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# Regional Education Outreach at the Parliament of South Australia: Strategies and Learnings

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## **CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

In 2021 the results of Australia's National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC) 2019 test were publicised,<sup>1</sup> with challenging results for South Australia. NAP-CC testing is not as widely known as its literacy and numeracy equivalent (the NAPLAN), but the NAP-CC provides a helpful snapshot for educators of the depth of understanding of Civic and Citizenship skills and knowledge across the country, as well as a picture of youth trust in democratic institutions.

In South Australia, only 43% of year 6 students met the proficiency standard for Civics and Citizenship (the second lowest result in the nation),<sup>2</sup> and only 29% of year 10 students (the third lowest result in the nation).<sup>3</sup> The results also indicated that in South Australia, only 56% of year 6 students have trust in their civic institutions and processes, and 52% of year 10 students.<sup>4</sup> Year 10 students are usually 15-16 years old, approaching the point where they can pre-enrol to vote. It is concerning that the knowledge and trust indicators are low in South Australia, particularly in the age bracket where young people transition into their adult lives. Twenty-five per cent of

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<sup>1</sup> National Assessment Program, 'NAP CC Public Report'. Accessed at: <<https://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports>>.

<sup>2</sup> National Assessment Program, *NAP CC Public Report*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> National Assessment Program, *NAP CC Public Report*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> National Assessment Program, *NAP CC Public Report*, 80.

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the South Australian students tested were from regional and remote locations,<sup>5</sup> indicating that efforts to improve civic literacy and participation must extend beyond the metropolitan area.

Students in regional and remote South Australia cannot easily access the external Civics and Citizenship programs and opportunities available to metropolitan students. Excursions to Parliament House, the Courts, Government House, council offices, and more, are readily available to schools with public transport access, but regional schools can expect bus fares of \$500-\$2000 a day to try to have these experiences. Some of these experiences cannot be replicated by local offerings.

In an effort to support improved NAP-CC results for South Australia, and to facilitate access to Civics and Citizenship opportunities for regional and remote students, the Parliament of South Australia (Parliament) has developed a Regional Education Strategy. The Strategy has two key features. First, it aims to bring the Parliament out to the regionals via travelling programs, and second, it provides support for regional and remote schools to visit the Parliament of South Australia through the provision of financial assistance.

This Comment will explore the successes and learnings of the Regional Education Strategy and its two features, reflecting on how parliamentary education can be made more accessible.

## **APPROACH ONE: TRAVELLING EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

The Parliament launched its first travelling regional education program in 2021. To determine the potential regions and locations to visit, the Parliament assessed its visitation data from 2017-2022 and collated lists of electorates with the lowest school visitation data within that period. The lists were then assessed against the Department for Education's Index of Educational Disadvantage<sup>6</sup> and the Index of Community Socio-

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<sup>5</sup> National Assessment Program, *NAP CC Public Report*, 167.

<sup>6</sup> Government of South Australia, 'Index of Educational Disadvantage by School'. Accessed at: <<https://data.sa.gov.au/data/dataset/index-of-disadvantage-by-school>>.

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Educational Advantage,<sup>7</sup> so that the Parliament could determine the electorates with the lowest visitation data and the schools with the lowest educational disadvantage scores. Multiple electorates were identified and arranged in order of need, and the ability to access the areas with the education equipment. For the pilot travelling program, the Hammond electorate was selected. This electorate covers South Australia's Murray-Mallee region.

The Parliament approached every school in the Hammond electorate via telephone calls and emails to offer a free 90-minute incursion experience. A schedule was devised to incorporate as many schools as possible, allowing for travel time between each destination. Not all schools took up the opportunity, but every school who expressed interest received a program.

The program included a focus the key principles underpinning parliamentary systems in Australia, including the separation of powers, Westminster Conventions, and rules governing elections. It also discussed the different levels of government in Australia, and the functions of different officials and decision-makers including the role and responsibilities of members of parliament. The program also includes a demonstration of the passage of the bill and a number of interactive activities relating to how students can participate in 'active' citizenship.

Special equipment was procured for the program in an effort to bring the Parliament to life outside of the physical building, including six metre by four metre floor mats of the House of Assembly, Legislative Council and steps of Parliament House. The equipment also included a replica Mace and Black Rod, wigs, robes, ballot boxes, bells and debate scripts.

The Hammond trip took a 'roadshow' format due to the distance between each school and the size of the communities. For context, at the time of the visit the Hammond electorate extended approximately 177km north-south, and 218km east-west (reaching the Victorian border), covering much of South Australia's wheat growing region.<sup>8</sup> Towns visited ranged from populations of 427 (Langhorne Creek), 2,644

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 'Guide to Understanding the Index of Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA)'. Accessed at: <<https://www.myschool.edu.au/media/1820/guide-to-understanding-icsea-values.pdf>>.

<sup>8</sup> South Australian Electoral Districts Boundaries Commission, 'Electoral District Maps'. Accessed at: <<https://edbc.sa.gov.au/redistributions/2016/2016-electoral-district-maps.html>>.

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(Mannum) to 22,348 (Murray Bridge), skewed more towards the townships with less than 1000. Two staff members drove from school to school, setting up equipment at each site. The local MP, Adrian Pederick MP, was invited to attend and assisted delivering one of the sessions. The program reached 350 students across a widespread region of South Australia. The program was well received, assessed by way of feedback forms provided to participants. Feedback asked how the program would impact teaching in class, and what could be improved.

Following the Hammond trip, the Parliament has conducted a further four regional trips – each time modifying the offering based on the destination.

The second program involved travel to the regional township of Whyalla in October 2021. Whyalla is a coastal town and the fourth most populous city in South Australia, approximately 4.5 hours drive from the Adelaide metropolitan area. The town of Whyalla served as a ‘hub’ that could be accessed by a range of communities in the local area. The population density of approximately 22,612 and school locations around Whyalla allowed the Parliament to set up equipment in a central community centre for the one-week duration. The Parliament funded shuttle buses to support schools on the outskirts of Whyalla to access the community centre. Using a community centre also allowed the regional program to extend to teachers, with a teacher professional learning session hosted on one of the evenings.

A third program was conducted in Mount Gambier in March 2022. Mount Gambier is South Australia’s second largest city (population 29,000) and an important community centre for a number of townships in the south-east section of the State. The Mount Gambier program was also organised in a ‘hub’ format. The Mount Gambier program was extended again, by adding a general community seminar to the program, so that students, teachers, and the broader community all had access to a program.

The community seminar received registrations from local public servants, interested citizens, parents and other community members. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions the planned in-person community seminar was cancelled, and the participants were offered an online alternative.

Travelling education programs continue to be hosted each school term (south-east SA May 2022, mid-north South Australia August 2022, Port Lincoln November 2022), with plans to continue on an ongoing basis. Where hub options are available, all regions will be offered student, teacher and general community sessions.

## APPROACH TWO: FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE – CIVICS IN THE CITY

The Parliament launched its regional and remote financial assistance program, ‘Civics in the City’, in 2022. Civics in the City is a joint initiative between the Parliament and South Australia’s Commissioner for Children and Young People (‘the Commissioner’). The Commissioner undertakes an independent statutory role tasked with advocating for South Australia’s young people.<sup>9</sup> The intention of Civics in the City was to support regional and remote schools with low educational disadvantage index scores with funding in order to visit to the Parliament and the Adelaide metropolitan area for Civics and Citizenship education programs.

The Parliament and Commissioner worked together to determine eligibility criteria, which resulted in a concerted focus on engaging with category 1-5 schools on the Department for Education’s Index of Educational Disadvantage,<sup>10</sup> or under 1000 on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage<sup>11</sup> (Catholic and Independent schools); and schools more than 20km from the Adelaide CBD.

All eligible schools were emailed and advised that five schools would be selected to receive money to support travel and accommodation costs to Adelaide, on the condition that the schools booked in a visit to Parliament House during their city stay. The amount of money available depended on distance from the Parliament:

**Figure 1. Funding for travel**

Distance from SA Parliament	Travel and Accommodation Grant Funds (per student head)
Adelaide outer suburbs (over 20km)	\$20
Inner regions (over 50km)	\$60
Outer regions (over 150km)	\$100
Outback (over 500km)	\$120

<sup>9</sup> *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016 (SA)*.

<sup>10</sup> Government of South Australia, *Index*.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Guide*.

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Schools were invited to apply on a form that asked questions about their previous experiences with Civics education, other opportunities the students had received, including, for example, whether they had engaged with the regional programs described above.

This program was promoted in a range of different ways, including direct contact with educators and communities and via social media. The announcement was also closely timed to the South Australian state election and the Federal election. It attracted a larger than expected number of applications, covering almost 70 schools.

Various reasons were advanced in the applications for financial assistance received from eligible schools. Many applications made reference to the fact that although Civics and Citizenship had been included in the school curriculum, there were limited practical supports provided to teachers in regional areas, particularly in the context of teaching arrangements that combined the Civics and Citizenship content with other topics. Other compelling reasons advanced in support of financial assistance included:

- the need for students to understand the power of their voice and their impact (including use of Indigenous voice);
- the growing student interest in Civics and Citizenship in the wake of 2022 State and Federal elections;
- financial constraints on parents, some of whom cannot afford the excursion fees;
- the need to provide an opportunity for students to travel to metropolitan Adelaide, some for the first time;
- the high costs of bus transport from some regional areas to Adelaide; and
- the limited options for Humanities and Social Studies themed excursions in the school's location.

The applications were assessed having regard to the strength of the arguments advanced in the application, whether the program could meet the specific needs advanced in the application, the school's socio-economic category and need for financial support; and the potential to reach the school via alternative regional outreach programs.

Consideration was also given to the potential to develop further supporting resources in the process, for example, language translation of existing materials into Pitjantjatjara, a key Aboriginal language in South Australia.

The final five schools selected ranged between 247km and 1398km from the Adelaide metropolitan area.

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The first recipients of the grant, Leigh Creek Area School, visited Parliament House in September 2022 for a 2.5 hour program covering, elections, debating and more. The local Member of Parliament, Geoff Brock, joined the school and participated in 'question time' with the students in the House of Assembly chamber. The Commissioner for Children and Young People came to listen to their concerns about their community.

## **SUCSESSES AND LEARNINGS**

The various regional outreach programs described above have been well received by participants and highlighted a sustained interest to strengthen links between the regional South Australian communities and the Parliament that represents them. Teachers have contacted the education office with comments such as:

*Several weeks later and the students are still talking about it!*

*It was incredible. Informative and engaging. The students will take away some great new learning.*

*Fantastic to bring the learning to life through hands of role play that engaged students.*

Useful specific feedback has been received by regionally located schools and communities. For example, feedback has included requests for more time for the program (more than 90 minutes), more support to bookend the program in classrooms, or highly tailored resources for student context.

The Parliament will reach approximately 3000 regional and remote students in the 2022 calendar year through these initiatives, which improves upon its reach of 226 in 2019 (the last calendar year not impacted by COVID-19 restrictions).

The main learning from the initiatives relates to resourcing, particularly financial and human resourcing. Each travelling regional program is offered for free, and the Civics in the City initiative involves granting money to schools directly. In order for these programs to remain sustainable and continue to grow (with the goal of free access for all), budgeting is a large consideration. The Parliament is seeking contributions from other Government sources to help grow the programs.

In addition, the time required for education staff to travel out of the office, plan the program delivery, and facilitate Civics in the City is a significant but essential

component of the success of the programs. In order to make the regions as a priority, metropolitan based initiatives must be set aside.

## **CONCLUSION**

All programs offered by the Parliament are designed to increase public contributions to law shaping and law-making processes, highlighting the Parliament's democratic function. The Regional Education Strategy works towards this goal and will incidentally support increased *National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship* results for South Australia and more youth engagement. Staffing and financial resources are challenges for a smaller jurisdiction, but the feedback and interest in the program provides strong justification for building and enhancing regional programs. The success of the programs also indicates a growing demand for civics education and valid justification for further funding and staffing of education units generally.