

Ready or not?

Preparing youth for  
21<sup>st</sup> century responsible  
citizenship



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**Published by:**

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Learning for a Sustainable Future would like to thank Deloitte for supporting the development of this Final Report and the delivery of the *Ready or Not? Preparing Youth for 21st Century Responsible Citizenship* roundtables.

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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. Since voter decline is most prominent in younger generations, it is useful to examine how the education system may be contributing to the problem, and also how it may be used as a means of preparing young people to be empowered and engaged citizens. In the ongoing process of education policy reform there is significant need to consider the reorientation of policy and practice to increase democratic participation. The overriding purpose of formal education should be reframed in the context of education for responsible citizenship. No other institution is better positioned to address the fundamental challenges we face.

The need to educate for responsible citizenship was the motivation behind the *Ready or Not? Preparing Youth for 21st Century Responsible Citizenship* roundtable discussions. The roundtables were a result of a partnership between Learning for a Sustainable Future (LSF) and Deloitte. The discussions brought together senior decision makers from the education, government, business, and non-profit sectors, and were held in four cities across Canada – Toronto, Halifax, Edmonton, and Winnipeg – between March 22nd and May 1st, 2012. Participants were asked to consider the following question: *What do children and youth need to know, do, and value in order to ensure they are responsible, active, and contributing citizens, and how can formal education be reoriented to meet these goals?*

Through a series of presentations, participants in the roundtable discussions were briefed on the state of responsible citizenship education. Presentations focused on the findings of LSF's informal online poll into youth participation, and a recently issued Environics Institute report, *Canadians on Citizenship*. A keynote video address was provided by His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada. Participants developed recommendations for strengthening policy and practice in support of responsible citizenship education in Canada through a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis related to youth citizenship, a visioning exercise, structured brainstorming, and breakout group work, all focusing on strategies to enhance Canadian citizenship education.

# What is responsible citizenship and why is it essential?

Voting is a vital act of democracy; however, participation includes more than just voting. Responsible citizenship 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, and acting conscientiously to support societal movement toward a sustainable future.

There are a number of useful taxonomies of political participation. LSF has identified three levels of democratic citizenship (adapted from Westheimer and Kahne (2005): 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.

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?

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). Since voter decline is most prominent in younger generations, it is useful to examine how the education system may be contributing to the problem, and also how it may be used as a means of addressing it. We need to understand why graduates are not leaving the school system as engaged and active citizens.

Contemporary education often focuses on training workers for a competitive global economy. Instead, education must focus on developing engaged citizens (Osborne (2000). Research on how to engage youth often references the following strategies as essential in providing opportunities for youth to develop the competencies required for participation (LSF & Deloitte, 2012):

- View learning as a process that engages both the teacher and student
- Shift the emphasis of learning from an individualistic competitive focus to include more collaborative collective experiences
- Reduce the subject-based, siloed organization of learning in favour of more holistic, cross curricular approaches.
- Focus on inquiry and action, where children learn through direct experience
- Develop the competencies for collaborative, community-based participation
- Embed education in local communities
- Make learning self-directed
- Discuss controversial issues
- Involve students in decision making at all levels

# Calls to action

Calls to action for enhancing citizenship education in Canada were generated through recommendations provided at the roundtable discussions, background research, and perspectives shared by youth in the informal online poll.

## Make responsible citizenship education a priority

Responsible citizenship should be set as a guiding purpose of education, and established as a graduation outcome for students of the Canadian education system. Making responsible citizenship a graduation outcome means that education policy and practice is oriented to ensure students are able to develop the necessary competences and skills for participation by the time they graduate from high school. To accomplish this, citizenship should be elevated to a cross-curricular theme applied across policy and practice at all grade levels. There is a need to break down silos, and work together to create solutions – achieving success through collaboration and cooperation. For citizenship education to be adequately prioritized, changes must be made to assessment and reporting, so that they capture the value of experiential learning and the competencies derived from it.

## Learning through experience

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. An education system that allows youth to see themselves as important members of political institutions, and develop the competencies to effectively participate in them can prepare them for participation. Learning through experiential and collaborative activities can help children develop the skills deemed essential for constructive participation in society. Being able to see their own role in political processes can help students to see democracy as a work in progress, with room for more voices and views in its development and transformation. Instead of existing as extra-curriculars, leadership and volunteerism should be embedded into curriculum with service learning requirements, as part of courses, assessment, and credit.

## Grounding education in real world issues

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). When children can engage in action-based learning within local environments, they are able to see the results of their actions. They can see that their engagement is not futile, but that they are able to produce real change. Community engagement can validate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) outcomes, and focus education on developing creativity and critical thinking skills through project and inquiry-based learning. Giving students the opportunity to learn how to articulate their opinions, listen to those of others, and critically assess controversial issues is integral to participation in democratic society.

## Empowering youth 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. Learning should be self-directed, allowing students to ask questions that interest them, with the opportunity to work collaboratively to find answers. 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. 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 do so. The proper support systems, such as positive role models, must be in place to encourage and support engagement. These influencers can help youth feel connected to political systems, and help to promote the view of youth as active and contributing members of their communities. Youth should also be acquainted with, and involved in, different organizations and structures, gaining direct experience in community involvement. These institutions should be positive places that youth can learn from as well as contribute to.

### **Supporting teachers: Pre-service and in-service**

Teachers and teacher candidates both need ongoing support in ensuring they are using best practice techniques for youth engagement. In order to ensure that pre-service teachers enter classrooms as new teachers ready to meet a graduation outcome of responsible citizenship, citizenship should become a core focus of teacher training programs.

Teacher preparation should be grounded in an understanding of the purpose of education as developing active citizens in a participatory democracy, with open opportunities for teachers and students to reconnect with the community. Education faculty should have a commitment to experiential learning, inquiry-based learning, outdoor education, collaboration, and a culture of teaching embedded in social justice and sustainability.

Professional development and structural changes are required to support in-service teachers in ensuring the goal of responsible citizenship education. Current demands on teachers to 'cover the curriculum', as well as fear of risk in taking students out of the classroom, must be mitigated to facilitate student involvement. Teachers need the tools to address students' negative preconceptions about politician and political parties before young people will get more involved in voting and other political processes.

Professional development opportunities should better equipped teachers to teach democratically, and to engage their students in civic participation.

# Conclusion

Making responsible citizenship a guiding purpose of education can help ensure that education is holistic, connecting learning across disciplines. Responsible citizenship education can help prepare youth to take action today, and tomorrow, to solve issues in a dynamic and ever-changing world. Children and youth must be given opportunities to learn skills to function in democratic society and a chance to gain and test those skills through experience. Since democracy is learned through practice, education must become a democratic process to ensure citizens have the actionable skills and confidence to fully participate in society. To democratize education, student perspectives must be incorporated into all levels of the decision-making process. When youth are given a voice in the governance of their school and classroom communities they can learn how to create change and that their opinions are valuable.



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