

Advocating Community Based Civic Education in BC

By Rick Beauchamp

A free society must rely on the knowledge, skills, and virtue of its citizens and those they elect to public office. Civic education is the primary way our citizens acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for informed and engaged citizenship. Many institutions such as the family, the church and social organizations help forge a person's civic character and propensity to participate. However, civic education in school is the one common experience Canadians share that helps them acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge and attitudes that prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives.

During my many years of involvement in local government I have seen a significant decline in awareness of local government and participation in the election process. Since the late 1960s, voter participation and political engagement among young adults have been declining rapidly. A number of studies have been conducted to determine the underlying basis for these changes. In recent years, we have seen a dramatic decrease in the number of young people choosing public administration as a career. Surveys across Canada are showing a lack of interest in politics by younger voters as well as an increase in young persons who are not voting at all. Voting is a key element of civic engagement. Overall, the trends in voting are discouraging. Since the mid 1960's, every significant indicator of civic engagement has fallen by about half.

What has changed? In recent years, public educators have been pressured to focus on core academic subjects at the expense of non-core subjects. In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on technology too. These pressures have resulted in a de-emphasis on civic education and an inevitable decline in the time and effort students spend on civics. In BC civics education has not been a compulsory part of the education curriculum. It is only briefly touched upon in the social studies curriculum with an optional local community development course in grade eleven. Provinces such as Alberta and Ontario have recognized the significance and made civics an integral part of their student studies.

What can be done? There is good reason to formalize civic education in our schools. Based on the findings of the Pammatt & LeDuc study (2003) the following solutions were proposed: "making voting easier and more meaningful for the first-time voters; making politics more relevant to the young; providing them with the tools they need to understand its relevance to their own lives; and engaging them more directly in the political process." Another beneficial outcome could be a greater interest in pursuing local government as a career choice to fill the growing number of employment vacancies. All these solutions could be addressed within a systematic and structured civic education program. If we want to increase voter participation and community engagement then improving the civic education component in BC's schools seems to be a critical first step.

Why formalize civic education? Another way the Ministry of Education can fulfill its commitment to making BC “the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction in the continent” is to acknowledge the need for civic education and to support the program. The Ministry is responsible for the policy and curriculum for K- 12 students in BC – part of which includes educating kids on what it means to be a Canadian citizen and how to actively participate in our democracy. Many American states are recognizing the importance of civics in schools and are adopting legislation to reinstitute civics into their curriculum. Many programs are including participatory features to encourage active participation from an early age. This education method has already proved successful in BC with the introduction of recycling education in the elementary schools that has resulted in a dramatic positive change in attitudes toward recycling home waste materials.

I have observed over the years a noticeable decline in the understanding of local government by the general public and newly elected officials. It has become increasingly apparent that something needs to be done in order to help develop good governance models for communities throughout BC making them more engaged in how their communities are run. The key to any change will require involvement of the youth who will be our future community volunteers and leaders.

In 2006 I tabled a white paper to the LGMA Board recommending the LGMA, UBCM and Ministry of Community Services partner with the Ministry of Education in creating and integrating into the education curriculum a community based civics education program for K-12 students. It is envisaged that a “Civics Toolkit” be developed for educators to use along with reference materials that could include video training materials and coordinated presentations by local government officials to students. The need for awareness can also be shared at education counsellor’s and parent advisory committee conferences. This initiative has been endorsed by the LGMA Board and advanced for negotiation with the other partners. Over the past year meetings have been held with Ministry Education officials to see how our community based civics program could be integrated into the social studies curriculum. The LGMA recently received a letter from the Minister of Education indicating the ministry would be pleased to work with the LGMA and partners in developing a “Civics Toolkit” to augment the existing K-12 social studies curriculum in BC. This decision by the Ministry of Education is very encouraging and will now pave the way for negotiating the development of some community based educational tools in the education curriculum that will help set out a better understanding of the importance of community awareness and engagement.

We want to grow and develop the best citizens in the nation.

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