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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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This report marks the completion of a research project into parents' attitudes to civics and citizenship education in schools. The project was undertaken by Denis Muller & Associates, in collaboration with Irving Saulwick & Associates, for the Australian Parents Council (APC), the peak national organisation representing parents of children attending non-government schools in Australia. This report consolidates the outcomes from the three components of the project.

## **1. The findings from the qualitative phase of the research conducted in November 1997, based on 10 focus groups of parents in all States and Territories.**

Participants in the focus groups were drawn from parents with children at government and non-government schools, through the State and Territory affiliates of the APC and ACSSO. In nearly all cases, they were "ordinary" parents, in the sense that they were neither schoolteachers nor office-bearers of any parents' association.

The groups were conducted in Canberra, Sydney, Toowoomba, Darwin, Perth, Adelaide, Launceston and Melbourne.

In Melbourne and Sydney there were two groups, one drawn from parents of children at non-Government schools, and one from parents of children at Government schools.

In each other centre, the groups were combined from the non-Government and Government sectors.

**2. The findings of the quantitative phase of the research conducted in all States and Territories of Australia between 9 and 15 February 1998.**

The research consisted of a telephone survey of 600 parents with children at school.

The sample of parents was selected at random and was distributed across Australia in proportion to the actual distribution of population. It included parents from non-government and government school sectors.

**3. The proceedings of a seminar conducted at the Institute of Administration, Little Bay, Sydney, on 27 March 1998.**

At this seminar, 48 delegates from the APC and the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) were presented with the qualitative and quantitative research findings, and took the opportunity to respond. Delegates came from all the States and Territories of Australia.

The purpose was to generate feedback to the Federal Government on the issue of Civics and Citizenship education generally and on the *Discovering Democracy* programme in particular.

The seminar was organised by the APC, and facilitated by the consultants, Denis Muller and Irving Saulwick, who also wrote this report.

In this report, the consultants bring together, and comment on, all the information obtained. They also offer conclusions and recommendations.

The research was funded by the Department of Employment, Education and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) and overseen for the Department by Ms Margaret Foster.

The consultants would like to thank the APC for the opportunity to conduct this very interesting and important work, and for the quality of their assistance throughout. They would also like to thank ACSSO for their assistance, and the delegates to the seminar, who participated so actively and constructively.

Finally, they would like to thank Ms Foster of DEETYA and Ms Sue Ferguson of Curriculum Corporation, for their valuable contributions.

DENIS MULLER & ASSOCIATES

April 1998

## 2. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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### 2.1 CONCLUSIONS

There is widespread support among parents of Australian school students for the concept of civics and citizenship education in general and for the *Discovering Democracy* program in particular.

Parents believe that their own education was deficient in these areas and they wish to see this corrected for their children.

Their reasons for this are that they have a genuine pride in their country, and a genuine commitment to its values, institutions and democratic processes. They do not take these for granted, and they are concerned to ensure that their children grow up with a proper understanding and appreciation of them as well.

They also wish to see their children equipped to discharge their responsibilities as citizens as well as to exercise their rights.

Moreover, they wish to see a strong sense of national cohesion grow out of the civics educational enterprise. They believe that Australia lacks a clear sense of national identity and see this programme as helping to develop a clearer sense of what it means to be Australian.

For all that, they see civics education as an important second-order priority for schools, behind the core subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic. There is

some concern that so many demands are being made on the curriculum nowadays that their children's education in these core areas might suffer. They regard civics and citizenship education as essential and want to see it included, but not at the expense of core skills.

Parents have a vast store of experience, much of it hard won, which could be harnessed for civics education. Our experience with the focus groups and in the seminar suggested to us that there was also a great willingness to offer this experience if a way of doing so can be found.

On a more general level, parents feel that civics education is a field where the ideal of a partnership between parents and teachers could be strongly expressed and made a practical reality.

Parents stress the need for a national programme but they also emphasise that children learn from familiar experience, and that therefore local and regional examples of the workings of this society should be included in the curriculum.

Among parents at large -- as distinct from those participating in the seminar -- there is a lack of confidence that as matters stand, teachers are well trained and professional enough to teach such a programme without bias. The seminar participants did not share this attitude, although they did not challenge the veracity of the research findings. Speaking generally, seminar participants expressed strong support for the professionalism of teachers.

## 2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

From this research it is recommended that:

1. School systems and school authorities involve parents at every stage of the implementation of the *Discovering Democracy* programme, and in the development of any further extensions to civics and citizenship education, so that their potential to support and enrich the outcomes is harnessed.
2. Adequate and properly resourced professional development of teachers be universally available to prepare them for teaching the *Discovering Democracy* programme.
3. Within a national framework, the *Discovering Democracy* curriculum should contain local content, and be practical and relevant to students' lives.
4. Before further commitment is made to a graduation ceremony, efforts be made more widely to assess the level of support for it among parents and students.

### 3. FOCUS GROUPS: MAIN FINDINGS

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As a prelude to this section of the report, we wish to state that there were very substantial consistencies across all the 10 focus groups across Australia in the views expressed, and in the general level of support for the principle of civics and citizenship education. Equally, there was very substantial consistency in views about the purpose and content of civics and citizenship education.

These statements hold true whether the groups were sectorally mixed (as most were) or separated (as in Sydney and Melbourne).

However, each group approached the questions from subtly different perspectives, and consequently shed subtly different light on them. We have taken pains to report these subtleties in all their shades.

1. Most parents either did not learn very much at all about their country's history and institutions when at school in Australia, or simply learnt about 'explorers and dates'. Some believe that they were given a distorted view of history, one which essentially looked at history through the eyes of a triumphalist British Empire. Few can recall learning much about events after Federation. Even fewer can recall being taught about contemporary or near contemporary events. While there are some notable exceptions, most parents say that they left school knowing very little about how Australia is governed, and how the institutions of government work. Most say that they did acquire this knowledge later, although some say that there are still major gaps. In retrospect, they would like to have been better educated on these matters at school.
2. When they did leave school with this knowledge, it was more likely to have come from the home than from school. Some report growing up in homes where discussion about politics and current affairs was vigorous. Some of these people accepted the political and social values of their parents, others rebelled against them. But most look back with gratitude that their parents introduced them to this area of knowledge. Others report that politics (with sex and sometimes religion) were taboo subjects. One woman said: 'I would not have dared ask my parents how they



voted'. This would not have been an isolated experience. Children who did not hear discussions about current affairs and politics at home say that it took them a long time to understand how government and our institutions work. Some are still hazy about it.

3. In most cases they believe that their children are being better educated about the political process than they were (although, as we have seen, their own education is remembered as being very modest). They are glad about this. They see it as an essential, indeed as a core, part of their children's education. Some, who have the simple view that there really is not too much to learn (although what there is, is important) wonder whether it is not already being covered adequately, and whether a special subject is necessary -- particularly one which extends over so many years.
4. When asked about the best features of Australian democracy, most start by talking about freedom. They see Australia as a free country and Australians as enjoying freedom. They speak of freedom to say and do what one wants; to live and to travel where one wants; to vote. Other things mentioned include the belief that this is a relatively peaceful and safe country, free from the racial and civil strife which afflicts many others, and that people have the protection of the law.
5. Our respondents were less able or less prepared to discuss possible weaknesses in the Australian democracy. Some criticised our politicians, some criticised particular policies they did not like, but not too many fundamental criticisms were offered. Many did, however, criticise the way our indigenous people had been treated: this theme arose unprompted and with conviction time and again throughout our study.
6. Many of our respondents were involved with their school in one way or another, usually as interested participants in their P & C. To this extent they were perhaps atypical of the total parent population, many of whom may not be involved at all. Some were also involved in other community organisations, although many were not.
7. They stressed again and again that their children should be taught about their society and their rights and obligations in it. Many lamented that people tended these days to be self-absorbed and self-interested. They looked back with some nostalgia and a palpable sense of loss at times when people, in their view, had a wider sense of community and of communal responsibility. They are of the generation which was galvanised by a major issue such as Australian participation in the Vietnam War.
8. They seem uncomfortable with the knowledge that individualism has been a dominant influence in public policy formulation since the early 1980s. (This idea was famously captured by Margaret Thatcher when she said: 'There is no such thing as society -- we are merely a collection of

individuals.’) This proposition is not accepted by ordinary Australians. Indeed they have a lively sense of belonging to a society and a feeling that this belonging both confers rights and imposes obligations -- particularly the obligation to participate in one way or another in the socio-political process. Many were ambivalent about this obligation: some did not know how to participate; some thought that participation was fruitless because one could not influence events; some were too busy or too self-absorbed or too uninterested to become involved; some had been seared by the process of involvement. Some looked askance at ‘activists’, seeing many of them as extremists whose motives could not necessarily be trusted. In summary, they agreed with the principle of participatory democracy, but many were wary of it in practice.

9. Australian parents are proud of their country. They are particularly proud of its freedoms. They want their children to be similarly proud of it. They know that Australians don’t shout about this pride, but believe that nonetheless it lies deep in the Australian psyche. Some would like it to be more overtly expressed. Moreover, they crave a more tangible expression of belonging to a nation which coheres around some identifiable unifying force, idea, identity or purpose.
10. At the same time, while they feel a sense of loyalty and commitment to Australia, and wish to see this shared and exhibited by their fellow Australians, many (perhaps most) explicitly reject nationalistic and jingoistic rhetoric and symbolism. Their generally positive response to the concept of civics and citizenship education, taken together with these overarching needs suggest to us that such a programme has the potential to contribute, in the minds of parents, to the development of a healthier and more tangible sense of community, stronger national identity, more cohesive national unity and to a process of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.
11. They want it both to impart knowledge about ‘how the system works’ so that their children can make informed political judgments and know how to participate if they wish to, and to foster a sense of national unity and national identity which is built around an understanding and acceptance of common values, and the institutions that underpin them. These values include the concept that all people are equal, should be treated as equal, and should have equal rights under the law.
12. However, there is a caveat. Because people are essentially pragmatic and utilitarian, and are certainly not used to thinking in abstract terms, they require the content of civics and citizenship education to be practical, relevant and close to home.
13. Many believe that unless it is grounded in ways which are seen by the students to be relevant to their lives it will not come alive for them and therefore not succeed. This is why many would like the civics and

citizenship programme to draw on local experience or local institutions -- so that students may more easily see the relevance of what they are learning to their own lives.

14. Some see a programme based on a national curriculum as violating this principle. Others see a national approach as desirable -- so that all children are offered all that should be offered, and offered it essentially in the same way. Still others see a synthesis -- a national approach expressed through an overall framework, but with local content used to deliver common outcomes.
15. There is an issue which causes them misgivings about this programme. This is about bias among teachers. It arises from their own experience. Many parents believe that this programme is a sensitive one. They see it as teaching values as well as facts. Some are worried that teachers may impart their own values (read biases) to the students, or place their own personal interpretation on the facts. Others argue that young people are sufficiently robust to form their own judgments, no matter what teachers may say, particularly if the programme encourages them to 'ask questions' and to approach learning with an inquisitive and open mind. These people see this as a particularly valuable, as well as a self-correcting, component of the programme. Still others see teacher training as a critical part of the programme, partly to educate them and train them in the programme, and partly in the hope that it will reduce what they see as the possible danger of bias.
16. One other matter was of major concern to parents. They see the current school curriculum as crowded. They do not want to put their children under more pressure. While they see the proposed programme as a very important core area of learning, rating just below the three R's (perhaps rating seven or eight on a 10-point scale of importance) they don't quite know how it would be accommodated. Some suggest that it is just a matter of reorganising the current curriculum. Others say the proposed programme seems to overlap with a lot of subjects. They are confused about how to give it the position it deserves without unduly overloading an already stretched curriculum. They need to be shown how the programme will fit in.
17. Allied to this -- but the obverse of it -- parents have wide-ranging expectations about what a civics and citizenship education programme could deliver. The current parameters of the programme may profitably be looked at in the light of these expectations. Parents want two broad outcomes from such a programme. First, at the level of the individual child, they want their child equipped to understand and participate in the political life of the nation. At what might be thought of as the "skills" level, however, they think of civics and citizenship education virtually only in terms of the political and legal processes, rather than in a wider social sense. However, there is a second level, where parents think about

the potential outcomes of the programme for Australian society as a whole. Here, as we have stated above, they think well beyond the political and legal processes. They want a civics and citizenship education programme to inculcate the core values they see as lying at the heart of what it means to be Australian. They want it to strengthen national identity, contribute to reconciliation between white and indigenous Australians, and be a force for national unity. Looked at from this perspective, they really do want more for their children than just the "skills". They want them to absorb the values, attitudes and beliefs that will enable them to create an Australia which, for today's parents, is more an aspiration than a reality.

## 4. FOCUS GROUPS: ISSUES AND HYPOTHESES

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A number of clear issues emerged from the focus groups, enabling the researchers to develop some hypotheses which were persuasively supported by the findings, and which were tested in the quantitative phase.

1. There is broad support among parents for the concept of a civics and citizenship education programme. They believe that schools do a better job of civics education now than when they were at school -- but that this is not saying much.
2. There is little argument about some of the central features of the proposed programme -- its title, its Years 4 to 10 span, its parameters and objectives.
3. It is unanimously accepted that it should be delivered within a national framework, but local content is favoured by many as a means of making it accessible, relevant and practical for students.
4. Many purposes are envisaged for the programme, some of which may lie outside the current boundaries of the programme:

To prepare young people to be informed and responsible citizens;

To equip and encourage them to participate in community affairs;

To give them a sense of belonging to Australia, and inculcate a sense of quiet pride in their country;

To contribute to a stronger sense of national identity and unity;

To contribute to the advancement of the reconciliation process;

To contribute to the integration of disparate groups.

5. There is concern about possible bias in the way the subject is taught.
6. There is confusion about how the programme will fit into what is widely perceived to be an already over-crowded curriculum, either as a stand-alone subject or as integrated into existing subjects.

7. There are major reservations about a citizenship ceremony, although a minority were quite attracted to it. There is wider -- though far from unanimous -- support for some kind of graduation from the civics and citizenship programme.

These hypotheses were incorporated into the questionnaire for the national survey. The questionnaire is included as Appendix I to this report.

## 5. NATIONAL SURVEY: HYPOTHESES TESTED

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**F**indings from the focus groups were quantitatively tested by a national survey of 600 parents with children at school. The sample was random and distributed in proportion to the actual population of Australia. In this section of the report, we systematically summarise the headline results from the national survey for each of the hypotheses described earlier, and for two additional issues -- the relative importance of civics and citizenship education, and compulsoriness of civics and citizenship education up to Year 10.

### Hypothesis 1

*There is broad support among parents for the concept of a civics and citizenship education programme.*

#### Result

Eighty-three per cent of parents support the introduction of a Civics & Citizenship programme.

### Hypothesis 2

*There is little argument about the parameters of the proposed Discovering Democracy programme.*

#### Result

97 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about the responsibilities of citizenship in Australia

95 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about people's rights in Australia

94 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about the history of Australia

92 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about how Australia is governed

86 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about what it means to be an Australian

86 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about current social issues

71 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about current political issues.

### **Hypothesis 3**

*Parents believe it is possible to prepare young people for citizenship, and they envisage many objectives for the programme.*

#### **Result**

94 per cent of parents agree it is possible to prepare young people to be informed and responsible citizens

86 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to give them a sense of belonging to Australia

83 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to equip and encourage them to participate in community affairs

79 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to contribute to a stronger sense of national identity

70 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to contribute to the advancement of the reconciliation process

### **Hypothesis 4**

*There is concern about possible bias in the way the subject would be taught.*

#### **Result**

Sixty per cent are not confident that most teachers are already well-trained and professional enough to teach Civics & Citizenship without bias.



### **Hypothesis 5**

*There are major reservations about a citizenship ceremony, although a minority were quite attracted to it.*

#### **Result**

Forty per cent of respondents would welcome a graduation ceremony for students who had completed the *Discovering Democracy* programme. Fifty-four per cent would not welcome it.

Respondents were evenly divided over whether they thought students themselves would welcome such a ceremony.

### **Additional issues**

*How important is civics and citizenship compared with other fields of study?*

#### **Result**

Civics and citizenship is a second-order priority after the “three Rs”, but ahead of subjects such as Art and LOTE.

*Should the programme be compulsory up to Year 10?*

#### **Result**

Fifty-six per cent of parents think the programme should be compulsory up to Year 10, and 41 per cent think it should not be.

## 6. NATIONAL SURVEY: MAIN FINDINGS

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### Question 1 – Programme objectives

It was a feature of the focus group discussions that parents were concerned to see their children inculcated with a sense of their civic responsibilities, even more than their rights, and this was borne out in the quantitative study.

It was also a feature of the focus groups that people felt their children needed to know more than the parents themselves had been taught about Australian history and how Australia is governed. This was seen as a necessary pre-requisite for assuming their rights and obligations as responsible citizens.

Respondents to the national telephone survey were asked to say how importantly they rated a number of possible components of a Civics & Citizenship programme. They were asked:

As you know, schools are asked to teach many things to young people. I have a list here of things that might be taught at school. As I read each one, would you tell me whether you think it is:

Very important  
Quite important  
Not very important  
Not at all important

How Australia is governed; People's rights in Australia; People's responsibilities in Australia; Current political issues; Current social issues; What it means to be an Australian; The history of Australia.

Table 1 overleaf summarises their responses.

TABLE 1

IMPORTANCE OF POSSIBLE PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES			
Programme objective	Important	Not important	Mean
	%	%	
People's responsibilities in Australia	97	3	3.60
The history of Australia	95	5	3.53
People's rights in Australia	94	6	3.51
What it means to be an Australian	86	12	3.38
How Australia is governed	92	8	3.36
Current social issues	86	14	3.20
Current political issues	71	28	2.93

Although all these issues are regarded as important, the last two are regarded as markedly less important than the others. We would speculate that the reasons for this are two-fold.

First, it was a feature of our discussion groups that parents were looking for unifying themes, for their children to be exposed to an education which would strengthen national unity and identity. It was equally apparent that they were thoroughly disillusioned with the current standard of political behaviour, seeing it as unworthy of the democratic process and unreasonably divisive.

Second, as has been mentioned already, parents lack confidence in the ability of teachers to teach this programme without bias. If bias were to be present, many parents may suspect that there would be greater scope to express it in terms of current social or political issues, than in other parts of the programme.

## Question 2 – Relative importance of civics as a subject

In question 2, we sought to establish the importance that parents attached to Civics & Citizenship relative to other fields of study.

The question was:

Taken together, these topics are included in a school subject called Civics and Citizenship.

Thinking now about the range of subjects taught in schools. If you were asked to give a mark out of ten for the importance of each of the following subjects, where TEN was of GREAT importance and ZERO was of NO importance, what mark between zero and ten would you give for:

Science; Reading and writing; Art; Mathematics; Civics and Citizenship; A language other than English; Physical education; Technology.

The results suggest that civics and citizenship ranks -- with a number of other subjects -- below the "three R's" but ahead of subjects such as Art and languages other than English (LOTE).

The results also suggest that parents give it a relatively high score for importance in its own right.

**TABLE 2**

RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF CIVICS AS A SUBJECT				
Field of study	Importance			Mean
	0-3 (Low)	4-6 (Medium)	7-10 (High)	
	%	%	%	
Reading & Writing	--	*	99	9.75
Mathematics	*	1	98	9.45
Technology	1	9	90	8.33
Science	2	17	81	7.86
Physical Education	2	19	79	7.71
<b>Civics &amp; Citizenship</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>7.38</b>
LOTE	9	34	57	6.64
Art	7	44	49	6.39

\*Less than 1 per cent

### Question 3 -- Should civics be compulsory up to Year 10?

Question 3 dealt with the issue of whether Civics & Citizenship should be compulsory for students up to -- but not beyond -- Year 10.

The question was:

In fact, it is planned to teach Civics and Citizenship throughout Australia in a programme called *Discovering Democracy*.

Do you think it:  
Should  
or  
Should not  
be compulsory for all students up to Year 10?

Respondents are more divided on this question than on most of the others, with a modest majority of 56 per cent saying it should be compulsory, and a significant minority of 41 per cent saying it should not be.

This pattern of response is quite consistent across the different demographic groups, although there is a tendency among people of higher education to favour compulsion more than others. The same is true of parents with children in government secondary schools.

**TABLE 3**

SHOULD CIVICS & CITIZENSHIP BE COMPULSORY UP TO YEAR 10?							
	Total	Child in secondary school		Highest level of education			
		Govt	Non-Govt	Some sec'y	Comp sec'y	Trade, tech	Tert'y
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	56	61	51	50	58	53	64
No	41	36	46	45	42	44	34
Don't know	3	4	3	5	1	3	2

### Question 4 – Parents’ expectations

In question 4 we explored parents’ expectations of what a Civics & Citizenship field of study might achieve. They were asked:

I have here some statements that some people have made about this programme. As I read each one, would you tell me whether you agree or disagree with them, or have no opinion:

It is possible to teach young people to be informed and responsible citizens;

The Discovering Democracy program should be designed to equip and encourage young people to participate in community affairs;

This program should be designed to give them a sense of belonging to Australia;

This program should be designed to give young people a strong sense of national identity;

This program should be designed to help advance reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

In the main, parents are optimistic about what the programme might achieve, and few have any doubts that it is possible for it to prepare young people to be informed and responsible citizens.

The results reflect the wishes of the parents. Whether the programme can live up these hopes remains to be seen.

**TABLE 4**

<b>PARENT EXPECTATIONS OF A CIVICS &amp; CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM</b>			
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Produce informed, responsible citizens	94	4	2
Give a sense of belonging to Australia	86	7	7
Equip for participation in community	83	7	10
Give sense of national identity	79	12	9
Help advance reconciliation	70	16	14

### **Question 5 – Perceptions of bias**

There is widespread concern that teachers are either not well enough trained or professional enough to teach this programme without bias.

A number of implications flow from this finding.

One is that professional development will need to be seen to be offered. Another is that in promoting this programme among parents, the objectivity of its content will need to be emphasised.

However, from our focus group discussions it became clear that while many parents do not believe teachers would be unbiased in their teaching of this subject, not all of them are concerned about this.

Many in this category take the quite sophisticated view that everyone has biases, and that their children ought to learn -- if the education system had not already taught them -- how to recognise bias and make their own adjustments for it.

Many also say that to engage the students is the critical factor. The more they became engaged, the more likely it was that they would form their own conclusions anyway.

At the same time there is a residual concern that positive steps need to be taken to prepare teachers to offer this course with fairness, factual accuracy and pedagogical expertise.

These views are common across all school sectors, age groups, and geographic areas. If anything, concern about bias is more often expressed among supporters of the programme than among opponents.

The question was:

Thinking about the teaching of Civics and Citizenship. Which of these statements comes closest to your view:

I am confident that most teachers are already well trained and professional enough to teach Civics and Citizenship without bias.

or

I am not confident that most teachers are already well trained and professional enough to teach Civics and Citizenship without bias.

The results are set out in Table 5 overleaf.

TABLE 5

CONFIDENCE IN TEACHER OBJECTIVITY					
	Total	School sector		Attitude to programme	
		Govt	Non-Govt	Support	Oppose
	%	%	%	%	%
Confident	33	33	30	32	38
Not confident	60	61	62	60	55
Don't know	8	6	8	8	7

### Questions 6 and 7

These questions sought to establish the level of support among parents for a graduation ceremony to mark the completion of a Civics & Citizenship programme by young people, and to find out how parents thought such an idea would be received among young people. Respondents were asked:

It has been suggested that a graduation ceremony for students who complete the *Discovering Democracy* program should be held at the end of Year 10.

Would you personally  
Welcome  
or  
Not welcome  
such a graduation ceremony?

And do you think that Year 10 students themselves would:  
Welcome  
or  
Not welcome  
such a graduation ceremony?

The answers to these questions should be treated with some caution, because respondents to the quantitative study did not have much time to contemplate the pros and cons. However, the findings do closely reflect the attitudes expressed in the focus groups where participants had ample opportunity to debate the merits.

Generally the idea got a luke-warm reception, both in the quantitative and qualitative research, as the tables overleaf show.



**TABLE 6A**

ATTITUDES TO GRADUATION CEREMONY -- PARENTS					
	Total	School sector		Attitude to programme	
		Govt	Non-Govt	Support	Oppose
	%	%	%	%	%
Welcome	40	40	40	45	16
Not welcome	54	52	55	49	81
Don't know	6	8	5	6	3

**TABLE 6B**

GRADUATION CEREMONY -- PARENTS' VIEW OF LIKELY STUDENT ATTITUDE					
	Total	School sector		Attitude to programme	
		Govt	Non-Govt	Support	Oppose
	%	%	%	%	%
Welcome	43	44	38	47	27
Not welcome	41	39	46	39	54
Don't know	16	17	16	14	19

## Question 8

In this question, respondents were asked:

Taking all things into account, would you:

Favour  
or  
Oppose

the introduction of a Civics and Citizenship program?

Is that strongly support, or just support?

Is that strongly oppose, or just oppose?

As can be seen from Table 7 overleaf, there is overwhelming support for the programme among parents in all school sectors. This level of support is uniform across gender, age and region, except perhaps in Western Australia where a noticeable minority (24 per cent) oppose the programme. However, it should be stated that even in WA, 72 per cent support it.

**TABLE 7**

<b>INTRODUCTION OF A CIVICS &amp; CITIZENSHIP PROGRAMME</b>					
	<b>Total</b>	<b>Primary (School sector)</b>		<b>Secondary (School sector)</b>	
		Govt	Non-Govt	Govt	Non-Govt
	%	%	%	%	%
Support	83	82	85	86	84
Oppose	12	14	11	10	10
Don't know	5	5	4	5	6

## 7. SEMINAR

# DISCUSSION & OBSERVATIONS

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### 7.1 DISCUSSION

The final phase of the project took the form of a seminar in which two delegates from each of the state parent organisations, government and non-government, participated. The seminar was held at Little Bay, Sydney, on 27 March 1998

Delegates received a written summary of the research findings from the APC. They were also given a detailed oral briefing from the consultants. This was followed by a question-and-answer session about the findings, and a general discussion.

The consultants noted two main features of the discussion. One was that the main findings of the research seemed to resonate with the participants, suggesting that they found the results credible and that they shared the main views expressed by parents generally.

The second was that the participants were pleased to be able to put their views forward and eager to have them fed into the policy process.

As a result of the presentation and the ensuing discussion, the consultants defined a number of central themes which participants were invited to discuss further in workshops.

Each of the six workshops then shared the fruits of its discussion with participants as a whole in a plenary session. A feature of these presentations was the strong common responses which emerged.

The themes and the participants' responses, are described below.

In short, there was a strong desire for parents to be able to participate in civics and citizenship education, both at the policy formulation stage and at the delivery stage. They wished for parents to be involved at a point where it was possible to influence outcomes, not after decisions had been taken.

### **1. What support mechanisms might be created to enable parents to be involved in civics and citizenship education?**

Participants shared the view of many parents, discovered during the research, that they had acquired some useful knowledge and experience about the way society works, and wanted to pass that on to their children. In many cases, parents felt that their knowledge and experience had been hard-won because their own upbringing and education had short-changed them on civics and citizenship. They did not want this happening to their own children.

Seminar participants wanted educational authorities to recognise the existence of this talent in the community and the community's preparedness to have it harnessed for the good of young people.

Participants urged that parents be regarded as partners with teachers in this programme. It was suggested that to facilitate this partnership, parents themselves should be educated about the programme and the role they could play in delivering it. They suggested that DEETYA fund this education as part of the preparation for the delivery of the programme in schools, by publishing material such as booklets and pamphlets designed specifically for parents. In addition,

programme materials, such as CDs, should be made available at minimum cost to parents.

It was also suggested that:

Strategies to involve parents should be included in materials developed for teachers, and that professional development programmes for teachers at State level should also include parents.

Parent evenings be held both to involve the parents and to educate them, and that Members of Parliament and others involved in the governmental processes be invited to speak at, and participate in, such meetings. At these evenings, detailed outlines of the *Discovering Democracy* programme should be made available and promoted.

Materials produced for the programme should be made available to community libraries as well as to schools.

For democracy to work, people need to be involved in the broad tapestry of community activity, and that this involvement should flow on to involvement in the *Discovering Democracy* involvement within schools.

The rationale for the programme needs to be explicitly communicated to parents, perhaps through Curriculum Corporation materials, or through a kit derived from some of these materials.

There also needs to be recognition that some parents may feel inadequate or not know how much they really know, and that steps need to be taken to overcome any sense of inadequacy, stressing the importance of the assistance parents can provide to children. Such steps might include highlighting civics activities that parents are already engaged in: for example, membership of school councils.

Teachers could provide brief stimulus materials for parents to use in helping their child.

Parents are a resource for teachers; teachers are a resource for parents.

A programme should be developed and funded that would make civics and citizenship education a joint endeavour between parents and teachers at the school level so that teachers can make use of the expertise within the community.

The signs so far suggest that although the programme looks good, the funding is not available at present to provide the necessary support structures that will maximise parent input.

## **2. How could parents influence policy decisions about programme content and delivery?**

Participants suggested that parents, or their representatives, could influence State-based agencies, such as boards of studies, in the choice of programme content.

It was also suggested that:

Parent organisations could convene forums which would involve not only the school community but the wider community, particularly local government and service clubs, to generate ideas which could be fed into the policy and curriculum development processes.

Parent organisations should express their views, and the results of their consultations with the community, to the relevant ministers,

parliamentary representatives, local government representatives, service clubs and the media.

Parent bodies should have a seat on the States' reference groups for the *Discovering Democracy* programme.

Parent bodies should support this programme as a matter of declared policy and ensure that, so far as possible, parents had a sense of ownership of the policy.

Parents should be involved in policy development and curriculum formulation at all levels of decision-making. At a state and national level, parent organisations should be asked to ensure that the priority given to civics and citizenship education in the overall curriculum was maintained.

### **3. What can parents do to add value to the teaching of civics and citizenship, how might this be done and by whom?**

By their own example, in participating in the development of the programme as well as in conducting their public affairs generally, parents could demonstrate tolerance, collaboration and consensual participatory decision-making.

It was also suggested that:

Parents ought to have input at State and school level in the development of the *Discovering Democracy* programme.

Parent groups could foster the development of kits designed to assist teachers to generate interesting and relevant material for local use.

Parents could be involved at a variety of levels. Parents could be invited to share their experiences in civics with other parents; parents and teachers combined could do the same, and parents could themselves be involved in the teaching process.

#### **4. What do parents think ought to be taught as part of civics and citizenship education?**

Building on the views expressed in the focus groups, participants wanted to see civics and citizenship education stress pride in, and a sense of responsibility towards, Australian society. In the view of seminar participants, this, in addition to adding to students' knowledge, would also add to social cohesion through participation.

Some concern was expressed at the possibility that civics and citizenship education might be watered down by being integrated across the curriculum rather than taught as a stand-alone subject.

It was also suggested that:

The essence of the programme should be to teach students to be active citizens, locally, nationally and globally, so that they develop life skills which help them shape their own destiny.

The programme should use the experience of the past to throw light on the present and to guide choices about the future.

Experiences at home in school and in society at large be used to illustrate to students the processes by which our society governs itself.



Students should be taught to become helpful and involved members of society, empowered to become active citizens, and to develop a sense that they can change the political agenda should they wish to do so.

History be taught as a means of enlightening us about ourselves as individuals and as a nation.

Values that underpin democracy should be taught so that students learn what needs to be preserved and what needs to be changed in our institutions.

Students be taught how our institutions interact and what opportunities and obligations they have to participate.

Students should be made aware of how political parties do work and how they might work, and should be taught (along with parents) how to hold decision-makers accountable.

Civics and citizenship education should highlight the rights and responsibilities of individuals as global, national and local citizens.

Practice should accompany theory in the learning process.

## **5. How can parents, as well as students, learn from the programme?**

Some participants suggested a parallel programme for parents, to run alongside *Discovering Democracy*, funded by government and supported by a campaign to increase public awareness of the existence of the programme.

It was also stated that if the *Discovering Democracy* programme is to succeed, it must have commitment from school principals, schoolteachers and school communities.

## 7.2 OBSERVATIONS

These parents were enthusiastic. They readily participated in the seminar, with the objective of making the fledgling programme of civics and citizenship education as successful as possible. They were particularly concerned to ensure that indigenous, non-English-speaking and other minority communities were not left out.

Most recognised it as an opportunity to discuss a subject that they clearly regarded as important, and to influence future developments in this area.

Like parents all over Australia, they had high expectations of what a civics and citizenship programme can achieve, and they liked what they saw of the *Discovering Democracy* materials. Ms Sue Ferguson gave a presentation on curriculum content which elicited a large number of questions, and participants expressed the hope that parents generally would also have the opportunity to see the materials.

In one particular respect, the participants in this seminar were more cautious than were the parents interviewed during the quantitative and qualitative research. The issue of teacher bias, clearly a matter of concern among parents at large, was approached with circumspection by these participants. While they did not challenge the veracity of the research findings, they expressed confidence in the professionalism of teachers, and they plainly did not wish to give the impression that the organisations endorsed the views about teacher bias reported in the research.

In other respects, however, their attitude towards civics and citizenship education, and to the Discovering Democracy programme specifically, was strongly consistent with those expressed by parents at large. That is, they unequivocally supported the concept and objectives of the programme, were glad to see it happening and were ready to play their part in making it a success.

If properly engaged in the process, they will be invaluable ambassadors for the programme.

**A note about the consultants**

DENIS MULLER is a political scientist in the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Melbourne, a former senior editorial executive of *The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age*, Melbourne, and a one-time education editor of *The Age*. He is the Principal of Denis Muller & Associates, a communications and market research consultancy.

IRVING SAULWICK, AM, is one of Australia's foremost public opinion pollsters and social researchers. He is Principal of Irving Saulwick & Associates, a market research consultancy renowned in Australia for its expertise in social policy research, as well as for major commercial research in the private sector.

The two consultants have worked closely together for many years on a wide range of market research and communications projects.

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# Appendix I

## Specifications for Focus Groups

## CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS: RESEARCH PROJECT

### FOCUS GROUP SPECIFICATIONS

1. These specifications are standard for all States and Territories.
2. Each group should consist of eight participants. It is sensible to recruit a couple of extras to be on standby at short notice in case someone pulls out at the last minute.
3. Each group will have equal numbers of non-government and government school parents (except in NSW and Vic where we will run separate groups, one from each sectoral category).
4. Participants should be:
  - ◆ Parents who have children in any year from Prep to 10 inclusive.
  - ◆ Of mixed ages. A practical way to approach this is to create three age brackets -- say, up to 34, 35 to 45 and over 45.
  - ◆ Of either gender, with an approximately equal representation of men and women (no less equal than 3/5.)
  - ◆ From as wide a range of socio-economic groups as possible. A practical way to approach this is to draw people from suburbs or districts across the whole of the area, and to know what the occupation of the main breadwinner is.
  - ◆ Drawn from as broad an area as is conveniently possible, especially from outlying districts in the smaller capital cities.
5. There should be no couples, close friends or parents from the same school in the one group. As far as possible the participants should not be closely acquainted.
6. As far as possible, participants should be “ordinary parents”, rather than affiliates’ officebearers. They should be ordinary parents who take a normal amount of interest in their children’s education. They should not be practising schoolteachers.



# **Appendix II**

## **Correspondence concerning focus group recruitment**

# **Appendix III**

## **Stimulus Materials for Focus Groups**



AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL  
CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT

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**MATERIALS FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS**

**DISCOVERING DEMOCRACY**

**SOME BASIC INFORMATION**

**What is it?**

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Discovering Democracy is a programme for teaching students in Australian schools about:

- ◆ What it means to be a citizen of Australia
- ◆ How our system of government works
- ◆ How Australian democracy evolved, and
- ◆ How to take part in the public affairs of Australia.

**Why do it?**

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We must prepare our young people for a life as responsible and effective citizens and encourage them to take part in the Australian democracy.

If young people are to take part fully in Australian society, they need a basic understanding of how that society is evolving and changing, how it governs and organises itself, and how the political systems and institutions were established.

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It is part of the central role of the education system to give young people that understanding. It is important that everyone understands the nature of our current institutions and of the Australian democracy.

They also need to understand the values that Australian society thinks are important, and which underpin Australian democracy.

In the part of the school curriculum that deals with studies of society and environment, subjects such as social studies and history touch on these topics, but there is no specific curriculum that teaches children what it means to be a fully engaged citizen of Australia.

This new programme of Civics and Citizenship education is designed to fill that gap. The activities which form part of the Discovering Democracy programme will help students:

- Recognise how their own lives are connected to the political and legal institutions through which we govern ourselves, and
- Develop the ability to participate as informed citizens in their community.

## **What values are we talking about?**

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Australia's democracy is built on values that say:

- ◆ All people are of equal worth
- ◆ People have a right to take part in the way they are governed
- ◆ People have a right to choose who will govern them
- ◆ People have an obligation to tolerate other people in their society, even if they are different from themselves
- ◆ People have rights to freedom of speech, of religion and of association, and of access to information
- ◆ People have a responsibility to take an active interest in the way we govern ourselves.

## What other information do young people need?

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Effective citizenship also requires an understanding of Australian history and of the workings of our system of government.

Over Australia's history, its citizenship and national identity have developed from their origins within the British Empire to those of a truly independent nation whose people have come from every part of the world.

If Australia's democracy is to continue to evolve healthily, it needs to be invigorated with a continuing commitment that comes only with an understanding and appreciation of its qualities and its potentialities.

To be active and responsible citizens, young people need to learn and understand the historic, social, economic and political forces that have shaped our society and our institutions.

This includes knowing about:

- ◆ The three levels of government -- federal, state and local
- ◆ The way the Constitution was developed
- ◆ The contribution of major figures in our history

It also includes knowing something about:

- ◆ How the nation of Australia evolved from a collection of colonies
- ◆ Major economic forces such as the gold rushes and depressions
- ◆ Major social forces such as our immigration programme, and
- ◆ That the new democracy came at a price to the indigenous people.

## **Don't young people learn this already?**

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The evidence is that because these things are not taught in a systematic way, a lot of students miss out, and some seem to miss out badly.

For instance, a national survey done for the Constitutional Commission in 1988 found that roughly half of all Australians -- not just those at school -- did not know Australia had a written Constitution.

Another survey, done by the University of Sydney among Year 9 and Year 10 students, found that 70 per cent did not know the name of the Lower House of the Federal Parliament, the House of Representatives.

To make matters worse, subjects such as History, where some of this information is taught, are attracting fewer and fewer students.

There is real concern among governments that if people know so little about their country, they will not have a healthy sense of belonging to it. Without a strong sense of belonging, our democracy is weakened.

It is weakened because people will not know how to participate fully and will not be equipped to make informed judgments about major issues.

## **Why get agitated about it now?**

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We in Australia are asking some very big questions at the moment about the way we are governed. Partly this is because the centenary of Federation is coming up, as is the new millennium, and there is a sense that Australia should take stock of where, as a nation, we have come to, and how we want to go on.

One part of this is the debate about whether Australia should remain as a constitutional monarchy or become a republic. There is soon to be a People's Convention to discuss this question.

These are very big decisions, and it is important for the strength of our democracy that all people should feel as if they have a stake in making them.

If people don't know and understand the basics about our system of government and the kind of society we are, there is a risk they will feel left out when those big decisions are made.

If they feel left out, they will not feel they have a stake in this country's future. That weakens our democracy.

It is of special importance that people who have come here as immigrants feel as strong a sense of belonging as everyone else. This is also true of their children.

Indeed the successful melding of immigrants from 150 countries is a defining characteristic of the Australian democracy, one all Australians need to reflect upon and appreciate.

### **What will a civics and citizenship programme deliver?**

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The idea is that throughout much of their compulsory years of schooling -- up to Year 10 in most States and Territories -- young people will learn progressively and coherently about these matters.

New curriculum materials are being created, and will be given to all schools in Australia. Importantly, this will mean that the same materials will be available to students wherever they live in Australia.

Teachers are to be given special training in how and what to teach in this field.

There are a number of activities involving parents and the community designed to keep everyone informed and able to participate in the programme if they wish.

The curriculum materials are being developed by Curriculum Corporation, a company owned by all the States and Territories.

The materials will consist of books and other printed matter, plus CD-ROMs and material on the Internet.

Introductory material will be in schools before the end of this year, and more detailed learning materials will go out next year.

Teaching of the programme, in Year 4 to 10, will begin in 1999.

The whole programme will be supervised by the Civics Education Group, which consists of:

Dr John Hirst, an historian at La Trobe University in Melbourne  
Professor Greg Craven, the Dean of Law at Notre Dame University,  
Western Australia  
Dr Ken Boston, Director-General of School Education in New South Wales  
Professor Stuart Macintyre, an historian at the University of Melbourne  
Ms Susan Pascoe, Co-ordinating Chairperson, Policy, at the Catholic  
Education Office in Melbourne.

This group was appointed by the present Government. Dr Boston, Professor Macintyre and Ms Pascoe made up the Expert Civics Group appointed by the previous Government to examine the need for a civics and citizenship programme in Australian schools.

## **National activities**

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In addition to this curriculum programme, there are a number of activities planned on a national basis to raise awareness of citizenship across the whole community.

In the post-compulsory years of schooling -- Years 11 and 12 in most places -- attention will be given to spreading good citizenship practice among young people. For example, it is proposed that there be a national project in which citizenship ceremonies were held for students in Years 11 and 12 as they turned 18.

The aim of the National Activities is to build support for civics and citizenship education among parents, teachers, principals, local councils and community organisations. They will be encouraged to help run constitutional conventions, parliamentary debates and mock elections as part of the educative process.

The Open Learning Agency will deliver a civics and citizenship course to the community through television.

There are also to be programmes offered through vocational training institutions and through the Adult and Community Education sector.

# **Appendix IV**

## **Questionnaire for national survey**



**SCREENING QUESTION**

Good . . . . . my name is . . . . . from AFS Research. We are conducting a survey about school education. Are you the parent of a child at primary or secondary school? (If not, ask:) Is such a parent available?

**SUBSTANTIVE QUESTIONS**

**Question 1**

As you know, schools are asked to teach many things to young people. I have a list here of things that might be taught at school. As I read each one, would you tell me whether you think it is:

- Very important
- Quite important
- Not very important
- Not at all important

VI    QI    NVI    NAAI    DK

- How Australia is governed
- People's rights in Australia
- People's responsibilities in Australia
- Current political issues
- Current social issues
- What it means to be an Australian
- The history of Australia

**Question 2**

Taken together, these topics are included in a school subject called Civics and Citizenship.

Thinking now about the range of subjects taught in schools. If you were asked to give a mark out of ten for the importance of each of the following subjects, where TEN was of GREAT importance and ZERO was of NO importance, what mark between zero and ten would you give for:

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Science											
Reading and writing											
Art											
Mathematics											
Civics and Citizenship											
A language other than English											
Physical education											
Technology											

**Question 3**

In fact, it is planned to teach Civics and Citizenship throughout Australia in a programme called *Discovering Democracy*.

Do you think it:

Should  
or  
Should not

be compulsory for all students up to Year 10?

DK

#### Question 4

I have here some statements that some people have made about this program. As I read each one, would you tell me whether you agree or disagree with them, or have no opinion:

It is possible to teach young people to be informed and responsible citizens;

Agree      Disagree      Don't Know

The Discovering Democracy program should be designed to equip and encourage young people to participate in community affairs;

Agree      Disagree      Don't Know

This program should be designed to give them a sense of belonging to Australia;

Agree      Disagree      Don't Know

This program should be designed to give young people a strong sense of national identity;

Agree      Disagree      Don't Know

This program should be designed to help advance reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Agree      Disagree      Don't Know

#### Question 5

Thinking about the teaching of Civics and Citizenship. Which of these statements comes closest to your view:

I am confident that most teachers are already well trained and professional enough to teach Civics and Citizenship without bias.

or

I am not confident that most teachers are already well trained and professional enough to teach Civics and Citizenship without bias.

DK

**Question 6**

It has been suggested that a graduation ceremony for students who complete the *Discovering Democracy* program should be held at the end of Year 10.

Would you personally

Welcome

or

Not welcome

such a graduation ceremony?

DK

**Question 7**

And do you think that Year 10 students themselves would:

Welcome

or

Not welcome

such a graduation ceremony?

DK

**Question 8**

Taking all things into account, would you:

Favour

or

Oppose

the introduction of a Civics and Citizenship program?

Is that strongly support, or just support?

Is that strongly oppose, or just oppose?

DK

**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS**

And now, to finish, just a couple of questions about yourself.

**Question 9**

Do you have a child or children in:

A Government primary school  
A non-Government primary school

A Government secondary school  
A non-Government secondary school

**Question 10**

Did you go to school:

Mainly in Australia  
or  
Mainly outside Australia?

**Question 11**

And what was the highest level of education you achieved:

Primary  
Some secondary  
Completed secondary  
Trade or technical qualification  
University diploma or degree

**Question 12**

How old are you?

Under 30  
30 to 39  
40 to 49  
50 or over

**Question 13**

Gender

Male

Female

**Question 14**

Location

Melbourne

Sydney

Brisbane

Perth

Adelaide

Other Vic

Other NSW

Other Qld

Other WA

Other SA

ACT

NT

Tas

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