

Submission to the :

**Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education**

Prepared by : Mrs Melissa Rasmussen

To the chair,

It is with great enthusiasm and excitement that I have the opportunity to submit my thoughts to this committee.

In 2005 I was the recipient of the Westfield Premiers Scholarship and received funding to travel to the United States to research a civics education program titled "We the People" as administered by the Centre for Civic Education. On return from my travel, I prepared a detailed analysis of my findings and focused on how a similar program could be made available for Australian students. This research forms the basis of my submission and accordingly is attached for your perusal.

Therefore, upon hearing of this committee I am elated at the prospect of sharing this outstanding program with those in the community who have the ability recognize its importance. It is not my intention however to make reference to the inadequacies of our current education directives in teaching civics, but to propose an answer as to how we can address the rising tide of political apathy in our youth. After careful scrutiny of other submissions to the committee, it is clear that a wide cross section of the community including educators recognize this political deficit.

We the People and it's accompanying programs are an outstanding testament to the commitment of the United States government to the promotion of civics education amongst its youth. It is my belief that Australia has the resources and the ability to deliver programs that equal their demonstrated excellence.

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to share my passion and I look forward to the prospect of discussing the matter with you further should you have any questions or would like to see materials or documents relating to the program.

Best Regards  
**Melissa Rasmussen**  
**Kalgoorlie WA.**

**“We the People”  
A report into the suitability of “We the People” for West Australian  
Secondary Schools**

Melissa Rasmussen  
John Paul College  
Kalgoorlie  
Western Australia



*Dr Susan Leeson (Former US Supreme Court Judge) – Presenting at “We the People” Summer  
Institute 2005*

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## Abstract

Classroom teachers often have the best insight into the thoughts and emotions of Australia's youth. It is from this contact with our emerging adolescents that I realized that there is a major drought in political awareness and appreciation. In fact the Civics Expert Group of 1994;

*"..argued that most Australians have little knowledge and understanding of the Australian Constitution and are unfamiliar with the principles of responsible government, of the division of powers, and the relationship between legislature, executive and judiciary."*

Futhermore, a survey conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research in 2000 revealed that

*"The Civic Knowledge items with which Australian students had the most difficulty were those which deal with the forms and purposes of Democracy. And that...."*

*"Australian students have a strong sense of 'natural justice' and equity, but they lack clarity about the theoretical precepts of democratic models and structures."*

Clearly this Political drought has been an issue for educators for some time which gave me the impetus to apply for the Westfield Scholarship as a means to research the US developed program of "We the People" (WTP). WTP is a program that teaches the specifics of US Government, it is funded directly by the Federal government and also attracts the support of private donors who have an interest in the furthering of democratic knowledge amongst America's youth. The explicit aim of WTP is

*"to promote civic competence and responsibility amongst the nation's secondary students"*

Through a program of student participation, WTP encourages students to relate important concepts and principles to a historical and current context.

On return from San Diego I began to research possible ways that this project could be implemented within Western Australian Schools. I noted the following,

- WTP requires State (although, Federal is preferable), initiative with funding and co-ordination.
- It is possible to embed the program within the current Federal program "Discovering Democracy"
- Without funding as above, classroom teachers still have the ability to include the program in their current instruction

“We the People” is an outstanding program that continues to operate since its inception in 1991, demonstrating its acceptance by educators and obvious results. I believe that such a program has the ability to engage our students and decrease the political apathy so prevalent amongst our students.



Californian students competing at a Congressional Hearing – The final component of “We the People”

## **Research Objectives**

Four research objectives were defined for the scholarship. Following are the objectives outlined before research was undertaken. Please note that there were three objectives that had to be removed as expenditure for research was underestimated.

1 : To participate in professional development delivered by the “We the People” Professional Development Institute (as administered by the Centre for Civic Education) as a means to engage in the process for the delivery of WTP in the Classroom.

2 : To network with other professional educators and discuss implications of We the People for global classrooms

3 : To integrate We the People with Federal Civics and Citizenship initiatives.

4: To promote and develop experiential learning in Western Australian learning environments.

## **Research Plan**

My research design changed quite significantly from the time of application. Once expenditure was finalized and Professional development opportunities were approved, I needed to make some adjustments.

### Part one : Visitation

Upon arrival in San Diego, California, participate in professional development for teachers.

### Part Two : Development

Upon return, utilise resources and training to develop programs for year 9 students.

### Part Three : Implementation

Using year 9 Students at John Paul College, begin modeling programs.

### Part Four : Evaluation

Final evaluation of program at the conclusion of 2006.

## **Conduct of Research**

With funding provided by the scholarship I enrolled to attend the “We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution”, California Summer Institute. The Summer Institute was held between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of July and was held at the very beautiful University of San Diego.

The goal of the Summer Institute is to bring teachers from all over California together to do two very important things. Firstly the institute aims to provide contemporary education on the American Constitution and Government. Notable speakers such as Dr Susan M Leeson, a former Supreme Court Judge and Dr Vikram David Amar, addressed participants with thought provoking and intense lectures. As a participant I was required to undertake readings during the previous evening in order to contribute to lectures. They began with an inquiry into the nature of political behaviour and a revision of the political philosophy behind the Washington style of government. I was transported back to the days of first-year university when I fell in love with the ideas of Hobbes and Locke. The lectures did however quickly move to an in-depth discussion of the framing of the US constitution and concluded with case studies both recent and past of Constitutional changes and violations.

The second aim was to model the process of the actual teaching program “We the People”. We participated in simulated learning environments where we were the students. These sessions were extremely valuable as we had an opportunity to utilize the outstanding text books and put our ideas and thoughts into practice. Coupled with this we were divided into teams and had the opportunity to prepare for our own congressional hearing – the finale of the program. An experience that better equips teachers to prepare their own students for State and Federal competitions.

Together with my attendance at the Summer Institute I had the opportunity to travel to various parts of California and interview teachers about their experience with the program. The interviews proved to be most worthwhile as teachers were happy to share with me their passion for the program. Most importantly, they shared their joy in the demonstrable outcomes that the program achieved.

Since returning from overseas my research has continued with an evaluation of the project as implemented in Indonesia. This has been most useful as I have gained much insight into how the project can be adapted to suit differing classroom environments. I have also been active in approaching the Department of Education and Training as a strategy to develop interest in the program.

(Please see appendix two for a sample of the daily program)



## Findings

As a result of attendance at the Summer Institute, my observations of the program are that:

- It is an outstanding program that teaches the explicit learning of the American Constitution.
- Substantial learning materials have been developed to assist both the teacher and the student in the conduct of WTP. These materials are readily available and can be obtained in class sets free of charge to the school. This improves the accessibility of the program and ensures continuity of learning objectives across the country.
- A National drive exists to implement the program with funding provided by the US Department of Education and private donors. The donations from private individuals and public companies underlines the importance that American citizens place on civic education.
- National outcomes are in place that reflect the desired level of student achievement across the nation. This has ensured that all schools and educators are encouraged to strive to achieve the same outcomes.
- The National Outcomes are explicit, written in clear and plain English and are directly relational to the lessons provided in the "We the People" teacher guide and student reader.
- Teacher Professional Development is available during summer vacation that provides funding for travel, accommodation and meals. This PD involves a combination of actual teaching of the constitution to equip teachers with theoretical knowledge and the teaching of program implementation. The Institutes are generally 2 weeks in duration and equip educators not only with the tools required to implement the program but most importantly the inherit desire to foster civic appreciation in their students.
- Significant evaluative materials designed to test student development in relation to National Standards are available. These evaluative tools include Multiple Choice questions, short answer tests and application activities.
- There are national competitive programs that allow students of each state the opportunity to compete against one another. Thus students are able to apply and demonstrate the skills learnt. (please see appendix three for a sample of Congressional Hearing topics and scoring)

Furthermore, a report conducted by the Centre for Civic Education found that;

- (WTP is) A "great instructional success," is how the Educational Testing Service characterizes the **We the People** program. Independent studies by ETS have revealed that **We the People** students "significantly outperformed comparison students on every topic of the tests taken."
- Students involved in the **We the People** program develop greater commitment to democratic principles and values, according to a study by Richard Brody of Stanford

- University. The study concludes that the program is effective in promoting political tolerance because participating students feel more politically effective and perceive fewer limits on their own political freedom.
- "[T]eachers feel excited and renewed.... Students are enthusiastic about what they have been able to accomplish, especially in terms of their ability to carry out a reasoned argument. They have become energized about their place as citizens of the United States," say researchers from the Council for Basic Education
  - A 2001 survey of **We the People** alumni revealed that they are better informed and participate at higher rates than their peers. The data suggests that voting rates are significantly higher among alumni than nonparticipating peers surveyed in the 2000 American National Election Study (NES). Eighty-two percent of **We the People** alumni voted in November 2000, in contrast to 48 percent turnout by peers.

Coupled with these observations and findings, I consider the following implementation issues to be significant for West Australian schools:

- A significant drive would be needed to establish a program similar to "We the People"
- An institute, similar in structure to the Centre for Civic Education in the US, would be required to facilitate the coordination and delivery of such a program.
- Significant input from Educators currently involved in State and Federal education would be required to develop the program. Often such initiatives are controlled by those who are not actively involved in the education of young people and therefore are not always suitable to current learning environments
- While initially the program could be operated at a State level, a national initiative would be required to support an effective program. Currently, the Federal government allocates approximately 4 million dollars to Civics education and this is directed to the Civics and Citizenship Education project of the Department of Science and Education. It organizes conferences and maintains an extensive website for teachers. Coupled with this they also provide grants to schools to conduct activities for Democracy Week. The grants provided are however very minimal.
- In recent years, since the Keating government, there has been much interest in this area which has resulted with the Howard government allocating 19.4 million dollars to the development of Curriculum materials. This led to the development of "Discovering Democracy", a program written and coordinated by the Curriculum Corporation. We the People could be diffused with this program and could be adapted to such activities as Senate Committee hearings and the like.
- State legislatures and their Educational agencies would need to have goals consistent with the Commonwealth as the Federal legislature can not mandate curriculum in schools.

- Subject to the provision of funding and with reference to the Discovering Democracy materials, a text should be developed for students in years 8-10 similar in style to that provided by the Centre for Civic Education. These texts would specifically address content areas such as the origins of democracy, Australia's constitutional history and current political theory. The current readers that accompany Discovering Democracy are under utilized and are more of a collection of diverse extracts that do not explicitly teach Australian Civics. On several occasions I have observed advertisements from educators trying to "off load" these materials due to their unsuitability.
- Much consultation should occur with the Centre for Civic Education. The Centre has an active policy to assist other countries with their own interpretation of the program. They are currently involved with countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Argentina, Germany, Romania and Russia.

## **Implications for the Classroom**

We the People is a program best supported with National or State coordination however, with some knowledge it can be implemented at the classroom level. Outcomes that could be achieved include :

1. Increased awareness of the Australian political system and history
2. A heightened interest in Australian citizenship and a desire to participate in Australia's democratic institutions.
3. An increase in the skills required to participate as responsible citizens.
4. Problem solving skills and the ability to work in team environments.
5. Opportunities for students to display the values learnt within the school and the community.
6. Improved public speaking skills.
7. Better summary and note taking skills.
8. Improved teacher skills in managing their classrooms. (students who are engaged are less likely to exhibit disciplinary problems)

I am presently developing materials consistent with current curriculum design principles. With the implementation of Student Progress maps, curriculum needs to have long term focus that seeks to assess outcomes in a more specific way. Assessment of outcomes should occur within a rich task framework.

Specific outcomes to be addressed are Investigation, Communication and Participation, Time Continuity and Change and Natural and Social Systems.

## Further Information

For further information on my research or any general inquiries I can be contacted on:  
[melissarasmussen@bigpond.com](mailto:melissarasmussen@bigpond.com)

Direct information on the program can be obtained by contacting Roy Erickson, We the People State coordinator and Director of Justice Education Programs in California:  
[Cacoord49@comcast.net](mailto:Cacoord49@comcast.net)

Information on attending any Institutes in California can be obtained by contacting JoAnne Fallon  
[Fallon@civiced.org](mailto:Fallon@civiced.org)

To contact teachers who have used the program and are involved in Teacher training the following two teachers are recommended;

Heidi Stepp  
[heidiastepp@aol.com](mailto:heidiastepp@aol.com)

Lynette V. Wallace  
[lwallace@canterburyschool.org](mailto:lwallace@canterburyschool.org)

For information on international programs consult :

**CIVITAS: AN INTERNATIONAL CIVIC EDUCATION EXCHANGE PROGRAM** that is directed by the Center for Civic Education and funded by the U.S. Department of Education under the Education for Democracy Act approved by the United States Congress.

Rita Foy Moss

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**U.S. Department of Education**

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Email: (Javascript must be enabled to see this e-mail address) [Rita.Foy.Moss@ed.gov](mailto:Rita.Foy.Moss@ed.gov)

## Useful Websites

For valuable and statistical research conducted on the international program operating in Indonesia visit;

<http://www.civiced.org/research/pdfs/RisingTide.pdf>

For information on the programs offered by The Centre for Civic Education visit;

[www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

The website above is outstanding and provides links to a plethora of information. You may however wish to visit websites that are hosted by each individual state regarding the outcomes of the program.

For information regarding the Australian National Civics program visit;

<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy/aboutdd/materials.htm>

## Appendix

## Appendix One – WTP Program Sample



### *We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution*

Directed by the Center for Civic Education  
Funded by the U.S. Department of Education by act of Congress



California Summer Institute  
July 6 – 14, 2005  
Agenda  
University of San Diego  
5998 Alcalá Park  
San Diego, California 92110-2492  
619-260-4623

#### Wednesday, July 6

1:30 – 3:00 pm	Mentor/Staff Meeting	Conference Room - Manchester Hall
3:00 – 4:00	Participant check in and registration	Manchester Hall
4:00 – 4:15	Welcome <i>Roy Erickson, State Coordinator</i>	Salomon Hall - Maher
4:15 – 4:45	Introduction to <b>We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution</b> <i>Roy Erickson</i>	
4:45 – 5:15	Correlation to California State History Social Science Content Standards and Framework <i>Roy Erickson and Andrea Mello</i>	
5:15 – 6:00	Introductory Activity <i>Mentors – Donna McNeel and Heidi Stepp</i>	
6:00 – 6:30	Team Meeting with Mentors ( <i>please bring binder</i> )	
6:30 – 8:00	Reception/Dinner	Manchester Hall Village Garden

#### Thursday, July 7

7:00 – 8:00 am	Breakfast	Hahn Center Main Dining Room
8:00 – 8:15	Review Agenda and expectations <i>Roy Erickson</i>	Salomon Hall - Maher
8:15 – 8:30	Announcements and Icebreaker <i>Facilitating Mentor – Andrea Mello</i>	
8:30 – 10:00	Unit One - What Are the Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System? Lecture – Part One ( <i>Mentor- Bob McCoy will introduce</i> ) <i>Honorable Susan Leeson</i> <i>Retired Justice, Oregon Supreme Court</i>	Salomon Hall
10:00 – 10:15	Break	



Appendix Three – Sample Hearing questions

California Summer Institute  
Hearing Questions  
*Congressional District Level*

**Unit III: How Did the Values and Principles Embodied in the  
Constitution Shape American Institutions and Practices?**

**is the power of judicial review and how was it established in the United  
?**

Is the power of the Supreme Court to overrule the will of a congressional majority consistent with the principle of representative government? Why or why not?

If the Supreme Court did not have this power in what other way could the rights of minorities be protected from the majority? Take and defend a position on which way you think the rights of minorities should be protected.

## Appendix Three – Sample Scoring Matrix Congressional Hearing Group Score Sheet

Unit # \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

For each criterion listed, score the group on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the best score. (Use a separate form for each group. A summary form will be provided for totaling each class's score.)

1-2 = Poor      3-4 = Fair      5-6 = Average      7-8 = Above Average      9-10 = Excellent

	SCORE	NOTES
1. <b>UNDERSTANDING:</b> To what extent did participants demonstrate a clear understanding of the basic issues involved in the questions?		
2. <b>CONSTITUTIONAL APPLICATION:</b> To what extent did participants appropriately apply knowledge of constitutional history and principles?		
3. <b>REASONING:</b> To what extent did participants support positions with sound reasoning?		
4. <b>SUPPORTING EVIDENCE:</b> To what extent did participants support positions with historical or contemporary evidence, examples, and/or illustrations?		
5. <b>RESPONSIVENESS:</b> To what extent did participants' answers address the questions asked?		
6. <b>PARTICIPATION:</b> To what extent did most group members contribute to the group's presentation?		
<b>GROUP TOTAL</b>		

Tie Breaker\* \_\_\_\_\_

\* Please designate a score of any number between 0 and 100 points that reflects this group's OVERALL performance. (This score will be used only in the event of a tie.) Please use following scale:

Outstanding	90 to 100 points	Average	50 to 69 points
Very Good	80 to 89 points	Below Average	30 to 49 points
Above Average	70 to 79 points	Poor	0 to 29 points

JUDGE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: \_\_\_\_\_