



AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF SOCIETIES
FOR STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND
ENVIRONMENT

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Attention: Sonia Palmieri
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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament of Australia
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Inquiry into the adequacy of electoral education

Following is a response from AFSSSE:

a.. the current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system

In undertaking a brief consultation exercise on the questions, the AFSSSE Executive became very aware of the need for information on the current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system. Although the ACER testing has been comprehensive, **the AFSSSE Executive feel they are well positioned to undertake a small research study (student survey and curriculum audit) to provide a focused description of civic and electoral education as is practised in Australian schools. This could provide valuable advice to future planners.** The following comments have been made based on experiences of members of the AFSSSE Board, rather than an analytical and tested accumulation of findings.

AFSSSE believes that generally young people do not show too much interest in the electoral system as they think that it is something that only affects them in the future. For those who are interested, opportunities do exist, for example, in the SOSE curriculum at Year 9 and 10 and with VCE National Politics. Most teachers would say that their knowledge of and responsibilities under the Australian electoral system is quite limited.

However, there appears to be some improvement in knowledge especially with senior students. The challenge is to engage younger students who need to better understand the process of decision-making especially in a democratic society and within various levels in society - from the family unit to local organisations to local government and then to state and federal. Using the theme of how decisions are made is a good way to start.

b.. the nature of civics education and its links with electoral education

AFSSSE acknowledges that the curriculum in the states and territories included civic and electoral education, but suggests a more focused approach is needed to ensure agreed content and skills are covered if student outcomes in civic and electoral education are to improve. This will of course require a careful analysis of the preparedness of teachers. If teachers are not knowledgeable about civics and electoral issues, the translation of the syllabus outcomes may continue to be at a participatory level rather than a knowledgeable level. Many schools have excellent programs on democratic action but whether students understand how this translates to their own local, state and national governments is questionable.

The complexity of secondary school education often means many things are taught in isolation with little regard to the interrelationships, relevance and links among KLAS. Electoral education needs to be a challenging topic for students through the use of practical activities and simulation games are encouraged. Student parliaments and student councils are excellent initiatives provided students are genuinely empowered and provided with the rationale for certain limitations being placed on their decision making powers. The reasons for this should be explained in terms of the similar patterns that have been defined for our society as a whole. The Sustainable Schools model in which an environment committee is established is one way to illustrate this. In this situation the student shares responsibility for decision-making with teachers, non teaching staff and community representatives and is then actively engaged in implementing the decisions. Electoral education should not be the responsibility of one staff member or faculty within a secondary school. It is best implemented as part of the operation and management of the school as a whole and planned as an across curriculum exercise among subject departments. In other words the school should walk the democratic electoral education talk and be a model for its implementation, while also ensuring the learning experience is based on a sound understanding of the electoral processes of our different governments.

One of the five essentials of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings K-10 curriculum is Social responsibility. This essential encompasses ideas about community, social justice and cultural valuing, participating in democratic civic life and accepting an obligation to contribute to global wellbeing. Developing a sense of social responsibility involves understanding the interdependence of our social, political, cultural and economic systems. Civic responsibility includes developing the capacity to take action and to influence events within the framework of democratic processes.

Under the VELS Civics and Citizenship domain there is a link with electoral education particularly at Level 6, although the emphasis of the Civics and Citizenship domain is both knowledge, understanding and community engagement. Perhaps the best way to engage students in learning about the electoral system is by way of community engagement projects, with well educated teachers who can draw parallels between community engagement projects

and the legal and political practices which impact on rights and responsibilities. There are no clear guidelines for the teaching of Australian electoral education in Victorian Secondary Schools, and AFSSSE suspects this is the case in most other states and territories.

c.. the content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities

The AFSSSE Board believes there is opportunity to include electoral education in all sectors, but not the emphasis. Syllabus documents may include electoral education topics, but whether any significant outcomes are gained by teachers in this area are questionable.

Teachers need more support to develop their own understanding of content in civics and electoral education. There is a need for more professional development and clearer guidelines linking electoral education to outcomes or essential learnings.

Electoral education suffers from the same problem as many other cross curriculum studies do. Unless it is in the syllabus it will take second place with the exception of those teachers who have a burning interest and commitment to it. Unless each state and territory system makes it mandatory and establishes a framework to ensure it is taught then it will have a low priority given the surfeit of responsibilities teachers work under. One way of minimising the problem is to ensure it is incorporated into such syllabuses as SOSE, History and other areas of social education. The way a school is managed can also be an effective strategy for demonstrating the concepts in action.

There are many ways that environmental education and education for sustainability can be linked to civics and citizenship and electoral education. All have political and social ramifications, all relate to values and commitment and each has a decision-making component.

A number of concepts and content areas could be considered when dealing with electoral education. Some suggestions are: power, decision making, lobbying; parties; cabinet; government; opposition; bill; law' regulations; parliament; Westminster system; policies; splinter groups; bicameral system; first past the post voting; proportional representation; preferential voting system; Senate, House of Representatives.

Topics might include: Case studies to demonstrate how a government is formed; the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Govt; the relationship between the legal system and parliament; role of the Electoral Commission; role of the Governor General; the purpose of the Constitution; how the Constitution can be changed.

Tasmanian government schools are implementing the Tasmanian Essential Learnings curriculum which has a focus on civics education and electoral education. This is a K-10 curriculum which will be assessed and reported on by all government schools in Tasmania.

One of the key elements of Social responsibility is Acting democratically. Learning in relation to this key element centres on learners of all ages, 4 – 16 years, developing an understanding of their rights and responsibilities as participants in civic life and learning to act on these understandings.

These actions are equally important to the formal and informal decision-making processes we participate in at work, in clubs and societies, and during the work we do as citizens in the course of political decision-making.

The key element outcome for Acting democratically is “Understands and participates effectively in democratic decision-making processes and civic life” which encompasses developing an understanding of electoral processes at a community level as well as at all levels of government.

In Victoria, civics and electoral topics tend not to be a compulsory aspect of the curriculum, although this will change with the implementation of VELS. Many students would leave school with no or very little knowledge of the electoral system. It also appears as if very little on these topics is taught in TAFE or at University.

d.. the school age at which electoral education should begin

Early concept development should begin as early as Kindergarten where students can elect team leaders and discuss ways of solving local school issues. By early primary years students can be shown how decisions are made and should be able to engage in simple simulation games. Mock elections and establishing buddy charts can be introduced in the early years as well. When it comes to a formal understanding of the parliamentary process this can be introduced at Stage 3 Learning. Many schools tend to visit the Federal Capital at this time to show how parliament operates. State Parliaments are also visited at this time as well.

In Tasmanian government schools, civics education as described in the essential Social Responsibility, is part of the learning and teaching for all students aged 4 – 16 years. Outcomes and standards have been written for each of the Essential Learnings key elements. The standards translate the key element outcomes. There are five standards of each key element. The five standards, together with the Foundations for each Essential Learning, cover the period from birth to sixteen years. Each describes what students should know, understand and be able to do In terms of significant aspects of learning.

The middle to upper primary school students will have had many experiences with the processes of decision-making at a classroom and school level. They make some connections between the democratic processes which underpin home, school and community to a broader perspective ie local, state and federal government. These democratic processes include voting procedures (first past the post, preferential voting, majority rules and secret ballots), consultative processes (surveys, class meetings, community of inquiry), taking collective responsibility for tasks, being representative (SRC, sports captains, class captains), consensus decision making (rosters) and taking action (protests, petitions and lobbying).

These early learning experiences related to democratic processes underpin future learning at standards 4 and 5 (standards achieved by secondary school students), for example, learners being able to identify, compare and contrast different political systems and their key features, recognise significant turning g points in Australia’s democratic evolution, understand the role of a constitution in governanc4 and organisation of our political and judicial systems.

e.. the potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs

It appears that teachers may feel inadequate in teaching the electoral system and would welcome outside bodies providing resources/activities/excursions. It is acknowledged that Parliamentary Education Officers often have a huge task with minimum resource assistance.

The following opportunities already exist to increase electoral knowledge, but need to be included in more programs with strong links to defined outcomes. Opportunities include: Visits to state and federal parliaments, attending local council meetings, asking the local MP to talk to students; undertaking a mock election and debriefing how the results were tabulated; examining computer models of balance of power within various parliaments; contacting education officers in various state parliaments;

f.. the adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities

AFSSSE has little information on this issue but suspects there are many issues to consider including retention issues, literacy issues and cultural issues.

g.. the adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens

The experience of AFSSSE Board members is that many migrant citizens are terribly unaware of major political issues in Australia and tend to keep their opinions to themselves. This particularly applies to people from war torn countries and where human rights were severely abused. Democracy is not within the realms of experience for some migrant citizens as they have come from countries where there is no real democracy, and language barriers may prevent acquisition of knowledge.

The problem is how, where and when contact can be made with these groups. Perhaps it is an issue to be taken up by DFAT or the Dept of Immigration. More coordination is required between DEST and these other two departments.

h.. the role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education

There appears to be a need to clarify the difference between the role of the Australian Electoral Commission and the Parliamentary Education Officers. Does every state and territory have PEOs?

Obviously the AEC and the Electoral Commissions should play a big role but producing a plethora of publications and teaching aids is only part of their role and not necessarily the most effective. Training programs for teachers and train the trainer programs are more effective along with suggestions for practical activities and case studies to inspire discussion and individual student learning. Both groups should collaborate on resources and projects and avoid unnecessary duplication.

Many teachers have utilized the services of the Australian Electoral Education Office in

Bourke Street for VCE students and have found it extremely useful. More links should be made with local, state and federal government. The AEE does require more funding.

Governments have a role to play in educating citizens about the electoral system as a way for the public to participate in democracy. More funding is required for schools to visit governments ie Canberra can be expensive.

i.. the role of Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education

Again the same comments apply. In fact a committee of all these groups and the former in (h) above should develop a national plan to support the area. A number of educators should also join the committee to establish a framework for the implementation of electoral education. The plan should then be presented to MCYEETA for approval and each state and territory should establish its own support model using the agreed principles developed by the national group. Local Government in NSW is already working formally with the DET on environmental education and education for sustainability. A similar model could be introduced for electoral education.

j.. the access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament; and

This is a very expensive exercise and its cost benefits are questionable unless a set program accompanies the visit. Many excursions are not successful because of poor planning and a lack of clear goals. A less expensive option is to prepare a virtual tour of parliament and to provide extracts of debates with exercises and discussion points accompanying it.

The costs of a school visit are quite prohibitive for the general population and funding would be appreciated.

k.. opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand

By all means conduct a literature search and adopt projects and programs that suit our system in Australia. A small team of part time educators could be selected and could present a number of options and projects after a 6 month research period.

This would be a good idea, as even though Australia has a system of compulsory voting, it does not have compulsory education about the electoral system. Innovative and creative approaches would be welcome from systems where voting is not compulsory, as they would need to inspire and motivate people to go to the polling booth. US, Canada, Germany and UK have a good civics and citizenship program. NZ is similar to Australia.

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