



## Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

### Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education

AISV Submission

*This response, on behalf of the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV) has involved a reference group of educators from a variety of schools, each with a strong commitment to Civic and Electoral Education. The opinions, ideas and recommendations that follow are based on a consultation with these educators and while the writer believes them to be an accurate reflection of the sentiment in the wider independent school community in Victoria, she cannot claim that they are representative of all independent schools.*

*The submission will address three of the terms of reference:*

- *The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education*
- *The content and adequacy of electoral education in non-government school programs of study*
- *The school age at which electoral education should begin*

The preamble to the Adelaide Declaration identifies Australia's future as depending upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is seen as central to achieving this vision. Independent schools in Victoria are fully committed to meeting each of the goals for schooling as stated in the Adelaide Declaration, including those that specifically refer to the knowledge, skills and attributes that prepare young people to be active and informed citizens with an appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life.

The discussion of the reference group is best presented as an elaboration of a number of the key findings of the evaluation of Discovering Democracy conducted in 2003-4. Factors facilitating the use of Discovering Democracy in schools are very similar to those identified by the group as factors facilitating the implementation of Civic and Electoral Education in schools today. These include:

- Teacher enthusiasm/motivation and teacher knowledge with implications for pre-service teacher education as well as ongoing professional learning for practicing teachers
- Availability of engaging and relevant teaching/learning resources including a focus on inquiry-based learning, contemporary technologies and digital citizenship
- Focus on appropriate pedagogy to facilitate effective and engaged learning.
- A strong advocate for Civics and Electoral Education in the school who is responsible for developing scope and sequence maps with multi-discipline teams of teachers
- An explicit 'place' for Civics and Electoral Education in and across the curriculum

- Availability of professional learning support for teachers many of whom have low levels of engagement in civic and electoral bodies of knowledge
- Student enthusiasm/motivation through engaging and purposeful activities, using learning strategies such as inquiry-based learning and contemporary technologies to support their learning. Citizenship and active learning experiences are engaging for students and teachers
- School leadership support
- Funding grants
- Availability of external support through bodies like the Victorian Electoral Commission
- Systemic requirements such as the identification of Civics and Citizenship as a domain within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and the implementation of the National Assessment Program (NAP): Civics and Citizenship
- Parent and community expectations.

Similarly, the identification of 'blockers' to the implementation of Civic and Electoral Education resulted in a high level of commonality with the issues perceived as impacting negatively on Discovering Democracy. These include:

- Inadequate opportunities for teacher professional learning, based on principles of effective professional learning rather than one-off training days
- Poor or no integration of the knowledge and understandings into the existing and very crowded curriculum
- Inadequate or poor access to computers with CDROM and broadband internet
- Additional costs associated with providing additional materials, excursions, professional learning and planning time for teachers etc
- High level of difficulty for students and lack of engagement for students. Civic knowledge can be 'dry and boring' for teachers and students
- The lack of appropriate teaching strategies is as much a factor of poor teacher engagement and knowledge about civic literacy as a lack of adequate time to plan interesting and engaging units of work. Discovering Democracy provided excellent materials that are engaging and accessible, but teaching practices were not challenged – no adequate learning models such as inquiry learning were provided
- Discovering Democracy was seen as 'political' by many that were suspicious of the 'agenda' resulting in less enthusiastic implementation

Once again, the underlying principles to best inform a framework for Civic and Electoral Education discussed by the group are, in effect, a reiteration of those identified in the Discovering Democracy Evaluation. These are:

- The importance of continuous professional dialogue within and across schools through the development of funded local and national networks. These could provide timely opportunities for sharing and showcasing successes across all stages of schooling. There could be a role for a central body in each state such as the Victorian Electoral Commission in Victoria
- A focus on integration of Civics and Electoral Education across the curriculum without 'diluting' the civic knowledge beyond a point of recognition

- A focus on whole school curriculum development and implementation. The implementation of VELS by many independent schools, and their continuous commitment to ongoing whole-school improvement, has resulted in an increased capacity in this area
- A balance between external pressure (through NAP and other educational accountabilities), and targeted and funded support for development
- Sustainable professional learning including provision of advice to schools to focus on appropriate pedagogy as much as content
- Involvement of the school leadership team in all aspects of whole school planning including professional learning
- Purposeful assistance directly to schools such as targeted funding to bring learning to the school rather than sending teachers out and ensuring there is adequate access to ICT and bandwidth to support school initiatives.

### **Cameos from Victorian Independent Schools**

When asked to identify Civic and Electoral Education programmes in schools, members of the reference group quickly listed these 'snap-shots' of popular and embedded activities in schools:

- Year 6 students travel to Canberra as part of their SOSE/Humanities curriculum
- Senior students participate in the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) programme – a not-for-profit organisation which provides free education services to Melbourne's Sudanese Community
- Mock elections are run in over a two or three day period in Year 8. The Victorian Electoral Commission launches the activity
- Year 10 students participate in a subject called 'Society and You', a core subject covering politics, law and careers education
- Middle Years students use 'A Democracy Destroyed', a Discovering Democracy unit within their Humanities Programme.
- Year 10 students engage in an inquiry-based learning activity where they 'build their own country based on democratic principles'
- International Round Square schools engage in community action through their global citizenship programme
- Grade 6 students work with the local Meals on Wheels team to deliver meals to the community's elderly citizens
- School behaviour management policies are organised around 'democratic' classroom principles, where students contribute to decision-making, negotiate learning outcomes and determine their code of behaviour including consequences for not following the code

- Staff and students raise more than \$15, 000 by organising and participating in a walkathon among other activities to raise funds for tsunami affected schools in Sri Lanka
- Student leaders participate at Board level in their school and regularly contribute to significant decisions such as the employment of staff etc
- 'Student Voice' is actively promoted as an authentic leadership approach
- Year 10 and 11 students choose Nation Place and Citizenship – Area of Study 2 in Australian History, a VCE subject that encompasses the period from 1901-14

There are countless more examples that could be provided. What is of interest is the range of activities on offer. Of equal interest is the overlap between civics and citizenship though this is hardly surprising. Teachers tend to use citizenship as an active learning strategy to engage young people in their world. Civic information on its own is seen as insufficient; students need to understand how civic knowledge empowers their participation in their community, and how that participation benefits both them and their communities. *Making Active Connections* is an AISV project that highlights the significant contributions that students, their parents and staff at independent schools make to their communities by offering time, expertise and resources. Go to <http://www.ais.vic.edu.au/independent/community/connections> for further information and case studies. Enabling active citizenship is becoming more and more difficult in schools with a number of schools choosing to opt out of community-based programmes due to the perceived restrictions imposed by the requirement that school-based activities require supervision by appropriately qualified staff. An increasing trend is to see civics and citizenship education concentrated into Year 9 'integrated' programmes where visits to the city centre focus on government, law courts, immigration museums and other places of cultural and social significance.

The risk in focusing on citizenship is that civic knowledge is neglected in favour of the activity. A greater emphasis on describing the explicit differences between civic and citizenship and their necessary overlap is critical. The use of NCCO Statements of Learning and Professional Elaborations has the potential to provide clarification as do the NAP – Civics and Citizenship Assessment Domain Descriptors. Another challenge is the inescapable fact that teachers and students find civic knowledge 'boring and difficult' yet rich discussion and debate require a certain level of content. What lessons are there to be learned from other subject areas – has Science, for example, managed to overcome these challenges in a more successful way, where issues-based learning using inquiry-based learning strategies sets a context and a manageable challenge to students?

Another challenge for civic and electoral education is the three-tiered system of government in Australia. Perhaps the level of government most able to directly interact with young people, and impact on them in a positive way is local government. In spite of the emerging global context, most young people identify very much with their immediate community. The Stonnington Youth Council is an advisory group of young people aged between 14 and 21 who represent and advocate on the interests of young people. Participation through the Youth Council provides young people with an opportunity to develop leadership, communication and organisation skills and learn about the structure and processes of local government.

Many local councils offer similar opportunities for young people to be involved. Another successful example is **We the People: Project Citizen**, a curricular programme in the United States for middle grade students that promotes competent and responsible participation in local and state government. The programme helps young people learn how to monitor and influence public policy. In the process, they develop support for democratic values and principles, tolerance, and feelings of political efficacy. All participants in the reference group agreed that civics and citizenship education should start with young children. Students are capable of accessing the knowledge, skills and attitudes from an early age through appropriate teaching strategies

## **Recommendations**

- Establish a central body to support Civics and Electoral learning programmes. Successful models already in place include the Asia Education Foundation website. Discovering Democracy materials remain very relevant. Provide resources to the Victorian Electoral Commission to develop a 'one-stop-shop' for civic and electoral education resources.
- Provide resources to establish local and national networks to continue professional dialogue within and across schools
- Use the NAP – Civics and Citizenship Assessment Domain Descriptors and the NCCO Statements of Learning and Professional Elaborations (when available) to locate civics and electoral knowledge, skills and behaviours within and across the curriculum, including developing some scope and sequence maps. Only a coherent, embedded programme can be successful
- Provide adequate funding to support professional learning of teachers through programmes based on the principles of effective professional learning.
- Engage young people's voices at all stages of the inquiry. Harness the digital vote.
- Learn from successful models and frameworks already in place. Examples such as the Asia Education Foundation, some Science programmes etc have the potential to be valuable.
- Develop models of active student leadership and active student voice for schools with a focus on transparent processes and authentic purpose.
- Identify schools as one component of a broad-base civics and electoral education programme. Engage all stakeholders in the process.