

Local Government and Public Services Committee

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Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly for Wales

Title: CEWC-Cymru's work in engaging young people in democracy

CEWC-Cymru is an educational charity that works with schools across Wales to develop global citizenship. We organise a core programme of conferences and competitions alongside classroom workshops and projects on aspects of Personal and Social Education (PSE). These projects have included developing critical thinking and disadvantaged youngsters' Key Skills. For the past three years CEWC-Cymru has also been involved in democracy work with the support of the Electoral Commission. During this time we have produced training packs and resources for teachers, encouraging democratic participation in schools.

We have found that participation in school councils is one of the best ways for young people to experience "local" governance. However, a school council should not be created without a supporting structure - an ethos of participation, which encourages all members of the school to voice their opinions. This attitude must be instigated and implemented by a school's senior management, but also requires the development of the students' participation skills.

Our experience is that schools are not looking for a rigid model from us, but training to help them develop school councils and a structure for participation that best fits their school. We have therefore produced a toolkit, which leads teachers through a series of questions and makes suggestions for increasing participation. The toolkit contains case studies of school councils in primary, secondary and a special needs schools, and a secure unit. Each has a different voting procedure but most echo the practices of either local or national government.

Skills based lessons should form a significant part of the teaching of democracy in schools. This is distinct from merely imparting knowledge. Encouraging voter turnout or participation relies upon young people not only knowing about democratic systems but also how these systems can be affected and changed by them. At present CEWC-Cymru is consulting with young people on the skills they need to participate at school, nationally and globally. We have found that communication skills are rated highly, but a significant number of young people also cite "intelligence" and "contacts" as the way to succeed in democracy in school. This year we will work to address the feeling that academic excellence or "who you know" are necessary for democratic participation.

Most students felt that wearing a wristband or t-shirt supporting a cause was 'democratic'. In fact, more felt that this was a democratic action than being a member of their school council, further illustrating that they more easily engage with issues and campaigns than official mechanisms for participation. This reflects the difficulties in raising turnout amongst young people. Whilst personality is a strong factor in school council elections with many students voting for their friends, it is campaigning issues that often attract young people outside the school environment.

Our current project will develop PSE lesson plans on the skills and knowledge necessary for participation. We are focusing on Communities First Areas as these areas have lower than average turnout rates for voters. The project culminates in two Model National Assembly Elections in March 2007, which will engage students with national issues and the democratic process. CEWC-Cymru has experience of running stimulus activities with its regular Model United Nations and Model National Assembly events. A teacher at Hillside Secure Unit, Neath, involved in the previous phase of our work, commented that:

"Training in democracy from a social skills perspective has been useful to highlight the need and consequences arising from either poor or good democratic processes. We will offer more practical based activities regularly to show pupils why institutions like the EU and Parliament exist to allow democracy and human rights to be protected."

We conclude that a combination of developing skills through practical activities, and training that is adaptable for each different school setting, provides a strong basis for developing participatory knowledge and action. It could also ultimately have a positive impact on voter turnout.