



Democratic Life briefing: Parliament Week and effective citizenship education

Introduction

This briefing calls on MPs and Peers to use Parliament Week to visit citizenship education classes in schools and colleges in their constituencies. Citizenship education offers a statutory place in the curriculum where young people can learn about Parliament and the workings of democracy. The briefing also provides a summary of Democratic Life's evidence to the National Curriculum Review currently being undertaken by the Department for Education (DfE).

About Parliament Week (31 October – 6 November)

Parliament Week is a new annual series of events, run by Parliament, which aim to raise awareness of Parliament and encourage engagement with the UK's democratic system. The inaugural Parliament Week is taking place between 31 October and 6 November 2011 with a programme of activities across the UK that explore how and why the House of Commons and the House of Lords matter to everyone.

This year's Parliament Week theme is 'Stories of Democracy' - encouraging participants to consider stories from 'the past to the present, from local to national.' For further information about Parliament Week visit <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/parliament-week/>.

How you can get involved with Parliament Week

Parliament is running a number of events to mark Parliament Week, but Democratic Life hopes that MPs and Peers will also use the week as an opportunity to visit local schools and colleges to see citizenship teaching in action and to share their personal 'Stories of Democracy'. If you would like to arrange a school visit and require assistance, the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) is able to put you in contact with citizenship teachers in your area and can be contacted at info@teachingcitizenship.org.uk or on 020 7253 0051.

Democratic Life would welcome stories from Parliamentarians about their visits to schools and colleges – please contact us (hello@democraticlife.org.uk) if you would like to share your visit on our website.

Democratic Life's submission to the National Curriculum Review

In April Democratic Life submitted evidence to the National Curriculum

Review.¹ In summary, our main arguments were:

Citizenship is a unique subject combining academic knowledge of politics, law and the economy with practical social action. No other subject adequately and specifically addresses these areas of knowledge.

- We are convinced that citizenship must remain a compulsory National Curriculum subject at key stages 3 and 4. We believe there are significant benefits to including citizenship in the primary curriculum. For reasons of continuity, progression and to ensure high standards of attainment are reached by more students, citizenship should also be a compulsory National Curriculum subject at key stage 2.
- Citizenship education is an internationally recognised and respected subject. The highest achieving countries, such as Finland, include a commitment to teach citizenship education as part of their core National Curriculum. The recent IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) shows that 20 out of 38 countries surveyed include a specific subject for civic or citizenship education in their national curricula.² England has been seen as a world leader in developing a curriculum with national standards for citizenship, however more needs to be done to ensure England is also a world leader in achievement and attainment of civic and citizenship knowledge and understanding.
- Despite the ongoing challenges of a lack of specialist trained teachers and resources for the subject, significant progress in improving the quality of teaching and learning has been made in schools. The subject has been most successful in schools where it is taught as a subject, by trained teachers with the support of senior leaders. More targeted resourcing for the subject is now needed to build on the progress made to date.
- Citizenship education is too important to be left to chance in our schools. It needs to be retained as a National Curriculum subject and positively supported by Government. It would be a retrograde and damaging decision for our democracy and society to remove the subject and deny our children the best kind of political, legal and economic education.

The importance of retaining statutory status for citizenship education

We have heard arguments that the decision whether citizenship education is taught should be left to individual schools' discretion. Removing statutory citizenship education may mean that many students are denied the opportunity to learn about Parliament, democracy, law and the economy.

1 Our full response can be seen here <http://www.democraticlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/DL-response.pdf>.

2 IEA (2010). ICCS 2009 International Report: Civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement among lower secondary school students in thirty-eight countries. Amsterdam.

Experience demonstrates why statutory status is so crucial: when citizenship education was made a non-statutory cross curricular theme in the National Curriculum in 1990 by the Conservative government, 'the uptake of the subject was both sporadic and piecemeal'.³ The introduction of citizenship education as a statutory National Curriculum subject was, in part, a recognition of the non-statutory model's inadequacies. It would be a step backwards to see citizenship as being simply about the ethos of the school; citizenship is then 'everywhere and nowhere'.

If citizenship education is not a National Curriculum subject with a statutory programme of study, many schools may decide not to continue teaching it. Recently Democratic Life undertook a survey about citizenship education and 384 teachers and educationalists responded. When asked whether their school would continue to teach citizenship if it became non-statutory, 74.1 per cent said no or that they were unsure. Only 25.9 per cent felt that their schools were certain to continue teaching citizenship no matter what the circumstances.⁴

Citizenship education is too important to be left to chance and needs a clear and specific location in the National Curriculum.

Conclusion

Democratic Life believes that the National Curriculum Review provides a timely opportunity to re-examine citizenship education's design, whilst retaining its position in the National Curriculum. However, in any citizenship curriculum, high expectations of pupils should be maintained. For example, by age 14, pupils should know and understand:

- how the political and justice systems operate in the UK and how laws are created and shaped through parliament and the courts;
- rights take different forms, are often in conflict and need to be protected and balanced;
- how the economy functions and the difficult decisions government makes about the collection and allocation of public money and measures to support business;
- there are different types of democracy and government and comparisons between the UK system of parliamentary democracy and those in other parts of the world;
- the role of the UK in the international community, Europe and the Commonwealth;
- how to initiate, participate in and evaluate different kinds of responsible, democratic and social action and play a positive part in public life.

In many schools this learning is already taking place, facilitated by well trained, creative teachers. We hope you will use Parliament Week as an

3 O'Hare, P. and Gay, O. (2006), *The Political Process and Citizenship Education*, London, House of Commons Library, 9.

4 See <http://www.democraticlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/DL-response.pdf> for more details of the survey.

opportunity to visit citizenship education classrooms and see first hand the positive impacts this unique subject has on young people.

About Democratic Life

Democratic Life is a coalition of nearly 700 individuals and 37 organisations who have come together to campaign for better citizenship education. Our founding members are Amnesty International, Association for Citizenship Teaching, British Youth Council, Changemakers, Citizenship Foundation, CSV (Community Service Volunteers), Hansard Society, Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust, Involvement and Learning and supporting organisations include the Law Society, Oxfam UK, The Cooperative Group and the NUS.

Over 300 of our supporters responded to the National Curriculum Review call for evidence and we have an active group of head teachers, teachers and young people who regularly campaign on Democratic Life's behalf.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss Democratic Life's objectives, please contact us at hello@democraticlife.org.uk to arrange a meeting.