

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

Submission by Independent Schools Council Australia

About ISCA

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) is the peak national body covering the independent school sector. It comprises the State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools. Through these Associations it represents a sector with over 1,000 schools and almost 480,000 students accounting for some 14 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

Independent schools serve a range of different communities. Many independent schools provide a religious or values-based education, while others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, such as Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist and Uniting Church schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions founded by religious or other groups in the community and are registered with the relevant state or territory education authority. Most independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example the Lutheran system. Systemic schools account for nearly 20 per cent of schools in the independent sector.

Summary of submission

The Independent Schools Council of Australia has made this submission on behalf of state and territory Associations of Independent Schools, addressing areas of common interest in relation to civics and electoral education. In addition, some Associations have made separate submissions with a specific state and territory perspective.

This submission addresses most of the terms of reference for the inquiry. Key points made are as follows:

- The independent school sector is very diverse, and it would be difficult to make generalizations about the content and adequacy of electoral education within independent schools
- The 2004 national sample assessment on civics and citizenship education, with a breakdown of student performance in Year 6 and Year 10, will provide useful information though caution needs to be exercised as there are limitations to the sample assessment process, and to the validity of national comparability.
- In many schools, civics education does not focus on the theoretical content of our political and legal system. Rather, many teachers prefer to focus on opportunities for students to be active and informed citizens.
- Civics and electoral education is taught in schools from the early years through to the final years of schooling. The most effective way to teach civics at each stage is through practical experiences, rather than by teaching facts and content in isolation.
- More sophisticated understandings about civics education are better left until students are older, particularly from middle-school age. Middle schooling philosophy can do more to encourage active and informed citizenship through the practices that are undertaken, than any amount of content knowledge about political systems.
- In relation to school visits to federal Parliament, access is a major issue for most schools distant from Canberra. The costs involved in transporting groups of students from the far north or far west of Australia to Canberra are far too exorbitant for most schools. Funding to support familiarization tours for teachers would be a welcome addition.

Additionally the following points about civics and electoral education are made:-

- Schools have to grapple with many competing agendas about what is considered to be important in terms of knowledge, skills and dispositions for life in the twenty-first century. Civics and electoral education is just one of these.
- Civics and electoral education occurs in a wide variety of settings apart from within schools
- Civics and electoral education has a place within the formal curriculum offerings of independent schools, and occupies a significant amount of the SOSE/ HSIE curriculum
- Civics and electoral education is also normally a part of the extra-curricular activities of independent schools.

Comments addressing the terms of reference

1. Current status of young people's knowledge and responsibilities

In 2004 a national sample assessment of student performance in civics and citizenship education was conducted. Independent schools were represented in the sample. The results of the 2004 sample, with a breakdown of how well students performed in Year 6 and Year 10, will be available shortly. While it is expected that the results of the sample assessment will provide some useful information on the current status of young people's knowledge of civics and the Australian electoral system, caution needs to be exercised as there are a number of limitations to the sample assessment process:

- it is a 'point in time' test administered to a small minority of students in each of the target year groups
- the constraints of a short test format mean that some aspects of civics knowledge are given priority over other aspects
- the test is taken out of context to the real world experiences of the students
- the test is aimed at assessing students' knowledge about civics education rather than assessing their active involvement in citizenship

There are some further concerns in regard to national comparability rising from the selection of year 6 for the national sample assessment. It is customary practice in some states, such as Queensland, for students to study local government in early primary (usually year 3) and state government in year 5. Federal government is most often studied when the students are in their last year of primary school and traditionally culminates in a trip to Canberra; the students electing their senior leaders of the school; class parliament activities etc. It is usually not until the final year of primary school that the three layers of government are tied together, and the focus is really on students' understandings about civics. Students in those states where Year 6 is the final year of primary school are therefore in a much better position to do well in the sample assessment. In states where year 7 is the final year (Queensland and Western Australia), year 6 students are likely to do less well.

At the year 10 level, there may also be anomalies in performance by state. In NSW there has been a particular emphasis on civics education, with the state government offering its own civics education test in year 10. This is likely to have had the effect of strengthening the ability of students in NSW to do well in the national testing program. The curriculum practice in secondary schools in other states may be 'out of kilter' to the sample testing program. Many secondary schools offer a multi-disciplinary year in year 8 but then students may be given the choice to undertake a history-oriented course or a geography-oriented course in years 9 and 10.

In the case of Queensland, students in independent schools are well prepared for the national testing program, through implementation of the Queensland Studies Authority *Years 1 – 10 Study of Society and Environment (SOSE) Syllabus* (or its equivalent). This syllabus describes twenty key concepts to be studied across the ten years of compulsory schooling. The concepts include environmental sustainability; concepts of time, continuity and change, concepts of place and space and concepts around government, governance, rule, law, parliaments, power, the Constitution etc. Of the twenty concepts described, five have

themes directly connected to civics and electoral education. Through the non-state schools accreditation process, independent schools must demonstrate that they are implementing the state syllabus or an equivalent.

Other states have developed similar syllabuses in SOSE or HSIE that have direct links back to the National Statements and Profiles. In all cases, civics education is given a prominent position within these syllabuses. In each case, the syllabus is also broad enough to allow for interpretations and contexts that are directly linked to civics understanding. For example, a student action plan to prevent environmental desecration could become an application of informed citizenry.

The national *Discovering Democracy* program provided enormous support for professional development for teachers but in some states at least, this was often translated into the actions of active citizenship rather than the more passive knowledge acquisition about civics.

As a requirement under the Australian Government's *Schools Assistance Act 2004* and associated Regulations, all states must demonstrate that the national Statements of Learning (for English, mathematics, science, ICT and civics) are embedded within the state syllabus documents by 1 January 2008. Currently curriculum authorities across the nation are undertaking a mapping exercise to demonstrate the synergy between the relevant state syllabuses and the national Statement of Learning for civics education. For some states, this will require a significant rewrite of their current Essential Learnings to cover the specific content statements of civics. For other states, the shift will not be significant at all. The danger in this exercise is that the multi-disciplinary nature of SOSE becomes lost, with perhaps too much of a focus on civics education at the expense of other important aspects.

2. The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education

'Civics and electoral education' as identified in the terms of reference of this inquiry appears to be interpreted as the deep understandings of the theoretical foundations of our government system, the Constitution, our legal systems, the three tiers of government, rules, laws and powers rather than the broader interpretation of active and informed citizenship. In many schools, civics education does not focus as much on the content of our political and legal system as some would expect. Rather, many teachers prefer to focus on opportunities for students to be active and informed citizens, participating in many rich experiences. Teachers see their role as being related to the core business of schools: that is, educating young people to lead full and enriched lives in an increasingly complex world.

3. The content and adequacy of electoral education in non-government school programs of study

While independent schools must meet the requirements of the relevant state or territory government registration bodies, they are generally responsible for their own educational directions and outcomes, and each school develops its own curriculum and program. Independent schools are also able to develop cocurricular programs that are suited to their communities and to the school's local environment. The independent school sector is very diverse, and it would be difficult to make generalizations about the content and adequacy of electoral education within independent schools.

Some independent schools have very strong traditions in civics education, built for example on an awareness of the history of this country. Other schools engage in class parliaments on a regular basis, or have democratic processes in place in the school that ensure students are living through the experiences of active citizenship.

4. The school age at which electoral education should begin

Civics and electoral education is taught in schools in a gradually deepening manner from the early years through to the final years of schooling. The most effective way to teach civics at each stage of development is through practical experiences, rather than by teaching facts and content in isolation.

In many states SOSE/ HSIE syllabuses describe students beginning to understand some of the concepts of rules, governance and working with others from year 1. Provided that the content is age appropriate, students can start to understand from a very early age concepts such as why there are leaders and rules, why we should listen to one another etc. It must be emphasized that ‘civics and electoral education’ need not necessarily imply formal schooling. This sort of ‘education’ can actually begin with play groups, prep or reception class, or as part of the other interactions children have with peers from a very early age.

However, the more sophisticated understandings about civics education are better left until students are older, particularly from middle-school age. In independent schools, a middle-school philosophy usually means that:

- the curriculum is negotiated;
- students are engaged in real-life experiences;
- students undertake extended fields of study;
- students are encouraged to act for and mentor others;
- students are developing their emotional responses and their understanding of ways to contribute meaningfully to society.

This philosophy aims to develop active and informed citizens who understand the processes required to make changes in the world and to challenge inequities and disadvantage. A true middle schooling philosophy does more to encourage active and informed citizenship through the practices that are undertaken, than any amount of content knowledge about political systems.

The real dilemma for electoral education is that it would have most impact if taught during the senior years of schooling when students are closest to the legal age for enrolment on the electoral role. Generally however the senior years offer wide subject choice, and many students do not in fact choose to enrol in a social science subject. In many independent schools, the only time that all senior students are together is during the ‘pastoral care’ or religious education lessons. This is a precious time when career education, tertiary options, drug education and ‘schoolies’ information; road safety education and a raft of other equally important activities are undertaken. Independent schools would find it incredibly difficult to squeeze more content material into this time.

5. The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs

Electoral and civics education is not the responsibility only of the SOSE teacher. There are many opportunities for students to be actively involved in citizenship roles in programs outside the formal curriculum. The Constitutional Convention is just one example of these extra-curricular activities. Youth Parliaments are organised in most states and are another avenue for students to participate.

6. The adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities

Independent schools across Australia educate significant numbers of indigenous students, both in boarding situations where the students are removed from their communities, and in community-run schools within regional and remote communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often not active participants in democratic processes unless their own local council or lands governance body is active and promotes that broader participation. Developing trust and faith in a local system of governance is vital to involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in active participation in democratic processes and such local involvement should be the focus of electoral education campaigns. Language barriers and geographic isolation mean that success in local government must come first. Participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in mainstream democratic processes is often viewed with skepticism, anxiety and distrust. Within an historical perspective, indigenous peoples have many good reasons to be suspicious of 'white' politics and the motives of Commonwealth and state governments. Traditionally also, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not always respect young aspiring leaders, respecting rather the elders for their wisdom and insight (grey hair is an important signifier of knowledge).

7. The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens

Across Australia, significant numbers of students in independent schools are children of migrants. Schools work with these children to develop their understandings of civics knowledge and processes but there are some additional complicating factors that may underpin the approach these children take to civics education. Some migrants to Australia have experienced extreme duress, sometimes torture, physical and mental abuse and lost relatives, because of the government actions of their home country. These migrants are perhaps reluctant to participate in democratic processes because they have deep suspicions about governments and 'freedom of speech'. Other migrants of course enthusiastically embrace their potential to be a force for change and participate very actively in Australia's democratic processes, including becoming involved in support groups for newly arrived migrants. Language differences, cultural customs and norms may be a very real barrier to participation by certain groups.

8. The role of Governments in promoting electoral education

Many students leave school before they turn 18 years of age. There is a significant role for the government in promoting electoral education for young people once they are old enough to vote. For example it could be a requirement that in the same way as they apply for a driver's licence, they must also apply to be registered on the electoral role.

9. The access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament

Access is a major issue for most schools distant from the Sydney/Melbourne/Canberra corridor. The costs involved in transporting groups of students from the far north or far west of Australia to Canberra are far too exorbitant for most schools. Even for students to travel to their respective state parliament is in many cases not an option. Similarly, many teachers do not get to experience what Canberra has to offer, and do not realize how much their students would benefit if they did in fact 'make the effort'. Funding to support familiarization tours for teachers would be a welcome addition.

10. Opportunities to introduce creative approaches

It is very timely to consider creative approaches to support students' understanding about civics and electoral education. Roger Hollinsworth's Student Action Plans (SAPs) for example are a great way to engage young people in active citizenry.

Other comments

Competing agendas

Schools have to grapple with many competing agendas about what is considered to be important in terms of knowledge, skills and dispositions for life in the twenty-first century. Civics and electoral education is just one of these. Listed below are just some of the national agenda issues currently confronting schools:-

- healthy eating to combat obesity
- mental health
- environmental education
- Asian education and understandings of Muslim culture and practices.
- Literacy, including multi-literacies of our increasingly complex world.

In dealing with these competing agendas, teachers tend to put most emphasis on areas in which they feel most professionally competent. Many teachers have not specialized in political history or similar studies, and may therefore give priority to other areas of the social sciences.

Settings apart from schools

Civics and electoral education occurs in a wide variety of settings outside school. Many students are involved in sporting, religious or volunteer clubs or associations, which are likely to have structures in place such as a constitution, a governance structure, a set of rules, and a process for resolving differences. Exposure to these organisations provides students with experiences in how real life conflicts are resolved; how visions are created and grown; how budgets are maintained and people are held accountable.

Extra-curricular activities

Many independent schools offer a range of experiences for students outside the formal curriculum of the school. These include opportunities for debating and public speaking, participation in Constitutional Conventions; presentations at school assemblies; representing the school on formal occasions; participation in volunteer activities, including mission and charity work, and involvement in organizations like Amnesty International. All of these experiences assist students to grow and develop as active citizens in our community.

Changing behaviour

There is a wealth of research to indicate that knowledge of something does not necessarily translate into behaviour.

Australia has had a number of very successful public awareness campaigns which have changed people's behaviour. The "click clack front and back" seat belt campaign or the "no smoking" campaign are good examples of these. In both cases, the behaviour of the Australian public has changed significantly in a short time. The secret to the success of both these campaigns has been a combination of:-

- law – the laws have been changed to promote the new behaviour and to dissuade the old behaviours
- enforcement – police and local government officials are promoting the enforcement of these laws
- large public awareness campaigns (including catchy sayings, logos, advertisements etc) – to inform people of the new expectations

To bring about a change in behaviour and encourage informed and willing participation in the voting process, we suggest that a similar three pronged campaign be considered. Education, particularly school education, can play a part, but it cannot be the panacea to society's woes and the school curriculum cannot be seen as the only place in which this education will occur.

ISCA
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