Learning about and experiencing democracy in schools

**Brief submitted
by Élections Québec**
in connection with the revision of
the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program

élections
Québec

ÉLECTIONS QUÉBEC AND THE PROMOTION
OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

In its 2018-2019 annual management report, Élections Québec recommended that all students receive democracy education as part of their schooling. The consultation process launched by the Minister of Education and Higher Education for the revision of the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program mirrors our recommendation. The process focuses on the theme of *citizen participation and democracy* in the elementary and secondary curriculum. This brief sets out the reasons why the theme should be included in the revised program.

Élections Québec is a neutral and impartial institution responsible for the application of the *Election Act*. It organizes provincial elections and referendums, ensures compliance with the rules on political financing, and guarantees the full exercise of electoral rights. The promotion of Québec's democratic values is also a key part of its mission.

Committed citizens are a prime moving force in a society facing many different issues. People who take the time to remain informed, express their ideas, vote, discuss and initiate debate ensure that the world is made richer as new ideas emerge, projects are implemented and democratic society flourishes.

For almost 30 years, Élections Québec has worked with a range of partners to introduce various initiatives for school students to enhance the development of a democratic culture among young people.[1]

In the view of Élections Québec, democracy education must begin at an early age and be part of the education of every young person. This will ensure that all young people are aware that living in a democracy is a precious inheritance, and will be able to develop the skills they need to become active and responsible citizens.

As a result, Élections Québec considers that the revised ethics program must give a prominent place to education for democratic citizenship. It not only represents an investment in the future of our democratic society, but also enriches the students' educational pathway.

---

1.   The initiatives are presented briefly in Appendix 1.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF AN EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

In this brief, Élections Québec has chosen to use the term *education for democratic citizenship*, rather than citizen participation, democracy, or citizenship education. Why? Because there must be a clear link between education and a democratic society. Although it is essential to develop citizen values and to encourage young people to participate in social life, neither is sufficient to guarantee the existence and vitality of democracy.

Educating young people in citizenship in a democratic society involves offering them the tools they will need not only to live in a democratic space, but also to help preserve and seek to improve its democratic attributes.

> *Westheimer[2] points out that a form of citizenship education reduced to socialization in the areas of civility and individual responsibility can be observed in both totalitarian and democratic regimes. The particularity of democratic citizenship is that it involves a reflection on equality and justice and requires deliberative, critical and collective skills.[3]*

In a democratic society—defined as government of the people, by the people, for the people—citizens are required to participate in decisions about laws and policies that affect them all,[4] and the education system must prepare them to fulfill this role.

Cultivating democracy, an ongoing mission

A functioning democracy can never be taken for granted. It is a perpetual endeavour that involves informing and training citizens, young and old, to ensure that its vitality and perennity are secured.

From this point of view, the work of some researchers is a cause for concern: they show that a growing number of individuals, including many young people, do not consider that it is preferable to live in a democracy. One example is found in a study by Foa and Mounk (2016),[5] cited in the work of Westheimer.

> " I think that democracy is an important privilege, and that not many young people know how lucky we are to have it here in Canada. They should be taught that the future is in their hands and that if they don't realize this soon, they will have to live in ignorance. "
>
> Jason, age 17, Montréal

> *Between 1995 and 2014, the number of citizens who reported a preference for a government leader who was "strong" and who did not need to bother with elections increased in almost every developed and developing democracy and, again, the growth was greatest among youth and young adults (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Democracy, it seems, is not self-winding.[6]*

---

2. Joel Westheimer, *What Kind of Citizen? Educating Our Children for the Common Good* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

3. Stéphanie Gaudet, "Introduction : citoyenneté des enfants et des adolescents" in *Lien social et politiques*, no. 80 (2018) at 4-5. [**https://doi.org/10.7202/1044106ar**]. [Translation]

4. Joel Westheimer, "Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism" in *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94:1 (2019) at 4-16.

5. Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect" in *Journal of Democracy* 27(3) (2016) at 5–17.

6. Joel Westheimer, "Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism", in *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94:1 (2019) at 9.

These findings show that democracy is more fragile and less self-supporting than we perhaps believe. It also raises the question of how aware the individuals surveyed were: what did they know about the characteristic elements of democracy, and about its benefits compared to other political regimes?

Democracy in Québec: voter turnout as a sign of fragility

In Québec, several signs point to the need to redouble efforts to ensure that we do not drift away from the democratic ideal. One such sign is the decline in social and political engagement and the drop in voter turnout. Given the mission of Élections Québec, we will look at the question of voter turnout in more detail.

Although democracy is not just about elections and although the modes of citizen participation are becoming more diverse, exercising one's right to vote by casting a ballot remains a sign of commitment to democracy.

Unfortunately, the participation rate of 66.45% recorded at the provincial elections on October 1, 2018 appears to show that voter turnout in Québec is still declining. It has dropped by almost five percentage points compared to the participation rate of 71.44% in the 2014 elections. According to a research note published by the Research Chair on Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions at Université Laval,[7] this decrease is part of a declining trend over a period of several years in Québec. The study, completed in a partnership with Élections Québec, specifies that the change in voter turnout can be explained, to a large degree, by replacement of generations, as younger voters vote less than preceding generations.

During the provincial elections on October 1, 2018, voter turnout among voters under 35 was 53.41% compared to 69.68% among voters over 35, a gap of 16.27 percentage points.

Some explanatory factors can be found in the specialized literature, and in data from the post-election surveys carried out by Élections Québec. The factors most often mentioned are:
• a loss of trust in the political authorities;
• a political discourse that, for many young people, fails to reflect their concerns;
• the under-representation of young people in the political arena;
• media influence, which conveys a negative opinion of politics and maintains a level of cynicism;
• the lack of information about parties, candidates and programs;
• a lack of knowledge about the electoral process;
• the difficulty of obtaining information and understanding the issues in order to make an enlightened choice.

> " I'm going to vote, but only if I understand all the issues and the consequences of the vote. "
>
> Gabriel, age 18, Québec City

7. Chaire de recherche sur la démocratie et les institutions parlementaires, *Participation électorale à l'élection du 1er octobre 2018* [online]. [http://www.democratie.chaire.ulaval.ca/index.php?pid=923&n=540].

The lack of political socialization—which includes gathering essential knowledge about exercising the right to vote—contributes to the feeling of exclusion experienced by some young, and some not so young, people. The less informed are less likely to vote. While participating in various events, Élections Québec staff members have heard some startling, and in fact worrying, comments.

- One college student from the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, working in the mining sector during the summer, stated that workers do not vote because they believe that this right is not intended for them, since they lack a college or university diploma.
- During a simulated election at a university, an agriculture student firmly believed that he had no right to vote because he was in an applied science program, and not a humanities program such as political science, business administration, sociology or law.

Education for democratic citizenship in schools: a question of fairness

Like the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, Élections Québec believes that "schools in Québec, with their three-fold mission to provide instruction, to socialize and to provide qualifications, play a leading role in the area of citizenship education."[8]

The *Québec Education Program*[9] specifies that "Québec schools have a mandate to **prepare students to contribute to the development of a more democratic and just society**".[10] In its report on this topic, published in 1998, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation states that citizenship education has to become a central pillar of the educational project.[11] In 2006, in its report on democracy in education, the Conseil reiterated the importance of this theme and emphasized the need for prior action in order to preserve democracy, wording one of its approaches "support citizenship education to contribute to the continuity of democracy."[12]

Socialization is one of the three components of the mission of Québec schools. At school, children develop not only their cognitive abilities but also their ability to communicate, to live in harmony with others and to understand the society in which they live. Schools play an essential role in developing skills and an interest in democratic life and citizen involvement.

---

8. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Agir pour renforcer la démocratie scolaire : rapport annuel sur l'état et les besoins de l'éducation 2005-2006* (Québec: 2006) at 73.

9. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Québec Education Program. Preschool Education and Elementary Education* (Québec: 2001).

10. *Loc. cit.* The words in bold in citations from the *Québec Education Program* are highlighted to draw attention to references to democracy.

11. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Éduquer à la citoyenneté : rapport annuel sur l'état et les besoins de l'éducation 1997-1998* (Québec: 1998) at 83.

12. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Agir pour renforcer la démocratie scolaire : rapport annuel sur l'état et les besoins de l'éducation 2005-2006* (Québec: 2006) at 72.

SOCIALIZE, TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO LIVE TOGETHER IN HARMONY

*In a pluralistic society such as ours, schools must act as agents of social cohesion by fostering a feeling of belonging to the community and teaching students how to live together. This means that they must transmit the heritage of shared knowledge, **promote the fundamental values of democracy and prepare young people to become responsible citizens**. They must likewise prevent exclusion, which jeopardizes the future of too many young people.[13]*

Obviously, schools do not have sole responsibility for citizenship education. Society as a whole is involved, whether families, communities or public institutions. However, schools play a leading role because they alone can guarantee universal access to the knowledge involved, since they teach all young people up to the age of 16. As a micro-society, they can ensure that all students learn about and experience democracy on a daily basis.

> **"** I like the fact that the student representatives in the student council work as a team. There's a good team spirit.
>
> – I like the fact that the students propose activities that we can do. **"**
>
> Élina and Élizabeth, grade 6,
> École centrale Saint-Antoine-Abbé

The positive effect that political socialization experiences at school can have has been highlighted by research.

> *Schools are not the only venue for socialization and many other elements, in particular the family environment, influence students' knowledge and civic and political attitudes. However, the authors concordantly highlight the role played by the study and classroom discussion of political and social subjects. The inclusion of politics in school activities and debates helps develop students' knowledge of and interest in politics (awareness of political information and political discussions outside the classroom), as well as a feeling that they can influence the political process and become involved in the future.[14]*

Schools are the ideal place to introduce students to the operation of political institutions, and also to involve them in activities that make them more aware of the impact of certain political decisions on their own daily lives.

---

13. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation (2001), *op. cit.*

14. Géraldine Bozec, "La formation du citoyen à l'école : individualisation et dépolitisation de la citoyenneté" in *Lien social et politiques*, no. 80 (2018) at 72. [**https://doi.org/10.7202/1044110ar**]. [Translation]

CURRENT STATUS OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLING OF QUÉBEC STUDENTS

In 2020, what role do citizenship education and democracy education play in the schooling of Québec students? Why does Élections Québec recommend that this theme should be made a part of the existing program?

In Québec, there is no specific program for citizenship education or democracy education. However, a non-exhaustive examination of the documents that govern the school system reveals the existence of pedagogical goals and content closely linked to both themes. We present them below, followed by a review of some of the obstacles that cause variations in the way education for democratic citizenship is provided in different schools.

The Québec Education Program

The school mission

It is important to note that the **mission statement** with which the Program begins stipulates that "Québec schools have a mandate to prepare students to contribute to the **development of a more democratic and just society**."[15] This mirrors the concerns of Élections Québec.

> *Why are you a member of your student council?*
> – I chair our student council to create activities in our school and make students feel they belong.
> – I like having an opportunity to make a difference and to organize activities that everyone can enjoy.
> – I ran for election as president to make a difference and make things change.
> – I like the idea of helping other students in my school.
>
> Young people present at the #Onsengage event in the Chaudière-Appalaches region

While "their primary responsibility concerns the basic learnings [...], they also have a responsibility to help students take their place in society, by familiarizing them with basic social knowledge and values and giving them the tools they need to play a constructive role as citizens."[16]

As mentioned above, one pillar of the mission is socialization, the goal of which is to teach students to live together more harmoniously. Schools "must transmit the heritage of shared knowledge, promote the fundamental values of democracy and prepare young people to become responsible citizens."[17] In our view, this offers fertile ground for the inclusion of education for democratic citizenship.

---

15. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation (2001), *op. cit*.

16. *Ibid.*, at 3.

17. *Ibid.*, at 3.

Broad areas of learning and cross-curricular competencies

The educational aim of the **broad area of learning**[18] *Citizenship and Community Life* is "to ensure that students take part in the democratic life of the classroom or the school and develop a spirit of openness to the world and respect for diversity."[19] Its three focuses of development are inspiring:

- Awareness of the importance of rules of social conduct and democratic institutions;
- Involvement in action in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity;
- Culture of peace.

Numerous **cross-curricular competencies**, such as cooperate with others, exercise critical judgment and fulfill their potential, can provide support for education for democratic citizenship.

Subject areas

Four programs include competencies that appear to us to have a direct link with citizenship education and democracy education. They are presented in the following table.[20]

Program	*Ethics and Religious Culture* Taught from the 1st year of elementary school to the 5th year of secondary school, except for the 3rd year of secondary education
Competencies	Reflects on ethical questions Engages in moral dialogue

Program	*History and citizenship education* Taught from the 3rd year of elementary school to the 2nd year of secondary school
Competency	Constructs his/her consciousness of citizenship through the study of history

Program	*Geography* Taught from the 3rd year of elementary school to the 2nd year of secondary school
Competency	Constructs his/her consciousness of global citizenship

Program	*Linguistic, academic and social integration* Offered to non-Francophone immigrant students arriving in the education system
Competencies	Adapt to the local culture, at the elementary level Integrate within the academic system and Québec society, at the secondary level

Other programs may deal incidentally with elements relating to the themes of citizenship or democracy, such as *Contemporary World*, which addresses the theme of power when the entire program is taught to students in the 5th year of secondary school.[21]

---

18. The *Québec Education Program* has five broad areas of learning that run through the whole curriculum and anchor the development and transfer of cross-curricular and subject-specific competencies. The learning must be addressed in the various programs making up the *Québec Education Program*.

19. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *op. cit.*

20. A more detailed version is in Appendix 2.

21. The inclusion of the *Financial Education* program for students in the 5th year of secondary school may reduce the time devoted to the *Contemporary World* program.

The *Education Act* and *Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education*

Three elements in the *Education Act* and the basic school regulation also appear to offer possibilities.

The **student committee** (or student council) is introduced by the *Education Act* and offers a key opportunity to learn about and exercise democracy in each school. "During the month of September each year, the principal of a school providing education to students in the second cycle of the secondary level shall see to the formation of a student committee."[22] The purpose of the student committee is to "encourage the collaboration of students in developing, implementing and periodically evaluating the school's educational project and their participation in fostering success and in school activities [and also to] encourage the students to conduct themselves in a civil and respectful manner toward each other and the school staff."[23] The committee may also "make suggestions to the student representatives on the governing board and to the principal that are likely to facilitate the proper operation of the school".[24]

> Comments from people responsible for student councils:
>
> – It's important for us to encourage students to get involved in their school community. This introduces them to new experiences and to success, and helps them develop the skills they will need as responsible citizens in the future.
>
> Pascale, teacher, École régionale des Quatre-Saisons
>
> – It's a fair question: what are the positive impacts of an active student council? I'd say involvement, leadership and responsibility for students, a bridge between administrators and students, direct involvement in democracy, a feeling of belonging and the pride students feel in making a contribution to their own school.
>
> Toloff, teacher, Académie Sainte-Thérèse

---

22. Québec, *Education Act*, R.S.Q., chapter I-13.3, updated to 10 December 2019, Éditeur officiel du Québec, section 96.5.

23. *Ibid.*, section 96.6.

24. *Loc. cit.*

The *Education Act* provides for a policy to introduce students to democracy in schools:

> *Subject to any policy directions the Minister may establish, the school board must adopt a policy on introducing students to democracy in schools, providing, in particular, for a form of student representation with the council of commissioners.[25]*

In addition, the Spiritual Care and Guidance and Community Involvement Service, a complementary educational service for all students, is "a place where meaning and a sense of solidarity are developed. It is a place of discovery and creation, where they learn to express themselves and think critically [...]".[26]

Various extra-curricular activities, committees and events can also bring new learning, as can the actions of external resources whether inside or outside the classroom (youth forum, National Assembly, Élections Québec, cooperatives, etc.).

Some observations about the curriculum as applied

Given the elements identified above, one could believe that Québec schools emphasize citizenship education and democracy education. However, because of several obstacles, there is actually a gap between the curriculum as prescribed and the actual curriculum applied in the classroom.

The teaching of cross-curricular elements is a shared responsibility and, as a result, the elements are not assigned to a single teacher. In addition, they are not formally evaluated and are not covered by clear pedagogical goals[27] or guidelines[28] to help teachers include them in their teaching. These obstacles make the inclusion of cross-curricular elements in the students' schooling a random event.

> " It's important to find a way to get young people interested, and also to help them understand the operation of Québec's political system! It's a joke to think that students are going to be interested in democracy, and learn about it, in a history, economics or geography class!
>
> Arianne, age 17, Sainte-Martine

> *Even today, the Conseil notes that real consideration for the broad areas of learning depends on a more explicit explanation of possible links with each subject area. If schools are not given this support, the Conseil fears that the broad areas of learning will not be dealt with exhaustively and that key aspects of personal development will not be addressed.[29]*

The observations made in schools by Élections Québec confirm the varying degrees of emphasis placed on citizenship education and democracy education in the schooling of the groups of Québec students encountered.

---

25. *Ibid.*, section 211.1.

26. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, *Developing the Inner Life and Changing the World* (Québec: 2005) at 12.

27. Marie McAndrew, "Éducation interculturelle et éducation à la citoyenneté dans les nouveaux programmes québécois : une analyse critique" in *Quelle formation pour l'éducation à la citoyenneté ?* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004) at 27-48.

28. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *L'éducation financière obligatoire en 5e secondaire : enjeux et recommandations* (Québec: 2017).

29. *Ibid.*, at 17. [Translation]

For example, in one school, the student council is at the heart of the educational project, and is consulted on every topic that affects students. Every opportunity is taken to learn about and apply democracy in everyday life: in the classroom, in various subjects; in the choice and planning of complementary educational activities; and in the organization of student life. In another school, democracy is addressed explicitly only in the social sciences class, from a historical point of view.

A research project on citizenship education as included in the *History and citizenship education* program in secondary schools[30] shows that the emphasis placed on citizenship education varies widely, as does the way in which this theme is addressed by the various teachers students encounter during their schooling.

It appears that some of the significant learning that students acquire in connection with citizenship education results from the personal initiatives of their teachers and is not part of a universal program provided for all.

Some schools therefore play an active role in dispensing education for democratic citizenship, others less so. Given this situation, how can all students be guaranteed the same opportunities to develop the learning they will need to exercise their democratic citizenship? How can all students have fair access to this fundamental knowledge?

> " Young people are not well informed about politics… We don't talk about it at school and, because we know nothing about it, we don't have any reason to go and vote.
>
> We're often told that we're the future! But how can we create the future when we know nothing about the politics of the present? I sincerely believe that this is an important topic that we should study. In our history, lots of people and movements have given us the life we have today, and it's our duty to honour them! "
>
> Alisson, age 17, Trois-Rivières

---

30. Alexandre Fortier-Chouinard, *L'éducation à la citoyenneté au secondaire : quel effet sur l'intention d'aller voter pour les jeunes Québécois ?* (Université Laval: 2019) [Master's dissertation in political science].

LEARNING AND EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOLS WITH A CONNECTION TO DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The preceding chapters highlight the essential role played by schools in preparing future citizens who will support and develop democracy. Every day, the news reflects the fragility of this heritage and reminds us of the need to act in our everyday lives in order to preserve it. This is why Élections Québec considers that all students in Québec must have an opportunity to **learn about and experience democratic citizenship** throughout their schooling.

How can this goal, which is supported by research and observation, be achieved in the school system? The key point is that education for democratic citizenship must no longer be dependent on the actions of a few isolated individuals, but must become fundamental learning that all students will receive.

Elements to be considered

In light of the observations made in the field and the related research findings, Élections Québec proposes a set of elements to ensure that education for democratic citizenship becomes part of school life.

Train justice-oriented citizens

Before including education for democratic citizenship in the school program, it is important to think about the type of citizen we want to prepare. What are our expectations for students once they become adults?

A research project analyzing various citizenship education programs has concluded that their focus is not necessarily democratic citizenship.[31] On the basis of their findings, the authors identified three types of citizen:

- the *personally-responsible citizen* acts as society expects, for example by being polite, obeying laws, and helping others by making donations;
- the *participatory citizen* participates actively in the community's social and political affairs, and may coordinate volunteer activities, help implement group projects to improve the local environment, or organize fund-raising campaigns;
- the *justice-oriented citizen* goes beyond personal responsibility and participation, and analyzes situations to develop strategies for change that address the underlying causes of injustice, such as poverty.

---

31. Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer, "Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do", *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(1) (2003) at 34-66.

If today's youth are to participate in political decision making, schools must ensure that they are sufficiently well-informed to do so effectively. Basic skills like literacy and numeracy are, perhaps, the first important steps toward that goal—but they are not enough. Education that fosters the kind of engagement a well-functioning democracy requires will also ensure that students gain the knowledge, capacities, and dispositions associated with a robust democratic life.[32]

In light of this research, Élections Québec considers that to maintain a vibrant democracy, it is important to train justice-oriented citizens—young people who, thanks to the skills developed through democracy education, will be ready to take action to contribute to the common good and act on the causes of injustice.

Learning that begins at an early age and continues throughout life

An interest in democracy is instilled by a learning process that begins early in life—well before a person reaches voting age. It is known that the earlier children become aware of the precious heritage of living in a democratic society, the more they will be able to play an active role in society.

The ability of children to understand the ideas connected with democracy is often questioned, on the grounds that several political concepts are too complicated or of no interest to children. However, if scientific and mathematical concepts can be explained and exposed to children in simple terms, it is reasonable to suppose that the same applies to the concepts of democracy.

In fact, the question "is not so much to determine *if* children can learn political democracy, but rather *what* they can learn. Children and teenagers can have an interest in and the skills needed to learn about politics, although the depth and complexity of what they can learn varies."[33]

This is why it is important to equip and support students throughout their schooling and, above all, to introduce them gradually to democratic values and practices. Pedagogical activities and content must be adapted to students' educational level and modulated to match the progression of learning.

> " When I think about politics, I think about opportunities to change the world. I dream, like other young and not-so-young people, about a better world, and democracy is one way to bring it about. We are the future, so we might as well start to build it right away. We should honour our ancestors who fought to give us the right to vote by voting. "
>
> Jade, age 17, Saint-Colomban

> " It's really exciting to involve children in democracy education! I have an eight-year-old son who loves politics, who watched the leaders' debate, who did the vote compass, who has his own ideas and values, which are not necessarily the same as ours, luckily. We have discussions, a healthy and constructive debate. When he got home from school yesterday, he showed us a note inviting him to vote on October 1, just like us, and I can't tell you how happy he was! Thank you for remembering the new generation! "
>
> Édith
> Testimony from the "small polling stations" initiative, part of the Voters in Training program

---

32. Joel Westheimer, "Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism", *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94:1 (2019) at 14.

33. Valérie-Anne Mahéo, *L'éducation à la citoyenneté au primaire : de l'école à la maison* (2018) at 7. [Unpublished preliminary report on the impact of a democracy education activity during the 2017 municipal elections in Québec, presented to Élections Québec.] [Translation]

The research project *L'éducation à la citoyenneté au primaire : de l'école à la maison,*[34] conducted by Valérie-Anne Mahéo in a partnership with Élections Québec, included an impact study to assess, during the 2017 municipal elections, the direct and indirect benefits for children and their parents of a citizenship education activity for students in the third cycle of elementary education (years 5 and 6).

The project confirmed the positive impact of political socialization experiences, not only on the students, but also on their families' political engagement. Children who had taken part in the citizenship education activity in the classroom were more likely to have discussions about democracy with their family. In some cases, the children even encouraged their parents to go and vote.

The study shows that children can be taught democratic notions, and the children will then be more interested in and better able to learn about political notions.

A curriculum that includes various types of knowledge

When thinking about democracy education, we tend to focus on knowledge of democratic institutions and the election process. However, the development of the competency young people need to exercise democratic citizenship covers a much broader field of learning, including all three dimensions: knowledge, know-how and behaviour.

Knowledge includes everything acquired through learning or experience, such as knowledge of democratic institutions (their role, structure, operation and history) and knowledge of the means used to develop a critical stance and promote debate.

Know-how is the practical aspect of a competency and, in the area of democracy education, includes mastering the art of democratic debate by applying knowledge of the conditions that support it, exercising the right to vote at school, or managing a project. Students must demonstrate their mastery in a meaningful, reality-based context.

Behaviour is based on attitudes and values, in this case the values of living together in a democratic society (empathy, listening skills, mutual assistance and equality). The ability to perform actions and react appropriately in society is constructed throughout the students' schooling.
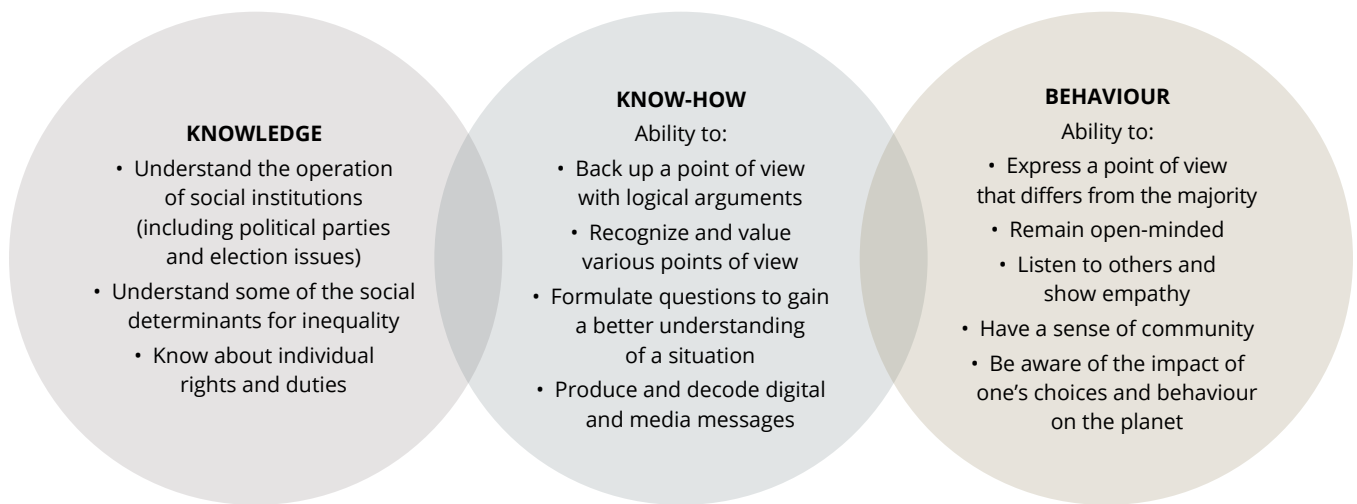
The integration of all these forms of knowledge is essential in the development of the competencies connected with education for democratic citizenship. The ultimate objective is to encourage students, once they reach adulthood, to transfer these competencies into their lives as citizens.

---

34. *Ibid.*

A research project completed by a team at the Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la citoyenneté et les minorités[35] illustrates the types of knowledge possessed by a democratic citizen. The research goal was to specify the key qualities of a democratic citizen, and the research team questioned thirty specialists from the university, community and school sectors. It then grouped the values that achieved a consensus, as shown in the diagram below.

The 13 qualities considered to be a priority for democratic citizens
Adapted from: Stéphanie Gaudet, Stéphanie Boyer and Judith Gaudet,
"Les qualités du citoyen démocratique" in *Cahier du CIRCEM*, Université d'Ottawa, at 5.

KNOWLEDGE
- Understand the operation of social institutions (including political parties and election issues)
- Understand some of the social determinants for inequality
- Know about individual rights and duties

KNOW-HOW
Ability to:
- Back up a point of view with logical arguments
- Recognize and value various points of view
- Formulate questions to gain a better understanding of a situation
- Produce and decode digital and media messages

BEHAVIOUR
Ability to:
- Express a point of view that differs from the majority
- Remain open-minded
- Listen to others and show empathy
- Have a sense of community
- Be aware of the impact of one's choices and behaviour on the planet

Learning anchored in practice

Schools are the ideal place for students to discover, in real-life situations, the power they have to influence their environment when they commit individually (and collectively) to bring about change for the common good. This power is similar to the power of citizens in society, and is learned through direct experience of democracy.

In 1998, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation had already identified this as a necessary action.

> The Conseil believes that no form of citizenship education will lead to tangible results unless students are invited to experience, in real life in their school environment, the values, rights, responsibilities and participation they are taught in the classroom.[36]

> *Why are you involved in your school's student council?*
>
> I think it's really important to be involved in my student council because I recognize the need to create a school environment for the generations to come.
>
> Nicolas, Secondary V, Académie Sainte-Thérèse

---

35. Stéphanie Gaudet, Stéphanie Boyer and Judith Gaudet, "Les qualités du citoyen démocratique" in *Cahier du CIRCEM*, Université d'Ottawa (2017).

36. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Éduquer à la citoyenneté : rapport annuel sur l'état et les besoins de l'éducation 1997-1998 – Synthèse*, (Québec: 1998) at 2. [Translation]

All dimensions of democracy must be taught through practical experiences in a meaningful context. Schools must provide multiple opportunities to practice democratic values and experience democratic processes. Citizen involvement and participation must be supported and encouraged (for example, by giving students academic credit to recognize their community involvement). In addition, students must have genuine zones of influence to make them aware of the power for change generated by their involvement and participation in democratic processes. If schools fail to recognize this power, they risk increasing students' cynicism about politics. This occurs when the power of a school's student council is limited to choosing extra-curricular activities, and if its opinion is not taken into account in other decisions that have an impact on the quality of student life. It also occurs when the students' enthusiasm is not nourished by meetings and actions.

A shared responsibility inside and outside schools

Education for democratic citizenship involves all players in the school community. It cannot remain the responsibility of a single person, for example the teacher who provides assistance for the members of the student council. All players must aim to exemplify its principles in their everyday activities.

Of course, schools do not have sole responsibility for the development of this competency. Other organizations can make a contribution, inside and outside schools, by offering students opportunities to learn about and experience democratic citizenship. Many inspirational initiatives already exist: youth committees in municipalities, the citizenship schools of the Institut du Nouveau Monde (INM), parliamentary simulations, student council training programs (including *Vox populi : Ta démocratie à l'école !*, a joint initiative of Élections Québec, the National Assembly and the Fondation Jean-Charles-Bonenfant), the Cité-école Louis-Saint-Laurent,[37] the accreditation programs of the Établissements verts Brundtland, and UNESCO Associated Schools.

> " Of course it's going to make me look forward to being old enough to vote. We're really lucky to have a chance to make a decision about the future of Québec, Canada and our city. Of course we must take this opportunity, and this is where we practice. "
>
> Étienne-Alexandre, Secondary V,
> Collège Saint-Charles-Garnier

> " *Why are you involved in your school's student council?*
>
> To make changes to my school that will lead to improvements and also improve the life of the students. "
>
> Brandon, Secondary IV,
> École régionale des Quatre-Saisons

---

37. At the Cité-école Louis-Saint-Laurent, the school parliament is modelled on a municipal council.

RECOMMENDATION

As part of the public consultation on the in-depth revision of the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program, and in light of the comments and observations set out above, Élections Québec makes the following recommendation:

Include a competency on the development of democratic citizenship in the revised ethics program.

This competency, coordinated with the *Québec Education Program* and the current objectives of the ethics program, namely the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good, could be worded as follows: *Constructs a democratic citizenship using ethics*.

To promote the acquisition of this new competency, the links between democratic values and processes must be made clearer. In addition, more opportunities must be created to experience democracy in everyday life, in the classroom, school and community. Several strategies designed to train justice-oriented citizens also match the current goals of the ethics program: teaching students to ask questions, bringing them into contact with multiple outlooks, debating controversial current issues, concentrating on the local level and encouraging political discussion.[38]

One crucial aspect will be to train and equip the people responsible for the program to translate the goals into actual learning. Age-appropriate teaching guides, pedagogical materials and opportunities for involvement at all school levels will be needed to turn good intentions into actions.

Some initiatives already exist, and simply need to be publicized and extended. In this way, schools will be able to offer all students an equal opportunity to learn about and enjoy a range of experiences connected with democratic citizenship. Schools could, for example,

> " I didn't want to come to school just for class, but also to get involved, and contribute ideas and assistance. It's a big commitment, but I enjoy it! "
>
> Antoine, Secondary V student, Cité-école Louis-Saint-Laurent

- organize democratic debates in the classroom or school;
- establish a student committee allowing all students to experience the electoral process and representative democracy, along with methods for direct participation (student assembly, class council) and community engagement, when projects are implemented outside the school;
- allow students to contribute to the democratic structures of school governance by taking their place on the governing board or any other body where students can make their voice heard.

However, even if the ethics program is enriched with a specific competency on education for democratic citizenship, this will not be enough to ensure that students acquire all the fundamental learning connected with this theme. Some elements addressed in other contexts also need to be consolidated to reach all students. They include knowledge of democratic institutions (in the history and citizenship education program) and experience of representative democracy (through the student council).

---

38. For more information on these strategies, see the work of Westheimer cited above (2019, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Considering the research completed on this topic and the observations made in the field, Élections Québec believes that education for democratic citizenship must be integrated into the schooling of all students in Québec.

To ensure that the integration is successful and has the planned effect, certain conditions must be assured. This brief mentions some of them: training justice-oriented citizens; beginning at an early age; training all students; including all types of knowledge; allowing students to learn about and experience democracy at school; involving all players inside and outside the school; training and equipping school staff.

In addition, to ensure that education for democratic citizenship is deployed in all its dimensions, and not just in terms of knowledge, an ongoing effort must be made in addition to the integration of the theme in the new ethics program.

This is why Élections Québec calls on all stakeholders in youth-sector education (education community, parents, community organizations, institutions, etc.) to unite their forces to ensure that all students in Québec learn about and experience democratic citizenship at all steps in their schooling.

All driving forces in society must come together to give schools the necessary support, including pedagogical tools and democratic opportunities. This will ensure that they can fulfill their mission and help them make education for democratic citizenship a reality in each student's schooling. The knowledge acquired and competencies developed will then ensure that all citizens can participate actively in the growth of our democratic society throughout their lives.

> " When we reach the age of 18 and get the right to vote, we are dealing with an important decision-making power! And making decisions with no markers and no knowledge undermines our freedom of choice and freedom of expression. "
>
> Kelly, age 17, Deux-Montagnes

Education for democratic citizenship is a responsibility borne by all players in society. Each person and each organization can make a contribution. Élections Québec will also continue its efforts in this area.

APPENDIX 1 Élections Québec programs and initiatives in the field of democracy education

☑ **Election simulations, part of the Voters in Training program**

During municipal and provincial elections, Élections Québec gives elementary and secondary schools, as well as youth organizations, a chance to conduct an election simulation. The program is offered free of charge throughout Québec, in English and French (under the name *Électeurs en herbe*). It includes a pedagogical component. Teachers have access to activities that they can use in class. Students can learn to distinguish between the various levels of government (federal, provincial, municipal and school board), define their own position on various social issues, develop their critical thinking and discover various ways to get involved in their community. In the fall of 2018, over 169,000 young people took part in the program and used some of the pedagogical materials.

☑ **Small polling stations, part of the Voters in Training program**

During a provincial election or by-election, children can use small polling stations to vote alongside their parents. At the last provincial elections, almost 180,000 young people had a chance to vote, in all electoral divisions in Québec, just like their parents. They answered a question on democracy: why do you think it is important to vote?

☑ **Vox populi : Ta démocratie à l'école !**

Vox populi is a program offered jointly by Québec's National Assembly, the Fondation Jean-Charles-Bonenfant and Élections Québec. It helps elementary and secondary schools establish a student council. In 2019-2020, the program has 231 member schools, with almost 3,000 elected student representatives. The members of the *Vox populi* team travel throughout the year to all corners of Québec to provide training sessions for elected student representatives, teachers who supervise student councils, and school staff members. Via their student councils, member schools give their students an important voice in decisions about school life. The student representatives are elected by their peers and gain an active understanding of democracy and the decision-making process by getting involved in projects that will make a difference in their school.

☑ **Behind the scenes of an election**

During a by-election, Élections Québec gives secondary school students in the electoral division concerned a chance to see behind the scenes of an election. On polling day, the students who register for the program can closely observe all the steps in the voting process. This helps them understand the work of each person involved in the operation.

☑ **Voting in Québec**

This program targets companies, francization classes, social and occupational integration organizations, vocational training centres as well as community organizations working with immigrants, youth age 16 and over and individuals undergoing social or vocational integration. Upon request, members of the Élections Québec democracy education department will travel to any place in Québec to offer an introduction to Québec's electoral system and the exercise of the right to vote.

☑ It's your turn

This project encourages young people to proudly celebrate getting the right to vote. A few months before their 18th birthday, all young people in Québec receive a personalized letter urging them to check that they are registered on the list of electors in order to vote for the first time when an election occurs. The letter contains a unique access code giving the young person access to an exclusive website that posts debates and testimony from other young people. Site users can also register to receive a text message reminding them to vote in the next election.

☑ A la carte educational activities

Élections Québec develops educational activities on an ongoing basis to help integrate democracy education into a range of school programs. The activities address various topics, including the powers of each level of government, the operation of democratic institutions, the right to vote, and citizen participation. The activities are designed for elementary school and secondary school students. They are available online at **www.electionsquebec.qc.ca/ZED**.

☑ Partnerships and events

Élections Québec takes part in conventions, symposiums and fairs to meet with professionals working in the field of education. It also works closely with various partners with a direct interest in democracy, such as the Institut du Nouveau Monde, with which Élections Québec has organized various events, including the *Écoles de participation citoyenne*. Élections Québec participates in work to make immigrants more aware of democracy, along with other provincial and federal organizations with responsibility for elections, and partners with research teams and community organizations to help modernize democracy education practices.

Competencies in the *Québec Education Program* with a direct link to citizenship education and democracy education

Program	***Ethics and Religious Culture*** Taught from the 1st year of elementary school to the 5th year of secondary school, except for the 3rd year of secondary school
Competency	Reflects on ethical questions
Components	• Analyzes a situation from an ethical point of view; • Examines a variety of cultural, moral, religious, scientific or social references; • Evaluates options or possible actions.
Competency	Engages in dialogue
Components	• Organizes his/her thinking; • Interacts with others; • Develops a substantiated point of view.

Program	***History and citizenship education*** Taught from the 3rd year of elementary school to the 2nd year of secondary school
Competency	Constructs his/her consciousness of citizenship through the study of history
Components	• Seeks the foundations of his/her social identity; • Considers the factors that govern social participation; • Understands the purpose of public institutions; • Establishes the contribution of social phenomena to democratic life.

Program	***Geography*** Taught from the 3rd year of elementary school to the 2nd year of secondary school
Competency	Constructs his/her consciousness of global citizenship
Components	• Examines human actions in terms of the future; • Evaluates solutions to global issues; • Shows the global nature of a geographic phenomenon.

Program	***Linguistic, academic and social integration***, at the elementary level Offered to non-Francophone immigrant students arriving in the education system
Competency	Become familiar with local culture
Components	• Get to know the academic system; • Learn about cultural diversity; • Explore and react to francophone culture.
Program	***Linguistic, academic and social integration***, at the secondary level Offered to non-Francophone immigrant students arriving in the education system
Competency	Integrate within academic system and Québec society
Components	• Come to terms with Québec realities; • Develop patterns of civic behaviour adapted to Québec society; • Adapt to Québec's academic practices.