

Ready or not?

Preparing youth for 21st century responsible citizenship



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Introduction

Turnout at the polls dropped to a historic low for the Ontario 2011 election with less than 50 per cent of eligible voters casting a ballot. Declining trends in voter turnout and other forms of democratic participation show that Canadians are becoming increasingly disengaged in active expressions of citizenship. Lack of participation threatens our form of government, creating an urgent need to increase civic engagement. The greatest declines in participation are occurring in younger generations, indicating that formal education is not adequately preparing young people to be empowered and engaged citizens. This paper will address the need to reorient education in Canada in order to increase participation. It proposes that the overriding purpose of formal education be reframed in the context of education for responsible citizenship. No other institution is better positioned to address the fundamental challenges we face.

This paper supports Learning for a Sustainable Future's (LSF) mission to promote, through education, the knowledge, skills, perspectives and practices essential to a sustainable future. The commitment to preparing youth for responsible citizenship is part of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (The Decade), which began in 2005 and runs until 2014. The goal of The Decade is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. Reorienting education to address responsible citizenship is one of the key themes identified by The Decade.

LSF is partnering with Deloitte to host a series of roundtable discussions with senior education policy leaders and business leaders in four cities across Canada: Toronto, Halifax, Edmonton, and Winnipeg. The partnership is based on a shared interest in advancing ethical practices, and supporting initiatives involving youth and education to advance democratic practice. The results of the roundtable discussions will be used to generate a White Paper advising on steps that must be taken to ensure students are prepared to be responsible citizens and future leaders. This background paper serves as a foundation so that diverse stakeholders can begin responding to the question: *what do children and youth need to know, do, and value by the time they leave school in order to ensure they are responsible, active, and contributing citizens, and how can formal education be reoriented to meet these goals?*

Why do we need responsible citizenship?

The following pages frame the argument for responsible citizenship – defining what is meant by the term and why it is an essential component of a democratic society. The various definitions of responsible citizenship assume that every individual has an obligation for ethical participation within a democratic society.

What is responsible citizenship?

Responsible citizenship is more than just voting. Being a responsible citizen involves the determination to act in the best interest of human and ecological communities, for social, environmental, and economic benefits. Ethical decision-making requires an understanding that one's actions have both direct and indirect effects on humans and environments.

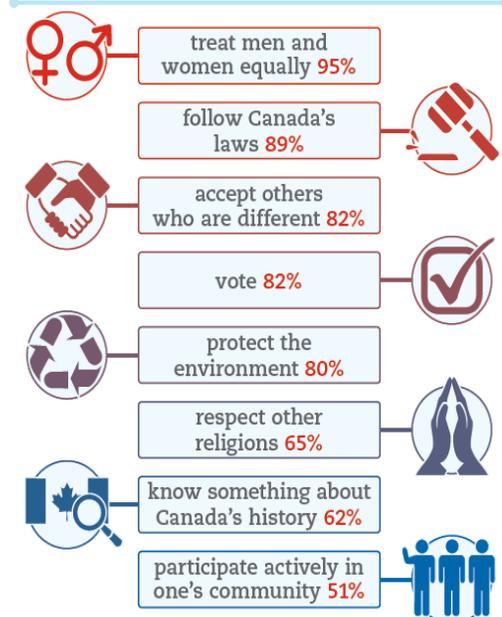
In February 2012, the Environics Institute released a summary report of the results of a public opinion poll which asked over 2,000 Canadians what they think are the characteristics of a good citizen and other questions about citizenship. The report was commissioned by CBC, Maytree, The Institute for Canadian Citizenship and the RBC Foundation.

Canadians define 'citizenship' as more than having a passport, obeying the law and paying taxes. These are widely seen as key aspects of citizenship, but just as important are being active participants in one's community, helping others and accepting differences.

(Environics Institute, 2012)

What makes someone a good citizen?

The following are considered to be very important to being a good Canadian citizen.



Institute for Canadian Citizenship,
<http://www.icc-icc.ca/en/news/citizens.php>

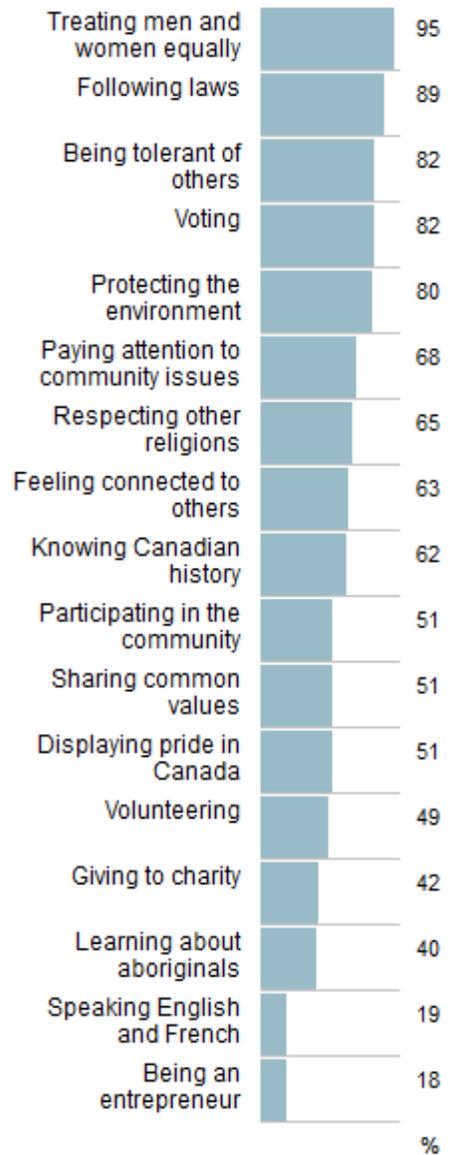
There are a number of useful taxonomies of political participation. Westheimer and Kahne (2005) identify three levels of democratic citizenship: knowledgeable citizens; participatory citizens; and citizens as change agents. Knowledgeable citizens understand the values, principles, responsibilities, and rights of being a citizen in a democracy. Participatory citizens understand the scope and skill of being an active citizen in democracy as it is currently practiced. Citizens as change agents understand the need for change and the means by which change is accomplished in order to improve their democracy and address existing social, economic, and environmental injustices.

Why is responsible citizenship essential?

Democracy by its very nature requires participation. In Canada, not only is voter turnout dropping, but other methods of participation are in decline, including joining or donating to political parties, signing petitions, and attending protests (Bastedo, et al., 2011).

Democracy relies on the active involvement of its citizens to address problems from local to global scales. Contemporary society is facing more imminent and threatening issues than ever before, yet people are engaging with these issues less and less. Declining citizenship demands immediate attention. Why is civic engagement declining in Canada, and what can be done to reverse this trend?

Very important to being a good citizen (all respondents):



(Environics Institute, 2012)

The role of schools

This section will introduce the argument for education as the focal point in increasing democratic participation, showing how it is implicated in both the signs and symptoms of declining engagement. The report will then show how current educational structures and curriculum are creating patterns of declining engagement, and will conclude with a summary of how to reorient education to ensure it effectively prepares students for participation within democracy.

Linking citizenship practice and educational experience

Declining voter turnout has shown the alarming trend of youth becoming increasingly detached from civic issues and participatory processes. The greatest decline in voter participation is amongst youth.

As each new cohort reaches the age of 18 and becomes eligible to vote, its members participate in fewer numbers than the cohort that came before it – only a third of first time voters today are actually voting, half the rate of a generation ago.

(Ibbitson, 2011)

Graduates are not leaving the school system as engaged and active citizens, yet the impact of formal education is often neglected (MacKinnon et al., 2006). Voting decline in younger generations points to the education system as both a possible source of the problem, and as a means of addressing it. We need to ask why graduates are not leaving the school system as engaged and active citizens?

According to Isaac Graves (2011) the mandate of citizenship education is to incorporate the knowledge, skills, and values required for active and ethical participation in democratic society:

Creating a generation of ‘solutionaries’... this begins with our young people. As such, we need to address these issues within our learning environments by creating authentic opportunities for young people to experience the power and possibilities democracy provides in loving and supportive community. We can transform our educational system to one based on respect for human rights and one that values freedom and responsibility, participation and collaboration, and equity and justice. To create a more just, sustainable and democratic world, we need democratic education.

The Samara Democracy Report's investigation into declining civic engagement in Canada concluded that while most Canadians agree in principle with democracy, they believe that engagement is futile (Bastedo, et al., 2011). When citizens do not believe their actions will produce change, then why would they participate in the first place? The following section will outline how this idea reverberates throughout the education system, within both the curriculum and the way it is disseminated.

What needs to change in current education models?

Examining the current policy and practice of most Canadian schools reveals conflicts with democratic values. The overriding purpose of education in most jurisdictions is to prepare students for their future role in the economy. Educational structures that seek to prepare children to compete effectively in the global economy typically perpetuate the myth that money is the only measurement of success (Orr, 2004). In their own governance, schools are not oriented as democratically governed spaces. There is little choice in what students learn, who teaches them, and where learning takes place. Preparation for citizenship requires the opportunity to learn and practice decision-making, yet the voices of students are most often stifled in these processes, at all levels of the education system.

Current curriculum in selected Canadian jurisdictions

Currently, citizenship or civics education in Canada is taught as an individual course, separated from other subjects. A mandatory half-credit civics course was introduced in Ontario in 1999, along with a graduation requirement of 40 hours of community service. However, there is little evidence that the introduction has led to any increase in civic engagement, as voter participation in recent graduates has continued to decrease (Milner, 2009).

Nova Scotia, includes a "Citizenship Outcomes" unit of study in grade three, and a "Citizenship" unit in grade eight. Both units fall under Social Studies and focus on understanding the structure of government and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Alberta has a similar approach to incorporating citizenship education into Social Studies, but lists citizenship learning as a general outcome at the grades one, five, six, and nine levels.

In Manitoba, there are specific learning outcomes related to citizenship at each grade level. In addition, in Grade 9 there is a cluster (grouping of specific learning outcomes) that is a study of democracy and governance in Canada. This cluster focuses mostly on understanding responsibilities and rights of different groups of citizens in Canada. Manitoba has also recently introduced a new grade 12 course: "Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability." This course is unique as it works to consolidate learning across disciplines to empower students as agents of change for a sustainable and equitable future. However, since social studies is not obligatory in Grade 12 in Manitoba, this course is an elective.

In common practice, citizenship education is an isolated learning experience. In order to achieve a more holistic, cross-disciplinary educational experience, citizenship education should be set as a guiding principle connecting all learning. There is a great need to include participatory learning processes based on interdisciplinary approaches, inquiry and action, rather than focusing on memorizing government structures and rights. In a Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) study, youth engaged in dialogue about how to increase civic participation in Canada, arrived at the following conclusion:

Ensure that our education system properly equips us to become active citizens engaging in political and civic life through a rethink and redesign of civic education to emphasize participation. Move from civics as an 'option' to building it into the core curriculum throughout school.

(MacKinnon & Watling, 2006)

Hidden curriculum

What students learn from the structure and administration of educational institutions is often referred to as the hidden curriculum:

...the unstated norms, values and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning and provided through school settings, textbooks, economics, social policy, teacher education, curricular structure, gender and class issues, language form and the nature of knowledge.

(Shaver, 1991)

Traditional views of good citizens often include obedience, volunteering, loyalty, conformity, avoidance of controversy, and restraint from criticism of government officials (Westheimer, 2008). Similar values are conveyed through the organization of the school system. Educational structures often rely on conventional information-transfer approaches to learning, placing the teacher at the front of the class as the commissioner of a set of knowledge that is to be deposited into the students through formal lessons – the “banking model” of education (Bell 1977; Freire, 2000). Therefore, the hidden curriculum is teaching a hierarchical structure that places students at the bottom, and teaches them that knowledge exists external to them. By the time students graduate, they have learned compliance, that their role as a citizen is to follow the instructions of others – developing inaccurate perspectives on citizenship and democracy (Schulz, et al., 2010). When people believe that their concerns will be disregarded by political systems, engagement is considered futile and participation decreases (Bastedo, et al., 2011).

The skills and dispositions necessary for democracy are learned through practice (Cook et al., 2007). When students are not being engaged in a democratic education, they miss out on developing the skills for action and participation, as well as the confidence and knowledge that they can make a difference. In interviews with secondary students in Canada, most believed that they were not able to address an injustice as they lacked the “actionable skills” and would require someone “smarter” or “with more power” to speak for them. Some students even attributed this directly to their lack of experiential learning in formal education (Cook et al., 2007, p. 25-27). Other studies investigating youth who have been engaged in solving complex problems facing their communities and the world have found that these youth are more likely to feel that they have sufficient knowledge and social capital to support community development, and as a whole have an increased vision of how to help others (Cook et al., 2007, p. 27).

Learning is a social process based on experience; direct experience provides engagement that greatly increases learning potential and opportunities (Kolb, 1984). Creating a learning environment free from hierarchical power structures is termed a liberating education, as people realize their own potential and become active agents of change (Marino, 1998). Involving the whole school community in decision-making processes can make schools a democratic space, allowing students to learn through action and experience.

Despite the dominance of hierarchical approaches to learning, there are many examples at all levels of the education system of successful attempts to make education a democratic process: teachers who use action and inquiry based learning to engage students; schools that work to integrate student voices into the decision-making process; organizations that work to provide policy and programs for a democratic education.

What needs to occur now is the incorporating of these ideas and actions into formal education policy, and turning that policy into action. Democratic approaches to teaching and learning must prevail throughout the school system, rather than exist as isolated examples of innovative strategies. These examples and the research base that supports them can be used to guide the reorientation of curriculum policy and practice. See Appendix A for a selection of best practice examples of democratic education in Canada. The following section will discuss how to re-orient both stated and hidden curriculum to educate for democratic participation, providing examples of those who are already using them with great levels of success.

Defining the goals of education for democratic participation

An effectively functioning democracy is made up of citizens who are informed, engaged, ethical, and responsible. Improvement can only occur when citizens question, challenge, consider alternative perspectives, and make ethical, critically analyzed decisions; citizens who see democracy as a work in progress, which they can engage with to make ever-better futures (Parker & Kaltsounis, 1991). To support this mandate, learners must experience a school system that takes their views into account, and requires them to practice and develop skills of engagement, action, and collaboration. Key elements that must be obtained in classroom and school cultures to educate for democratic engagement include (Schulz et al., 2010; Bastedo, et al., 2011):

- Personal success with politics, civics, citizenship before leaving school
- Learning that addresses the personal interests of students
- Learning that addresses personal citizenship efficacy
- Student ownership opportunities of the political system in the school
- Successes that result in a sense of hope that change can be achieved
- Confidence and belief that the political system responds to their individual concerns

The next sections outline key themes and strategies for incorporating democratic education into school governance, learning, and curriculum, to ensure that the above mentioned skills for democratic success are developed through formal education.

Elevating citizenship to a cross-curricular theme applied across policy and practice at all grades

Ethical decision-making requires reframing education from a focus on economic competitiveness, to ensuring that formal education:

Extends citizenship beyond the human to address our participation in biotic communities emphasizing interdependence and well-being as ethical criteria to guide human decision-making, placing a realistic constraint on the expression of freedom within the contingency of mutual dependence, and introducing more complex perspectives than economic prosperity.

(MacPherson, 2005)

Responsible citizenship education should not exist as an isolated subject within curriculum, but should be used as a cross-curricular theme. Setting education for responsible citizenship as a guiding principle in formal education can ensure education is holistic, integrative, and transformative. A cross-curricular theme approach is vital to achieving the transdisciplinary understandings key to arriving at sustainable solutions to societal issues.

Adopt learning strategies based on action and inquiry

When youth are asked why they are not engaged in civic affairs, a common response is that they do not feel that politics is something that includes them, but instead see politics as paying taxes and voting, that is boring, and has little to do with their lives, interests, and values (Cook et al., 2007). Civics in formal learning most often focuses on political structures, and not political participation – youth rarely get a chance to associate civic engagement with actions other than voting. What needs to be accomplished is the creating of an education system that allows youth to see themselves as important members of political institutions, and develop the competencies to effectively participate in them.

The “banking model” of education, in which the teacher is the depositor and students the depositories of knowledge, currently dominates policy and practice. The application of this teaching method involves the textbook, learning as an individual pursuit, occurs in classrooms isolated from the community, and is led by a teacher acting from a position of content authority. This is the model appropriate for the industrial age where the future is known and each individual has their determined place in society’s hierarchy.

The goal of responsible citizenship calls upon education to adopt a different set of learning tools and a different teacher – learner relationship that involves learning based upon inquiry and action. Paulo Freire (2000) terms this the “problem-posing” method of education, where teachers and students learn together through combining theory with action and emphasizing the importance of inquiry (Bell, 1977; Marino, 1998).

Learning through experiential and collaborative activities can help children develop the skills deemed essential for constructive participation in society: communication, cooperation, decision-making, negotiation, and problem solving (Pike & Selby, 1999).

Citizenship education works to develop a learner who is...

- Informed, skilled in forming, using and critiquing knowledge claims;
- Skilled in interpersonal communication and civic participation;
- Committed to democratic values;
- Willing to participate in democratic processes;
- Committed to intelligent, ethical and active participation in civic life shaped by:

- A global perspective (international as well as local and national)
- A pluralistic perspective (regarding cultural diversity and differences of opinion)
- A constructive or critical perspective (viewing democracy as unfinished business)

Parker and Kaltsounis 1991

In one research study, students and policy makers alike agreed on the following set of competencies required for strong citizenship.

“The ability to understand, accept, and tolerate cultural differences; the ability to work with others in a cooperative way and to take responsibility for one’s roles and duties within society; a willingness to change one’s lifestyle and consumption habits to protect the environment; a willingness to resolve conflict in a non-violent manner; the ability to be sensitive towards and to defend human rights; and the capacity to think in a critical and systemic way.”

(Kubow, as quoted in Cook et al., p. 27)

The world is ever changing, as is the learner; therefore, learning is the process of adapting to our environment (Davis et al., 2000; Kolb, 1984). In this context learning is viewed as a continuous process acknowledging that no environment is static, and that people must adapt and learn within a dynamic world (Kolb, 1984). Learning this can help youth to see democracy as a work in progress, with room for more voices and views in its development and transformation. When the conventional student/teacher dichotomy is altered, learners are able to see that knowledge is not only delivered by those deemed as experts, but can come from personal investigation and interaction. Learning to be open to more forms of knowledge building can allow children to value their own discoveries and understandings (Pike & Selby, 1999).

In Manitoba, teachers can receive grants to support initiatives that actively engage youth in innovative citizenship projects. These grants are given with the understanding that action can help students to acquire the knowledge, values, and skills to participate in their schools and communities, and will make them more likely to continue to be active citizens as adults (Manitoba Education, 2012). Action-based learning can create opportunities for collaboration, teaching students the valuable skill of working together to reach common goals while improving their communities and empowering them for further action. As conventionally seen in democratic structures, collaborative action can produce the most change.

Ground education in local communities and environments

To engage students in action-based learning, education must extend beyond the confines of the classroom and into local communities – both human and ecological. Embedding learning within local communities can help develop connections to a place, giving people a sense of belonging and responsibility and forming foundations for positive environmental and social behaviour (Ardoin, 2006; Chawla & Flanders Cushing, 2007). Children must learn that their community is both human and ecological, developing a holistic perspective that allows them to act on behalf of the cultural and ecological integrity of that place (Curthoys, 2007). Children are more able to relate and connect to local environments, and gain immediately applicable knowledge and first-hand experience to enhance learning (Sobel, 1996; 2004).

When children can engage in action-based learning within local environments, they are able to see the results of their actions, and can see that their engagement is not futile, but that they are able to produce real change. Whether the attempts of children succeed or fail, the experience of testing their ability to act in a safe environment can be invaluable. UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools program has had great success in empowering students by giving them a voice. After having her grade five class participate in this program, one teacher stated: "when children know their rights it empowers them to make a difference in their community. They become leaders. They end up becoming more responsible for their actions for leadership, friendship, and in relationships. They're not so much me-centered" (UNICEF, 2011).

Developing a sense of interdependence or connectivity can occur through engaging with local communities and being able to see the results of your impact. Dutcher et al (2007) define connectivity as a shared or common essence, or perception of sameness, between the self, others, and the natural world. Therefore, developing a sense of connectivity is fundamental to community building, as well as vital to increasing the desire and understanding of the need to make decisions and solve problems ethically and responsibly.

Empowering citizens as change agents

As learners develop the skills of active citizenship they must be prepared to become change agents, addressing complexity and controversial issues in order to think constructively about the future. Graham Pike and David Selby (1999), argue that education must bring learners to envision the future that they believe is presently being created, while simultaneously imagining alternate futures for themselves and the world, and to map out how they believe those futures can be created. Pike and Selby (1999) coin this type of learning as “futures thinking.” Empowering children to imagine alternative futures and realities can bring them to realize that they have choice and agency in creating the chosen reality. Viewing democracy as an ongoing process is a dialogue involving futures thinking. Students must be able to set goals and determine how to reach those goals, engaging in the appropriate democratic processes to make those alternate futures a reality – meeting the ultimate stage of democratic citizenship: citizens as change agents.

Another important aspect of democratic education is that learning should be self-directed. Students must be able to ask questions and work collaboratively to find answers. In studies of youth engagement, youth constantly state a desire to learn about issues that are relevant in their lives and important to them, giving the absence of this as a reason for civic disengagement (Cook et al., 2007). The ability to address complex and controversial issues is required for effective citizenship. Instead of thwarting student interest in controversial issues (Cook et al., 2007, p. 27), learning needs to embrace these opportunities to practice effective engagement skills, share perspectives and grasp the complex interplay of facts, values and views of others.

Conclusion

Increasing democratic participation in Canada should focus less on targeting specific groups to increase turnout at the polls, and more on ensuring that the education system is forming foundations for all forms of active democratic participation. ESD prepares students to be knowledgeable about the key issues of the 21st century. This knowledge complements what they will learn about democratic participation. Learners must be engaged in key issues facing democracy, know how to navigate the political system, and possess the competencies to take on effective individual and collective action (Chawla & Flanders Cushing, 2007). In a CPRN democracy study involving 144 youth, one youth stated: “Right now it seems like high school students are waiting to become part of society instead of already being part of society. So it would be good if we could involve our youth in society while they are still in school” (Mackinnon et al., 2006). Youth cannot be seen, and cannot see themselves, as citizens in waiting. The education system can alter this perspective, and show that young people have important roles to play as citizens – even before they reach the age to vote.

An education-based approach must be used to address declining levels of civic engagement. Students should be graduating not only equipped with the knowledge of political structures, but with the skills of engagement, gained through experience. To do so, both the structure of the education system and schools, and the way that knowledge is disseminated, must be reoriented to encompass ideals of the democratic process. Learning in support of responsible citizenship requires the use of strategies that transform the individual from one who receives knowledge to one who creates understandings by learning with others. Through democratizing the hidden curriculum, students can graduate with experience participating in communities, empowering them to continue to do so. By grounding this learning in an ethical framework of connectivity and interdependence, citizens can learn from an early age how to make responsible decisions. Education for responsible citizenship must be made a cross-curricular theme, set as a guiding principle of education.

Appendix A – Best practices

Alpha Alternative School, Ontario

Alpha Alternative School is an example of an educational institution that has successfully incorporated democratic education into its governance. The school has both an elementary school, Alpha I, and a secondary school Alpha II. Alpha uses the consensus model of education, where students are engaged in every facet of the decision-making process.

Alpha involves the whole community in school governance. Students help to set classroom rules and plans for the school at student-led meetings. Alpha prides itself on a community approach to education, and holds monthly meetings where students, parents, teachers, and administrators have an equal voice. When conflicts arise amongst students, a student-initiated conflict resolution process is used to settle them.

In the classroom setting, Alpha allows students to direct their own learning by choosing subject matter based on their own values. Students then work with teacher, peers, and mentors to engage in the learning process. The school works to help each student find the best way that they learn; timelines are not set for students, but they can work with teacher to set them for themselves. Students gain confidence through focusing on their strengths and interests, and develop interpersonal skills by working closely with their peers and school community members.

UNICEF: Rights respecting schools program

UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools program works to add a rights-based approach to learning throughout the whole school environment. Schools independently sign up for this program, and work with UNICEF to implement it throughout their school. In this program, the common value of respecting the rights of the child is used to create a cohesive community bonded by a shared goal.

Rights Respecting Schools work to create an environment where both children and adults feel respected and act responsibly. The philosophy of this approach is based on the principle that for children to want to achieve they have to feel included, that they belong in the community, and that they matter. Becoming a Rights Respecting School means that students have a voice in both how the school is governed and how they learn. Students are given an opportunity to voice opinions about their school, to participate in school and classroom decisions, and contribute to conflict resolution. Rights Respecting Schools programs have found that both teachers and students feel more empowered, and are able to form a more inclusive and participatory school community.

Manitoba global issues course

Manitoba's grade 12 Social Studies course, *Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability (40S)*, is a great example of innovative curriculum approaches to achieving citizenship education.

This course takes a cross-curricular approach, encouraging students and teachers to bring together learning from multiple disciplines. The course is based on the principles of active democratic citizenship, ecological literacy, critical media literacy, and ethical decision-making. An inquiry-based approach to learning is used, as students question the social, political, environmental, and economic impact of contemporary issues on local, national, and global scales.

This course is also unique as it has a specific focus on bringing learning out of the classroom and into the local community: a portion of the course is dedicated to the planning and implementation of a community-based action-research project. The course works with students to build competencies to be citizens who are mindful of their place in nature and in society, and are willing to work collaboratively to create a sustainable future.

Student vote

Student Vote is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that aims to build the capacity and commitment of young Canadians to participate in their democracy. Student Vote's flagship program is a parallel election for students under the voting age, coinciding with official election periods. The program combines in-class learning, family dialogue, media consumption and an authentic voting experience. The purpose is to provide young Canadians with an opportunity to experience the democratic process firsthand and practice the habits of informed and engaged citizenship. To date, Student Vote has successfully designed and coordinated 18 parallel elections engaging over three million students across Canada.

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