



Australia's national voice for people with  
Down syndrome and their families.

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

23 May 2024

### **Submission to The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM)**

Down Syndrome Australia (DSA) was established in 2011 as the peak body for people with Down syndrome in Australia. Our purpose is to influence social and policy change and provide a national profile and voice for people living with Down syndrome. Our vision is an Australia where people living with Down syndrome are valued, reach their potential, and enjoy social and economic inclusion. In line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Australia's Disability Strategy (the Strategy) we work towards a community where all people with disability are included, and their rights respected and protected.

DSA is pleased to provide this submission to the Joint Standing Committee for Electoral Matters (Inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia). Advocacy for a fully inclusive education system in Australia is an important aspect of the work undertaken by Down Syndrome Australia, however specific curriculum areas is beyond our regular scope. Please consider that many of the comments provided below reflect a philosophical standpoint rather than an experiential position.

#### **The effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia**

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum introduced the subject Civics and Citizenship, as part of the Humanities and Social Science family. There is a focus on knowledge, skills and capacity, aiming to develop active and participatory citizens<sup>1</sup>. DSA is certain that the Committee will receive submissions from professionals within the

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2018. *Australian Curriculum: Humanities and Social Sciences F-12*, accessed: <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/>

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teaching and learning professions who will make comment and recommendations on the effectiveness of the curriculum and the way that it is taught across primary and secondary environments.

Australian research has demonstrated that not all students with disability who attend a mainstream primary school setting attend a mainstream high school – i.e., a greater proportion of students with disability attend a segregated school in their secondary years<sup>2</sup>. Segregated settings, and segregation within mainstream settings, has anecdotally had a significant impact on the access to curriculum and content matter that students are taught. Generally, DSA understands that education in the Humanities and Social Science grouping is one of those areas removed or reduced in timetables for students with intellectual disability for other kinds of education, like life skills and work experience.

Experiences of education for people with intellectual disability vary widely internationally and DSA doesn't have the specialist knowledge to make specific recommendations about the effectiveness of different approaches to civics and citizenship education. DSA is concerned that removing access to civics and citizenship education for students with disability has lifelong impacts, and likely results in reduced electoral engagement, removal from the electoral roll, and reduced capacity for being supporters of democracy and democratic processes. DSA is sure there are opportunities for improvements at school level.

DSA would also like to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that in primary and secondary settings there can be opportunities to understand civics and citizenship through camps or experiential learning away from home, such as camps in Canberra, often multi-days/nights. These camps can be inaccessible to students with disabilities and therefore a significant missed opportunity for hands-on education on electoral matters. DSA would refer this matter to experts for recommendations but raises the issue for the Committee to consider.

DSA identifies an opportunity to investigate research into the matter of reduced curriculum and content for students with disability, particularly intellectual disability.

#### [Information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting](#)

For those adults with Down Syndrome who vote, information about voting processes and options must be accessible. DSA expects that it would be presented in formats for different audiences, including Easy Read, Plain English and in other accessible formats.

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<sup>2</sup> McKay-Brown, L., Mendus, A., Smith, C. & Harrison, M. (2023) *Addressing the Divide: Authentic inclusion in education for people with Down syndrome*. Report prepared for Down Syndrome Victoria. MGSE Disability Research Collaboration, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne.

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DSA understands that information is available in accessible formats and encourages the AEC to continue to provide that information.

DSA has written to political parties in the past and encouraged them to provide how-to-vote and other campaign material in accessible formats. DSA would continue to encourage the development and provision of information in accessible formats.

#### Social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation

Beyond issues which might be related to incomplete or inadequate civics and citizenship education, a range of barriers for participation in political or public life have been identified by DSA and include transport issues, being assumed to not have capacity, lack of support in the voting process and a lack of accessible information to support their decision making. Many people with an intellectual disability want to vote and have the capacity to vote if they are provided with appropriate support. The UN Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability (of which Australia is a signatory) outlines the rights of people with a disability to participate in political and public life.

Removal from electoral roll continues to be a barrier for some people with disabilities, with an unreasonable power for a General Practitioner to make decisions about capacity. DSA has contributed to inquiries on this matter in the past and maintains this position. It can be complicated to return to the electoral roll and this issue still affects people with intellectual disability not only for regular elections but also for referendums.

Down Syndrome Australia looks forward to seeing recommendations and changes in the civics and citizenship education space. DSA recognises that there may be data collection and research required to determine the ways that children with disability receive education.

If you have any questions about this submission, please contact Senior Advocate, Erin Papps, [REDACTED]

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