



Saskatchewan program brings civic education to higher level

Province's teachers view legislative process, meet with local legislators

by Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly Speaker Corey Tochor (speaker@legassembly.sk.ca)

Now planning for its 19th year, the Saskatchewan Social Sciences Teacher's Institute on Parliamentary Democracy has provided nearly 400 teachers from across the province an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the province's unicameral legislative process by observing it in action.

The SSTI, an intensive five-day professional development program hosted by the Office of the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, is offered to all teachers across the province.

Started by Speaker Glenn Hagel in 1999, the program was modeled after the Federal Teachers Institute, launched in 1996 by the House of Commons in Ottawa.

Federal program inspires provinces

After the inaugural federal institute, the six Saskatchewan teacher participants contemplated the prospect of undertaking a similar process focusing on the provincial governance system. This group approached Speaker Hagel, who eagerly endorsed the idea and committed staff resources to making it a reality.

The SSTI was the very first provincial teacher's institute in Canada. Most provinces now offer a similar program to their teachers, with some of these programs having been modeled upon Saskatchewan's.

Teachers are invited to apply by submitting a letter of interest as well as a letter of support from their principal stating why they should be considered as a candidate. There is minimal cost to attend, as all accommodations, food and travel are supported by the speaker's office.

Once the SSTI begins, the agenda proceeds at a rapid pace with a steady schedule of tours, briefings and seminars, including briefings with the lieutenant governor of Saskatchewan, the speaker, cabinet ministers, MLAs, chiefs of staff, clerks, officers of the Legislative Assembly, and

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members of the media. The institute is designed so that the teacher participants are emulating the day of an MLA during session.

The conference starts early in the morning and events take place on into the evening, depending on the sessional schedule. Upon their arrival, the institute provides teachers with a wide array of resources for their reference, including information about parliamentary democracy, law, legislation, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the various parliamentary offices and roles, and other subjects of interest.

Teachers are provided with an orientation binder of supplementary materials designed to be adapted to the classroom. In addition, the Ministry of Education gives a presentation on resources and curriculum connections, parliamentary democracy in the classroom, and citizenship.

Teacher participants also meet with representatives of other provincial offices such as Ombudsman and Elections Saskatchewan. They also have the opportunity to hear from the founder of CIVIX, a successful program in Canada designed to help teachers better engage their students in the parliamentary process. It provides teachers with resources, including polling stations and lesson plans for staging an exceptionally authentic and engaging mock election. Teachers report this to be a beneficial experience for their students.

On most evenings, the schedule concludes with a working dinner and an opportunity to debrief. Teachers are seated with the Legislative Assembly member from each of their respective constituencies (both for their residence and their school). This provides an opportunity for both the teacher and his or her MLA to discuss teachers' schools, their communities, and any concerns they may have.

Comments from MLAs and teachers have been positive about the arrangement. Teachers appreciate the chance to have an informal discussion with their elected representatives, all the while discovering that they too are human and work hard for the citizens of the province.

The MLAs also feel that this institute is valuable to them. It allows them a connection to teachers and their classrooms that they may not have otherwise, a chance to hear their concerns and to garner their suggestions about improvements to the education system. They find that they receive many repeat invitations from schools that have had teachers participate in the program.

'Mock parliament' a highlight

The teacher's learning experience is culminated in a mock parliament, following the exact proceedings that occur in the chamber, with the speaker presiding in his role. It is a unique experience that most say they will take back to their classroom. The mock parliament is filmed as a genuine parliamentary debate, and a DVD is made available to the teachers as a classroom resource.

Each year the institute's Steering Committee does an assessment after the program is completed. There have been tweaks and changes to the agenda over the years, but basically the program has been solid from its inception. Evaluation summaries from the participants include comments such as, "Don't change a thing. It is the best professional development program in Saskatchewan and it should not be missed by anyone who wants to teach their students what it means to be an engaged citizen." They feel enthusiastic and revitalized about teaching civics after completing the program.

Preparing for a program such as SSTI involves a lot of preparatory work and cooperation from the various bodies in the Legislative Assembly; however, the reward is great. The opportunity to share the behind-the-scenes workings and the valuable information about parliamentary democracy with our teachers, the leaders in our communities, is invaluable.

I am excited about being the Patron of the Saskatchewan Social Science Teachers Institute on Parliamentary Democracy. This program has become a Saskatchewan icon, and I hope to continue the tradition. I am looking forward to the institute's 20th anniversary in 2018. ★

Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly Speaker Corey Tochor was first elected to the assembly in 2012, representing the Saskatoon Eastview district. He was elected speaker in 2016.

Achievement levels of U.S. eighth-grade students on civics portion of National Assessment of Educational Progress

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Below basic
2014	2%	22%	51%	26%
2010	1%	21%	50%	28%
2006	2%	20%	48%	30%
1998	2%	21%	48%	30%

Submissions welcome

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