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# We're Here to Teach About Democracy Not Practise It. The Missed Potential of Schools as Democratic Spaces<sup>1</sup>

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In the fall of 2010 Emil Cohen, a student and soccer player at Northern Secondary School, in Toronto, received a powerful civics lesson. Cohen was selected to speak for the school soccer team at an assembly honouring athletics at the school. Although Cohen did want to celebrate the accomplishment of his fellow soccer players, he also wanted to express concern about the place of soccer in the school. Soccer had been struggling for several seasons. Coaches forfeited playoff games without telling team members, and a lack of coaches resulted in years with no team at all. That year, Cohen had written a letter to all teachers appealing for a coach, but no one came forward. A teacher did agree to act as advisor, and Cohen's father functioned as coach. The final indignity was when the team's last two home games were moved to another school so that the football team could have more time on the practice field.

Cohen decided to address some of these issues in his speech to the assembly but a few lines in was cut off, moved off the stage and subsequently suspended from school. The speech, which is reproduced below, was critical but neither inaccurate nor extreme. The school's response garnered a wave of criticism and protest from students, media personalities and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, but the school held firm with the principal insisting

the purpose of the assembly had been to "present a celebratory message, to celebrate successes" (Blatchford 2010; Dempsey 2010). Before he could return to school, Cohen was expected to contact the administration and coaches to communicate his contrition and willingness "to work with them and move forward, recognize the effort they put in every day" (Blatchford 2010).

### *Emil Cohen's Speech*

This year, the soccer season was one that easily surpassed the expectations of everyone involved with the team. Admittedly, these expectations were extremely low, due to the three years of abject failure that we have been subjected to, through no fault of our own.

We now have it instilled into us that "soccer" [at Northern] is synonymous with the word "unnecessary." We had this point made clearly to us during the season when our last two home games ... were moved to Forest Hill to allow the football team more field time.

Nevertheless, we had a team this year, due to the tenacity and perseverance of several players who took it upon themselves to do the phys ed department's job and find a coach. (*Toronto Sun* 2010)

Cohen and his fellow students learned a powerful civics lesson through this incident. Although going to school in a province where the high school civics curriculum at the time stated, “Students need to learn basic civic literacy skills and have opportunities to apply those skills meaningfully by participating actively in the civic affairs of their community” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2005, 63); Cohen and his peers learned that “their community” apparently did not include school. They also learned that good citizens of the school are not meaningful participants but mouthpieces for the institution, mandated not to speak for themselves but, rather, “to present a celebratory message.”

This may seem a harsh judgment, but examples of students’ voices being stifled in schools and school systems are easy to come by, and evidence suggests that these contextual civics lessons are far more powerful than those delivered through the curriculum (Sears and Perry 2000; Herriot in press). Despite social studies curricula across the country that focus on the development of active, engaged citizens and several provincial initiatives intended to foster extra-curricular student participation, such as Speak Out Alberta, our research and that of others indicates that students overwhelmingly feel powerless and voiceless at school. In the 1995 Hollywood movie, *Crimson Tide*, about an American nuclear submarine on the verge of conflict, the captain, played by Gene Hackman, dresses down his first mate who is contesting an order saying, “We’re here to preserve democracy, not to practice it.” It seems to us, this is an echo of the position schools and school systems across Canada take: We’re here to teach about democracy, not practise it.

## Young People as Democratic Agents of Change

For many years our research team has studied the way students and teachers understand key ideas related to democratic citizenship such as democratic participation, ethnic diversity and the role of dissent in a democracy. This work is in response to the pervasive consensus across the democratic world that consists of four elements: (1) a sense of crisis about the state of democratic citizenship; (2) a belief that the crisis can and should be addressed by effective citizenship education; (3) a commitment to a largely civic republican conception of citizenship; and (4) a move toward what are generally regarded as constructivist approaches to teaching and learning as best

practice in citizenship education (Hughes and Sears 2008; Hughes, Print and Sears 2010; Peterson 2011).

The driving force for this consensus is a sense of crisis or, more accurately, overlapping crises in democracies around the world about the disengagement of citizens from participation in even the most basic elements of civic life. This concern is commonly expressed in both academic literature and popular media and is often called a “democratic deficit” (Cook and Westheimer 2006, 349). A number of critics have questioned the degree to which these crises accurately reflect the nature of young citizens’ knowledge about and engagement in civic processes but, nevertheless, they permeate literature and policy statements in the area of civic education (for example, McAllister 1998; Sears and Hyslop-Margison 2007, Chareka and Sears 2006).

Canada has been no stranger to rising dismay over the disengagement of young citizens or an increasing focus on civic or citizenship education to address that disengagement. In 2011 the Canadian Political Science Association gave its Donald Smiley Prize for the best English language book in Canadian politics and government to Paul Howe (2010) for his book, *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians*. In this substantial study, Howe argues that “at least one-third of Canadians under thirty, and probably slightly more, have largely checked out of electoral politics” (p 21). For Howe, declining voting rates are not the whole story but “the canary in the disengagement coal mine” (p 8), signalling much more pervasive disengagement.

Canada has also been part of the worldwide trend to develop a civic republican approach to citizenship education, emphasizing both responsibility and agency as a vehicle to address the perceived disengagement crisis. Social studies curricula across the country stress the education of critical and engaged citizens with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to positively shape their communities, provinces, nation and, indeed, the world. For example, the role of social studies in Alberta is to develop “the key values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes necessary for students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world” (Alberta Education 2005, 1).

It is all well and good to teach young people about civic engagement but if, like Cohen, their efforts to engage at school are continually squelched, it may all be for naught. As a report on citizenship education for the European Union said, “The most powerful

lessons that teachers and schools teach their pupils arise from the way they act and behave, not from what they tell them” (Harrison and Baumgartl 2002, 33). So how are Alberta schools acting as sites of citizenship? Do students feel like they have the opportunity to engage in democratic processes in their schools and school systems? Or are they like the crew on the *Crimson Tide*, learning about democracy but not practising it? Some of our recent research provides at least partial answers to these questions and we will turn to that now.

## Student Voice in Alberta<sup>2</sup>

The research reported here is part of a larger study examining how Canadian students in the Maritimes and Alberta understand democratic participation. The study was conducted in two phases, which included surveying almost 2,000 Grade 12 students: 858 in Alberta and 1,050 in the three Maritime provinces. The survey was followed up by qualitative interviews with about 35 Grade 12 students in each of the jurisdictions. Both the survey and the interviews included direct questions about the students’ experience of democracy in their schools. This article focuses on our preliminary analysis of responses to those questions.

### Student Profiles

Before looking at how students feel about the democratic climate of their schools, it is important to point out that the students who responded to the questionnaire were not particularly disaffected or marginalized. Overwhelmingly they reported themselves as proud and patriotic English-speaking Canadians from middle-class families who do well in school and get along with their parents and teachers. More than 90 per cent reported being born in Canada (80 per cent of parents born in Canada as well), and 95 per cent speak English as a first language at home.<sup>3</sup> Those parents and students who were not born in Canada come from every region of the world with no particular area being dominant. The largest group came from East and Southeast Asia, with about 4 per cent (of the total sample) for parents and 2 per cent for students, and the next largest group emigrated from Western Europe, with 3 per cent for parents and less than 1 per cent for the students. Approximately 6 per cent of students identified themselves as Aboriginal, which is a fair bit higher than the 3.8 per cent of Aboriginal people in the Canadian population as reported in the 2006 Census, but that difference

might be at least partly explained by relatively high birth rates and consequently higher numbers of young people among Aboriginal groups (Statistics Canada 2009a and b).

The students located themselves and their families solidly within the middle class. Slightly over 50 per cent of parents have some form of postsecondary education, and skilled trades and professional work are by far the largest areas of reported employment. Students reported that only 4.4 per cent of fathers and 15.2 per cent of mothers were not in the labour force in some capacity.

Overall, school and home seem to be positive places for these students. More than 70 per cent said they like school, with just over 90 per cent ranking their general academic performance as average or above with almost 82 per cent rating themselves that way in subjects related to the study of Canadian government. These young people were strikingly sanguine about their relationship with teachers. Ninety-seven per cent of females and 92 per cent of males said they get along with teachers satisfactorily or very well, with almost two-thirds of females (65.5 per cent) and well over half of males (56.6 per cent) placing themselves in the higher of those categories. In addition to getting along with their teachers, the students reported significant agreement with their parents’ political views, as they perceive them. Well over one-third reported often or always agreeing with their parents’ political views, with only about 1 in 5 reporting they rarely if ever agreed with their parents’ views. In considering the results reported below, then, it is important to remember the respondents are not overly cynical outsiders but, as we have characterized them elsewhere, “extremely mainstream” (Sears et al 2012).

### Questionnaire Findings: Voiceless Members of Society

Our preliminary findings from this study suggest that students in Alberta feel a pervasive sense of voicelessness in terms of society generally and their schools in particular. In some ways they are considerably more cynical about student government and schools as democratic communities than their counterparts in the Maritimes.

The students in this sample from both the Maritimes and Alberta show high levels of support in principle for key democratic ideas and processes such as a free press; free, fair and regular elections; and citizen engagement in both formal and informal political processes such as voting and working for change in other ways, for example volunteering. The majority

also believe the political system should be equally open to people from diverse backgrounds. Attitudes change, however, when students are asked to move from abstract to more focused statements about democracy as practised in Canada, at least at the federal level. Here we find very low levels of interest and high levels of cynicism.

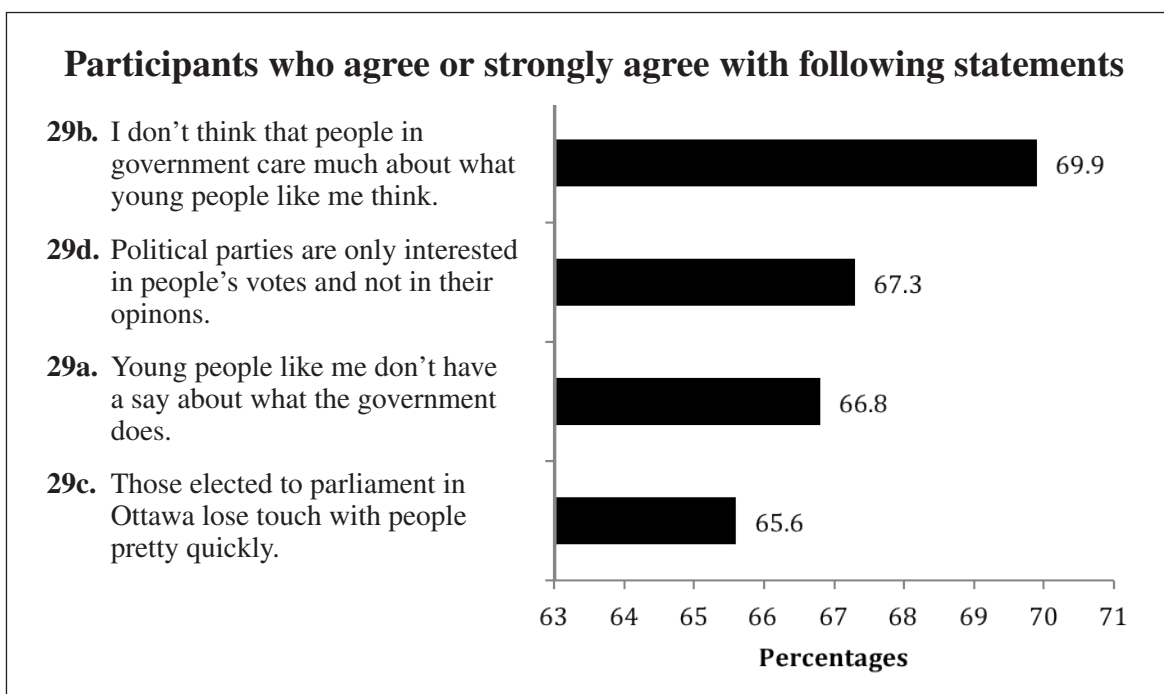
Less than one-third (32.9 per cent) of the students expressed a particular interest in politics generally, with only 6.9 per cent saying they had an active interest in politics. This closely mirrors interest in the Canadian federal government in particular, with 30.6 per cent of respondents saying they are fairly interested in what goes on at that level and only 6.2 per cent indicating they are very interested. Close to two-thirds (63.2 per cent) indicate they have little or no interest in government at the federal level in Canada.

This general lack of interest carries over to their attitudes toward voting. A vast majority of the students said it is important to vote (92.1 per cent of females and 85.9 per cent of males), but many fewer find the prospect of voting in a Canadian election particularly interesting. A little less than half (43.3 per cent) of respondents said they found it personally interesting that they would someday vote in a federal election, and when asked to compare it to other teenage rites of passage, such as graduating from high school, getting a driver's license or legally consuming

alcohol, first-time voting comes in dead last by a long shot.

This disaffection with government is just as pronounced when students are asked to consider the degree to which politicians consider the views of citizens, particularly young ones. Almost two-thirds (65.6 per cent) agreed that federal politicians are out of touch with people generally and even more concurred with a questionnaire item that read, "political parties are only interested in people's votes and not in their opinions" (see Figure 1). These students have even less confidence that legislators care about the opinions of young people, with about two-thirds agreeing that young people do not have a say in what government does. Almost 70 per cent of students said government does not really care about the views of young Canadians.

The students in our sample are quite supportive of key aspects of democracy and open, at least in theory, to wide participation of diverse groups in political and community processes. They exhibit, however, low levels of interest in and enthusiasm for Canadian government in general and voting in particular. They show high levels of cynicism about politicians and low levels of confidence in their own potential to shape political discourse or the direction of government. Overall they display a considerable degree of what some have called "disaffection with politics and government" (Howe 2010, 36).



**Figure 1: Young People's Attitudes About the Responsiveness of Federal Politicians**

## Questionnaire Findings: Voiceless in Schools

When we turn to an examination of how students feel about the potential for democratic engagement in schools, the picture is even bleaker. Respondents were asked to answer the question: Does your current school have elections for student government/representatives? We thought elections for high school student governments were a matter of course and were surprised when two-thirds of students responded no to this question. We were even further surprised when

we broke down the numbers by region to find that less than one third of Alberta students said their school had elections for student government compared to almost 90 per cent of Maritime students who responded the same way.

When asked about a range of elements related to school elections, such as whether or not everyone can vote, anyone can run or if elections are carried out democratically, students in Alberta respond lower in every area than students in the Maritimes (see Figure 3) and in some cases much lower. For example, less than half of Alberta students report that everyone

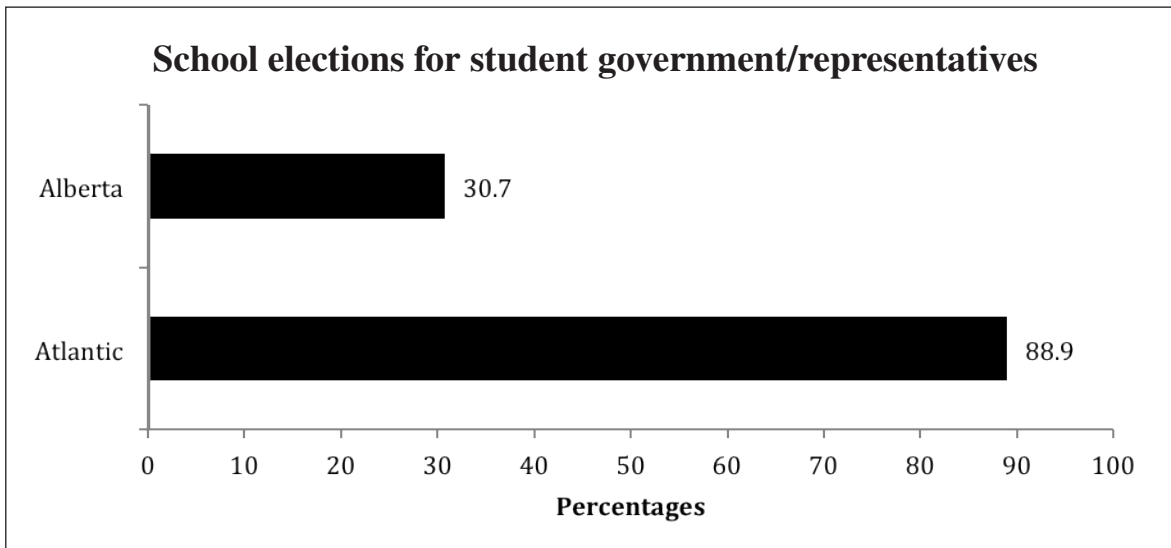


Figure 2: Elections for Student Government

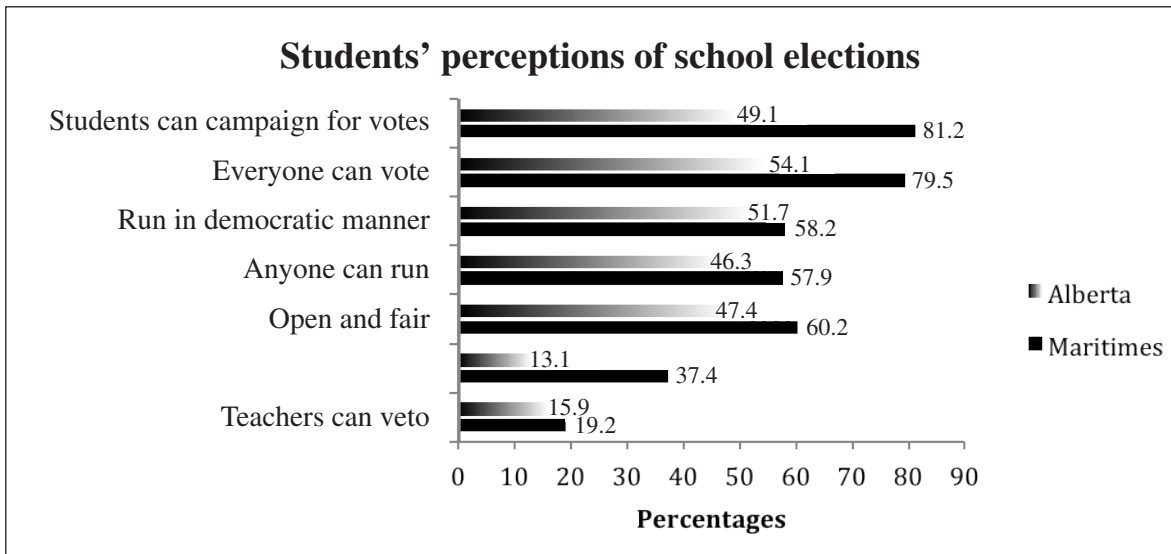


Figure 3: Student Perceptions of the Elements of School Elections

can vote in school elections compared to close to 80 per cent in the Maritimes. Sixty per cent of Maritime respondents felt school elections are open and fair, but less than half of Alberta students felt the same way. Students in both regions felt that their peers are generally uninterested in student elections, but even in this category Maritime students are much more optimistic than those from Alberta. Clearly, the Alberta respondents are much more cynical about student government than their Maritime counterparts.

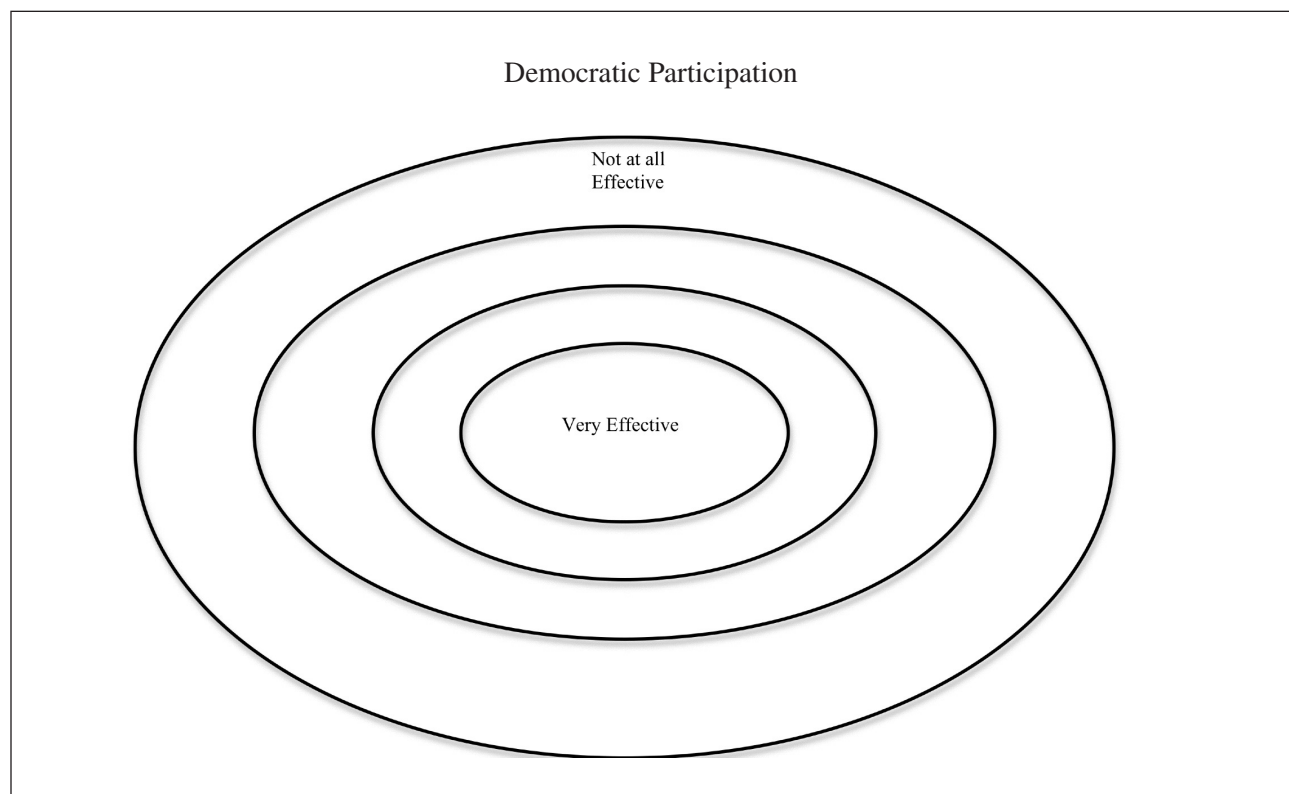
### Qualitative Data—Voicing Concerns over Voicelessness

Interviews with students confirmed their sense of voicelessness at school. The interviews took place in two phases. In the first, focus groups of three to five students were given a list of cards with various forms of civic engagement written on them (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup> They were asked to discuss and arrange these cards on a set of concentric circles with “very effective” written in the centre circle and “not at all effective” written on the outer circle (See Figure 4.). Following the activity, the interviewer conducted a focus-group debriefing to clarify the reasons for their choices.

In the second phase, students were interviewed individually about the likelihood of them engaging in any of these forms of democratic participation. To begin this activity, they were asked to arrange the same cards (plus any their group had added) on a

**Table 1: Forms of Civic Engagement**

Violent protest
Peaceful protest
Signing/circulating petition
Voting
Joining a political party
Boycotts
Joining a social network group to promote a cause
Writing a letter to the newspaper
Contacting an elected official
Strikes
Volunteering
Student government
Organizing an event



**Figure 4: First Interview Activity**

similar set of circles except this time the movement was from “things I would definitely do” in the centre to “things I would never do” on the outside. Students engaged in a “think aloud” procedure where they talked through their placement of the cards and following this, an interview was conducted to further explore their reasons for the decisions they made.

In terms of effectiveness (phase one of the study), “participating in student government” was ranked last of all 13 items (Table 1) in all of the group placements from Alberta. Overall, students felt it was the least effective of all the means listed for making change. However, in the second interview, most students placed participating in student government near the centre saying it was something they had done or would consider doing. If students considered participating in student government as ineffective, why did they still participate (or indicate a willingness to participate) in it?

In our conversations with students, we noticed some recognition that students could learn something about democratic processes by participating in student government. When asked about the value of student government, for example, one young woman replied, “It helps people realize how complicated it actually is to run the government and get stuff done.” Another gave a similar but more detailed response: “If a student runs for a position in student government, then they realize that they have to cater to things, like, the students, not necessarily what they want. . . . Sometimes it’s really frustrating when you want something done but nobody else wants it done and you get voted out. But that’s democracy, quote unquote, I guess.”

Beyond this acknowledgement that there might be some learning to be gained through the process of participating in student government, students overwhelmingly told us that the enterprise was phony and more about toeing the administration line than listening to students. In the words of one young man: “You’re just basically going in there [student government] and saying, ‘Okay, we’re going to keep the status quo. How do we go about keeping the status quo?’” Another put it very bluntly:

In [school] you vote for . . . one class rep and then a president and the treasurer, vice-president and you never see, like, anything again. Like, you can talk to them to suggest stuff, but you never get to have any say in the decisions or anything. *I think most of it’s pretty much shot down by the administration anyway.* (Emphasis ours)

In the face of this widespread disparagement of student government as effective for anything beyond

planning social events, we often asked interviewees how they might go about making change in their school if a rule or policy concerned them. Most said there really was no way they could think of, or no systematic way at least. Some acknowledged that a trusted teacher might take up a cause but that was rare. One young woman summed up the general feeling in her plea for some kind of system that took student voice into consideration.

Even though we have a school government and stuff it has nothing to do with our own Canadian government or anything to do with Alberta. I think something that would help me participate more in the government and get my voice across is if they introduce something to schools, where the students can make the change too. I don’t think our voices get heard as well as they should be.

Clearly the Grade 12 participants in our study from Alberta feel a pervasive sense of powerlessness in their schools even though the social studies curriculum and schooling more generally officially focused on fostering engaged citizenship. We acknowledge that student perceptions might not always be a fair reflection of reality—that some schools might be doing more to listen to students and take their ideas seriously than they are given credit for—nevertheless, perceptions this widespread and strongly held are important to consider. There is a plethora of international research to indicate that “Schools that operate in a participatory democratic way, foster an open climate for discussion within the classroom and invite students to take part in shaping school life are effective in promoting both civic knowledge and engagement (Torney-Purta et al 2001, 176).

## Possible Ways Forward

The bad news is that Alberta—all of Canada, in fact—lags significantly behind other parts of the world in paying attention to the contexts of civic education in addition to the curriculum (Hughes and Sears 2006; Hughes, Print and Sears 2010). The good news is that Alberta and Canada lag significantly behind other parts of the world in paying attention to the contexts of civic education, so there are a number of models on which to draw. Space does not permit detailed consideration of those here but suffice it to say they address contextual issues at three levels: the classroom, the school and the wider culture.

England provides the most comprehensive example of the first two. Along with making citizenship part of the national curriculum in 2001, England also

mandated the inclusion of students in meaningful governance roles in classrooms and schools. Not only was this mandated, but a system of monitoring and inspection was also established to ensure it took place. The national 10-year Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study, for example, developed a set of measures to evaluate the level of democracy in classrooms and schools and reported these regularly (Cleaver et al 2005).

In the United States, the Education Commission of the States has sponsored work on evaluating democratic practices in schools and published ideas that might be adopted by others (See Table 2). It should be noted that as in England, some of these measures address democracy for teachers as well as for students.

Finally, there is the wider policy context that does not seem to be getting attention anywhere. Herriot (in press) studied student responses to Bill 44 in Alberta, a controversial measure granting parents the right to exclude their children from the discussion of some sensitive topics in schools. Herriot makes the point that although the controversy raged for some time, students were never consulted in any meaningful way on how they felt, even though many had strong and well-thought-out points of view on the matter. This kind of exclusion is counter to Article 12 of the

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child which reads, “Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account.”

## Conclusion

Talk of democratic schools often sends shivers up the spines of administrators and teachers. They imagine disciplinary chaos and students voting to eliminate math from the curriculum. That is not what we mean at all. As Herriot (in press) points out, “Student voice with meaningful authority does not, however, preclude adult guidance and involvement.” A check of any of the initiatives discussed above will indicate that a meaningful student voice does not come at the expense of well-run and productive schools. In fact, research indicates that schools will be more productive if students feel they are valued parts of the community and not just passive recipients of adult authority and advice.

Democratic schools might just be administratively pragmatic as well. The principal of Northern Secondary School in Toronto was embarrassed that Cohen criticized the school in a public forum, but Cohen’s critique was mild compared to the street protests and petitions that ensued after his suspension. Popular comedian Rick Mercer even weighed in about the issue on Twitter—and not in favour of the school. We suspect the embarrassment to the school was much greater as a result of stifling Cohen’s participation than it would have been had the school embraced it. There are a number of jurisdictions trying to find creative ways to give students a voice in their education, and it makes good sense for Canada, and Alberta in particular, to get on board.

**Table 2: Selected Aspects of Democratic Schools**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students on hiring committees for teachers, principals and superintendents</li> <li>• Students on school planning committees and leadership teams</li> <li>• Student representatives on school boards and board committees</li> <li>• Students on curriculum committees</li> <li>• Student involvement in planning their own programs particularly through internships and individualized studies programs</li> <li>• Training provided to student representatives on boards and committees</li> <li>• Training for principals on facilitating public dialogue to encourage wide community involvement in schools</li> <li>• Controversial and political issues relevant to the curriculum are dealt with, including using visiting speakers</li> <li>• Staff makes decisions by consensus</li> </ul> <p>Adapted from Miller 2004</p>
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## Notes

1. With grateful acknowledgement to Keith Owre, graduate student assistant, for help with the statistical analysis.

2. The study was conducted in the Maritimes and Alberta. Some of the quantitative data refers to both places, and where that is true, it is indicated in the paper. All of the quotes from interview transcripts come from Alberta students.

3. According to the 2006 census 22.2 per cent of the Canadian population was foreign born (Statistics Canada 2009a), and 66.7 per cent used English most often at home, with 21.4 per cent using French, the other official language, most often at home (Government of Canada 2012).

4. Each group was also provided with blank cards on which they could add their own forms of participation. For consistency we have only used the ones provided by the researchers for this paper.



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