secondary schools.
- Presentation of education sessions to new citizens and other community groups.
- Publication of detailed fact sheets and electoral education resources intended to assist teachers and students.
- Conducting in-service programs for teachers.
- Conducting Student Representative Council elections in schools using the ACT's Hare-Clark electoral system and providing internet resources for teachers and students to conduct their own elections.
- Assisting the Legislative Assembly education office in organising and conducting the annual ACT students' constitutional convention.
- Facilitating electoral enrolment of young people through a "bounty" program with schools and through targeted mail sent as part of the continuous roll update program.
- Hosting a national conference on electoral education in October 2005.
- Provision of a wide range of education and information resources on the Commission's website at www.elections.act.gov.au .
- Extensive public information campaigns undertaken before every Legislative Assembly election.

The Commission's Annual Reports list how many electoral education participants receive face-to-face sessions each year. For example, in 2004/2005, electoral education was delivered directly to 1778 attendees, including 1237 school students (consisting of 618 primary school students, 55 high school students and 564 college students).

The ACT's electoral and parliamentary education centre

The presentation of education sessions at the Legislative Assembly building, including mock elections, is a key element of the Commission's electoral education strategy. The Commission and the Legislative Assembly each have education officers who work together to provide programs for schools, new citizens and community groups. The electoral and parliamentary education program conducted on the Legislative Assembly premises is the ACT's equivalent of an electoral and parliamentary education centre.

Education sessions held at the Legislative Assembly are targeted to suit the needs of attending students. Sessions aimed at years 5/6 primary school students are designed to fit in with the present ACT curriculum. The program also caters for secondary students. The Canberra Institute of Technology uses the programs at the Legislative Assembly to teach citizenship to migrant students. Community groups visit the Assembly or request information sessions at election time as a service to their members who may be unfamiliar with the ACT's Hare-Clark election system. During all sessions, while the focus is the ACT electoral and parliamentary system, mention is always made of the federal system.

On-line and printed resources

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 education projects without the need for facilitation by Commission staff.

The Commission's website at www.elections.act.gov.au is a comprehensive and current source of information covering all ACT electoral matters, and includes specifically targeted education resources. It is linked to "myclasses", the web based learning content management system that ACT teachers use in the classroom.

The Commission has developed and made available a wide range of fact sheets and electoral education resources to assist teachers. Information packs, also containing fact sheets provided by the Legislative Assembly, are supplied to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) Canberra Electoral Education Centre (EEC), to all ACT school libraries and to teachers who visit the Assembly on school excursions or for in-service programs.

In-service programs for teachers are conducted by the Commission and the Legislative Assembly to promote combined resources for teaching both teachers and students about elections and parliament in the ACT.

Student Representative Council elections

When requested, Student Representative Council elections are conducted in schools using the Hare-Clark electoral system. This experience gives students practice in nominating, campaigning, conducting and counting an election. Resources for teachers to conduct their own elections using the ACT's Hare-Clark electoral system are available on the internet. The Commission has found this to be one of its most successful electoral education tools.

ACT students' constitutional convention

The Commission assists the Legislative Assembly in organising and conducting the annual ACT students' constitutional convention. Year 11 students are given the opportunity to learn about the Australian Constitution and understand the constitutional referendum voting process.

Electoral Educators' Conference, Canberra, October 2005

The Commission hosted an Electoral Educators' Conference in Canberra in October 2005. This conference was initiated by the Commission and was the first such conference held since 1994. The conference was entitled *Fostering electoral literacy for all young Australians*. It was attended by electoral education officers representing all states and territories (except Tasmania), the AEC and New Zealand. It coincided with the annual parliamentary educators' conference also held in Canberra and some sessions were shared. Guest speakers other than electoral educators included academics, high school teachers and education department officers.

The conference concluded that:

- Electoral education should be seen as part of a whole school civics program.
- Resources should be developed using the expertise of a range of professionals for use Australia wide, especially via the internet.
- Persons outside the school system need to be included in awareness programs – especially the marginalised and those with a disability.
- Good relations between agencies needs to be developed and maintained.

Feedback from conference participants was very supportive of practitioners regularly meeting in this way. Attendees were in favour of holding a similar conference bi-annually.

Evaluation of current programs

Evaluation of the Commission's programs by teachers indicate that the presentation of sessions which include a description of the electoral system in mock elections and the conducting of elections in schools has been the most effective way to reach students. The success of these sessions and mock elections is due to the fact that they are usually conducted jointly with the Legislative Assembly and are put in the context of the way parliament works. While these programs are successful, they may not sufficiently cover the new federal testing requirements of civics and citizenship education.

Review of the Commission's electoral education strategy

The Commission is currently reviewing its electoral education strategy for schools in the light of the heightened interest in civics and citizenship as a curriculum area in both primary and secondary schools. This interest stems from the introduction of compulsory teaching and testing of civics and citizenship by the federal government, which has set Statements of Learning for Civics and Citizenship Education with key performance measures to be addressed by state and territory education departments.

Future directions under consideration will include greater collaboration with the ACT Department of Education and Training, the ACT Legislative Assembly education officer, the AEC and other state and territory electoral authorities. Particular activities under consideration include:

- Providing resources for teachers that are tailored to be used with the new national civics and citizenship requirements.
- Providing further professional development for ACT teachers, in collaboration with the Legislative Assembly.

- Working with the AEC to ensure that ACT students learn about both levels of government and their electoral processes when visiting the AEC's Canberra Electoral Education Centre.
- Researching strategies and materials being used successfully by other state and territory electoral authorities and adapting them for use in the ACT if appropriate.

Providing resources for teachers

In response to the new federal requirements, the ACT Department of Education and Training is drafting Essential Learning Achievements for civics and citizenship which have markers of progress from early childhood to later adolescence. The Commission has been asked to comment on these draft Essential Learning Achievements, which directly link to the national Statements of Learning for Civics and Citizenship Education.

To assist teachers to teach the new content, the Commission intends to make electoral education resources available on its website that are tailored to be used with the new national civics and citizenship requirements. The Commission has researched existing resources in other jurisdictions and is considering adapting ones which have been specifically developed for primary and secondary schools². The Commission also intends to align its available internet resources to reflect the national Statements and Essential Learning Achievements.

The Commission has identified through practical experience and through research that many teachers lack the confidence to teach civics and citizenship and the ACT electoral system in particular. The Commission intends to address this issue by adapting relevant existing classroom resources, used in other jurisdictions, to give teachers the tools to engage their students and create opportunities to make enrolment and interest in parliament worthwhile.

Providing further professional development for ACT teachers

The Commission, in collaboration with the Legislative Assembly, intends to provide further professional development for ACT teachers. For example, the Commission could provide teachers with experience of the hands-on program offered at the Assembly, direct them to the proposed new on-line resources and provide some of the required knowledge to put civics into context in the classroom. However, the Commission also considers that it would be appropriate for teachers to receive formal training in teaching civics and citizenship in the context of the new testing requirements, in addition to services provided by the Commission.

Enhancing the services provided at electoral education centres

The Commission intends to continue to promote the establishment and use of out-of-class resource centres such as the electoral education programs at the Legislative Assembly and the EEC. These centres give students an opportunity to expand their knowledge with practical, hands-on experiences provided by experts. The novelty of the environment can be expected to engage them more than a classroom experience of the same information. However, use of these centres needs to be integrated into a broader approach. In the Commission's experience, introducing the concept of elections and how government works is difficult for unprepared students because they will be more likely to disengage if they have not been exposed to positive experiences of citizenship in primary school.

² www.elections.org.nz/hands-up.html; www.vec.vic.gov.au/yoc.html

Recent research³ into how students learn about civics and citizenship indicates that a one-off visit to an education centre is not the most effective way to teach civics, if it is not accompanied by consolidation back at school. Civics and citizenship learning is most effective when it is taught in an atmosphere of democracy which is initiated in primary school. It is important that educators understand that a visit to an education centre is only part of an electoral education package within a civics and citizenship program. Ideally those experiences should support classroom teaching in a democratic school setting where civics and citizenship education begins in early primary school and continues in a progressive way to upper secondary school.

The Commission also considers that the services delivered by the AEC to ACT students could be enhanced by inclusion of material addressing both federal and ACT elections and levels of Government.

Students in the ACT may attend the AEC's Canberra EEC but would rarely attend both it and the Legislative Assembly in the one year. It would be desirable to have more co-operation between the AEC's EEC and the Commission to ensure students using either program learn about both levels of government and their electoral processes. Presently, if a visit to the EEC is an ACT student's only experience of electoral education, his or her knowledge of the ACT system would be very limited, as the EEC does not cover ACT electoral practices in its main presentations. Unlike in other parts of Australia, AEC Divisional staff do not provide any other in-school education in the ACT.

Working co-operatively with other state and territory electoral authorities

In the ACT, with the establishment of "myclasses", the web based learning content management system that ACT teachers use in the classroom, teachers can search and download learning objects in science, mathematics, literacy, languages other than English, innovation, enterprise and creativity which have been financed by the federal government. Objects for civics and citizenship have yet to be developed. With input from the states and territories, new learning objects could provide links in the curriculum for a whole-of-school-life civics program including electoral education.

At the electoral educators' conference it was evident that particular electoral education strategies were being used in some states exclusively and there was not enough research indicating the effectiveness of the strategies being used. It would be a useful exercise to undertake some evaluation of electoral education programs across Australia with a view to promotion of those programs that indicate the best outcomes for students in engaging with their community.

³ Murray Print, Larry Saha, Kathy Edwards, *Youth Electoral Study - Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, 2004

Suzanne Mellor (Australian Council for Educational Research Project Manager for the IEA Civic Education Study and MCEETYA Civics and Citizenship Assessment Project), *Solving some Civics and Citizenship Education conundrums*, www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/default.asp?id=9318;

ACT Electoral Commission, *Report on Electoral Education Conference, Canberra, October 2005*.

Conclusion

The Commission's examination of current practices and possible future directions for civics and electoral education has identified a range of factors and strategies which the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters may wish to consider in its current review. These include:

- Research indicates that civics and citizenship education should begin in early primary school and continue in a progressive way to upper secondary school. It should involve classroom teaching, modelling of democratic school governance, and out-of-classroom activities.
- Out-of-school programs – such as the AEC's Electoral Education Centres and the ACT's electoral and parliamentary education program at the Legislative Assembly – have significant impact on electoral education programs, as they tend to make greater impact than classes provided in schools, but only if they are included as part of a broader strategic educational approach.
- Electoral education outcomes could be improved if the AEC broadened its role in civics and electoral education by co-operating with the states and territories to ensure a recognition and discussion of their different electoral practices in its EEC programs.
- There would be considerable advantage if standardised learning objects in civics and citizenship, reflecting the national Key Performance Measures, could be developed for use by teachers nationally on the internet.
- The Commission suggests that formal training should be provided for teachers as part of the new civic and citizenship curriculum implementation.
- The Commission notes that resources available for electoral education are limited within each jurisdiction and suggests that, to ensure the best use of resources, co-operation between electoral educators in different jurisdictions should be encouraged.

The Commission welcomes the Committee's evaluation of current approaches to civics and electoral education in Australia and looks forward to its report on this inquiry.

ACT Electoral Commission, 15 June 2006