

When a week in politics is not a long time

Whatever happened to civics education, you know the stuff we used to learn at school about how the government works?

"It's alive and well," says Deb Parish from the Parliamentary Education Office. "It's just different now.

"Our emphasis is on teaching students how parliament works and equipping them with the skills that will enable them to become active participants in our community.

"It's more about students engaging in role plays than reading facts in text books. It's about getting them involved and keeping them interested."

As part of its civics strategy, the Parliamentary Education Office runs intensive week long programs in schools throughout Australia, taking students through the intricate processes involved in making the nation's laws. Students from Serpell Primary in Victoria were some of the most recent to find out that when you are learning about the operations of parliament, a week is not a long time in politics.

"The program we ran at Serpell introduced students to the full gamut of activities involved with getting a law through parliament," says Deb Parish.

"It's challenging for the students, because in a week they have to come to grips with a complex process that in reality can take many months to work its way through parliament."

The programs are linked to the curriculum and heavily embedded in reality, so that students and teachers take them seriously. At Serpell, sand mining on Fraser Island was the issue selected for debate.

Step by step students found out about the way parliament would deal with such a contentious issue. They debated a 'proposed law' and sought to amend it. They investigated the issue through a committee process, preparing submissions, conducting a hearing and taking 'evidence'. Every step of the way, students were able to contribute their opinions, research the facts, prepare speeches, lobby for or against the proposal, and listen to other opinions.

"At the end of the week," says Deb Parish, "students had gained so much more than they would have if they had just read a book about parliament.

"They learned about communicating with others, so that all sides of a debate can be heard. They found out about getting facts and opinions in relation to an issue, and why both are important. And they learned to negotiate in order to achieve outcomes on which there can be broad agreement."

There's no doubt about what the students thought about the program. Among the many thank you letters received by the Parliamentary Education Office was the following comment: "I like to thank you again for teaching me because now I'm smarter than my parents at democracy."

With glowing references from students and teachers, the Parliamentary Education Office has been invited back to a second campus of the school to conduct a similar program. ■

For more information

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Above: Debating the 'bill' for sand mining on Fraser Island.

Below: Students at Serpell Primary School (Victoria) investigating the facts on sand mining. Photos: Parliamentary Education Office

