

YOUTH PARLIAMENTS DISCUSSION – STEP UP BE HEARD (NT)



Parliamentary Education Services in the NT conduct a customised Youth Parliament program that we call *Step Up, Be Heard*. It directly targets Year 11 and 12 Legal Studies students, and is designed to fit into the Law Making – People, Processes and Structures unit within that subject.

From 1995 to 2008 our education unit worked directly with the YMCA to run a Youth Parliament program much like what is currently run in other jurisdictions.

In 2009, our former Speaker, Jane Aagaard, asked us to develop an alternative Youth Parliament to be completely run by our parliamentary education unit. She wanted a program that focussed on senior students and gave them the experience of performing a debate in the Chamber. The Speaker also asked if we could incorporate a political campaign and election process into the program to mirror what real life parliamentarians have to do to be allowed to debate in the Chamber. She then left the rest of the development of the program to us, which took over 12 months!

The development process was long and difficult, with many logistical hurdles to overcome. We had to set priorities to make sure we didn't get too overwhelmed by these difficulties. We had three main principles that guided us through the development phase. Firstly to separate the program into 2 distinct parts - the election campaign to be done entirely at the school with the assistance of the NT Electoral Commission, and the parliamentary debate, which would be prepared at the school but conducted at Parliament House.

Secondly, the program had to fit into the Legal Studies course (NT senior subjects follow the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) syllabus), and would therefore become part of the students' assessment. So every part of the program had to ensure that all students could be assessed on equal efforts, with no one role being significantly bigger or smaller than any other. Earlier ideas included students taking on the roles of chamber attendants, Serjeant-At-Arms, and the media, but these roles would not participate directly in the debate and therefore could not be assessed equally. This principle meant rules had to be broken. For example, while not all students would be elected in the first stage, all students had to be Members in the second stage.

Lastly, the program had to be flexible. Because of the length of class time the program would take up, teachers had to have some areas of individual control in order for it to work. Legal Studies class time is about 5 hours a week for a semester, and *Step Up, Be Heard* requires about 4 weeks, or 20 hours, of this semester. We felt it was important for teachers to have control over a number of aspects of the program so it could be tailored to meet their desired outcomes, as well as the unique needs of different students, teaching styles and school conditions. Also, with the program becoming part of the students' assessment, and the assessments being directed by the teacher, we wanted the teacher to be able to

design any assessment they wanted, without being locked into one that was attached to the program.

All through the development of the program we regularly met with a Year 11 and 12 Legal Studies teacher from Darwin High School who also happens to be one of our public tour guides. She agreed to let us run a pilot of the program with her Year 11 students the following year, and she was crucial in ensuring the program stuck to the course requirements and needs of teachers.

The final part of the development was coming up with a name, which was not easy! We did not want the name to include the words “youth” or “parliament” to clearly separate the program from the long running YMCA venture. We also wanted the name to highlight the two distinct stages that are included, as that is what sets this program apart from other similar programs. A former PES staff member came up with *Step Up, Be Heard*.

The basic structure of the first phase centres on an election campaign where students “Step Up” as either individuals or form parties (depending on teacher preference) to be elected. Students decide on their platforms and prepare their campaigns during class time, usually over two or three lessons. In the past, students have included PowerPoint presentations, posters and, this year, a rap song in their campaign speeches. This campaign speech usually forms the first assessment. In the pilot *Step Up, Be Heard*, the students created general platforms based on their personal interests, and last year and this year the campaigns centred around the already decided upon bill.

After the campaign speeches have been presented, the NT Electoral Commission conducts the election in the classroom. This is usually over a double lesson. The election has been run differently every year, with different teachers deciding how many electorates there would be, and how many candidates per electorate. There is usually a meeting with the teacher, PES and NTEC prior to the program starting where this is decided. Before Election Day, NTEC makes up the ballot papers for each electorate, and on the day set up voting screens and ballot boxes to look as much like the real thing as possible. Usually every student votes in every electorate because numbers are small. From the beginning, the idea was to present the election campaigns to other classes to increase the pool of voters, but it has proven to be very difficult to organise in a senior school. This year we managed to include one Year 10 class, but it was clear these students needed some electoral education before being involved.

Once the votes have been cast, the students assist with counting the votes and distributing preferences to learn how it is done. After repeating the process for each electorate, the students have a thorough understanding of preferential voting. The outcome for the winning candidates is decided by the teacher. This year and the first year, the party with the most winning candidates formed government. Last year, the winning candidates took on the leadership roles on both sides or became the independent. Parties were then formed around who agreed with the leaders on the bill.

The second stage requires all students to write a speech for or against the decided bill in order to “Be Heard” during a debate in the Chamber. The bill is always decided by the

students (either before or after the election as decided by the teacher), and is therefore a topic of their interest. The three bills that have been debated so far are:

1. A Bill for an Act to introduce a zero tolerance policy in regard to youth crime, to introduce increased and harsher sentencing in place for those who offend, and to introduce parental education for those whose children are repeat offenders.
2. A Bill for an Act to introduce a compulsory system whereby all 15 year old Territorians must work or volunteer three hours per week.
3. A Bill for an Act to introduce same-sex marriage and divorce.

Students are given class time to research and prepare their debate speeches, which becomes part of their second assessment. During this preparation time, a tour of Parliament House during a sittings period is also conducted. It is usually an extended tour, taking in some behind-the-scenes areas, and so far has always included meetings with Members. Another part of their preparation involves PES staff going to their classroom to do an abridged role play and also introducing the concept of Points of Order. Students are encouraged to use Points of Order during the debate, but have always been very shy and unsure about it. This year we showed students some footage from past sittings of four examples of Points of Orders being used, which seems to have been beneficial.

The debate takes place in the Chamber at Parliament House with the real Speaker presiding. Caroline Cavanagh, the Director of PES, has acted as the Deputy Clerk every year, and we have had the teacher or a colleague within the department act as the Clerk and Serjeant-At-Arms. The sitting usually goes for about two hours as every student must present their speech. Their presentation usually becomes part of the second assessment. The students are typically very nervous, but all have said they feel very privileged to have been able to speak in the Chamber, and to the real Speaker.

Since the pilot was run in the first semester of 2011 at Darwin High School, we have run it in Semester 1 of 2012 and 2013 at the same school, and each time with the Year 11 Legal Studies class. Each year, that subject has had a different teacher, and so each year it has been run slightly differently, but that was always the intention. At the end of every program we have sought formal and informal feedback from both the teachers and students, and have incorporated many of their comments and suggestions into the following year. Ideally we would like to run the program with other schools, but started with one school while still experimenting with the program's structure, and we knew that school would always have a sizeable Legal Studies class. There are only a small number of senior schools in Darwin, and not all of them offer this subject, or have sufficient numbers. However, now that we are more confident conducting *Step Up, Be Heard*, and most of the logistical difficulties have been resolved, we plan to promote the program to other schools from next year.