

Saskatchewan Teachers Observe Parliamentary Process in Action

Now in its 18th year, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy has given nearly three hundred teachers from across province the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the political system by observing it in action. Through meetings with the Lieutenant Governor, Speaker, Ministers, Caucus leaders, Whips, and Chairs, as well as with Private Members, media and the judiciary, the non-partisan professional development program provides teachers with an all-encompassing overview of the realities of democracy and its importance in our society, thereby equipping them with valuable knowledge to convey the issues and intricacies of modern Parliament to their students. The Institute also promotes the sharing of ideas, resources and methodologies for teaching about parliamentary democracy with fellow participants. In this article, the author recounts his experience as a teacher-in-training who participated in a recent edition of the program.

Eric Neudorf

When former Speaker Glenn Hagel launched the first Saskatchewan Teachers' Institute (SSTI) on Parliamentary Democracy in 1999, he created an opportunity for teachers to gain an unparalleled view into the parliamentary process. Prior to my own participation in the program, I had an avid interest in politics for years and had been to the Saskatchewan Legislature several times before; but the SSTI was an eye-opening experience for me.

The chance to observe what occurs behind the scenes in the Legislature is almost impossible to access except through this program, and there was much to learn from the opportunity. The divisions between the three branches of government – legislative, executive, and judicial – were clearly demarcated; I learned about the important roles non-elected officials hold in the process; and I observed the careful planning and cooperation required to make Saskatchewan's government an effective entity. All participants concluded that the

SSTI is arguably the best professional development available in Saskatchewan. It should not be missed by any educator who wants to learn how to better teach their students what it means to be an engaged citizen.

The five day Teachers' Institute proceeded at a rapid pace with a steady schedule of tours, briefings, and seminars. A Ministry of Education employee, Brent Toles, served as our guide and liaison during the Institute; he also led sessions on how to navigate the social studies curriculum by maximizing the use of materials available in the Ministry's extensive database. Teachers were also introduced to the co-founder of Student Vote Canada, Taylor Gunn, who led a session on youth engagement which provided outstanding materials for running mock elections and more. As the week progressed, teachers were briefed by professionals representing all roles and party affiliations on their functions within Saskatchewan's Legislative Assembly. These sessions culminated in a mock parliament, performed in the same Chamber where the MLAs themselves assemble, and presided over by Dan D'Autremont, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. The Institute was masterfully scaffolded so that by the time we entered the mock parliament all teachers understood the various roles they were playing and the rules to which they were required to adhere. The session was recorded for future use with our students, and abundant related teaching materials

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were provided. In all, the Institute created an experience which left teachers excited and informed about the parliamentary process and capable of passing on that knowledge and enthusiasm to their students.

Throughout the Institute, teachers were treated with dignity and respect, and they were given the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with parliamentary personnel. To achieve this end, hotel accommodations and meals were provided for the full five days. At the Legislature, MLAs and other professionals, including Ministers and Premier Brad Wall himself, took time from their busy schedules to meet with teachers and, in many cases, to hear their concerns as well. Several MLAs even joined the mock parliament to offer guidance and enjoyed themselves as we did our best impersonations of their debates in Question Period. Banquets hosted by Speaker D'Autremont and the Lieutenant-Governor were run with the same care and attention given to visiting diplomats. Speaker D'Autremont made a particular effort to make us feel welcome by inviting us to his office and joining us for evening socials. Through the relationship-building it promotes, the Institute is more than educational; it is a rare chance to network with teachers, politicians, and other professionals while being treated like an individual with a voice worthy of being heard.

I went to the Saskatchewan Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy as an engaged citizen, excited to network with other teachers, though uncertain of what I would learn. I departed feeling as though my view of democratic governance had been more than nuanced; it had been revolutionized. I set out to Regina with the sense that conflict between teachers and the government was almost natural. I returned home feeling valued and heard, with a renewed enthusiasm for teaching. These were the clear, observable outcomes of my attendance at the Institute. Teachers who wish to educate students about and engage them in the parliamentary process must first become educated and engaged themselves, and I am convinced that there is no better avenue for achieving this goal than the Saskatchewan Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy.

The itinerary and resources

The strength of the Institute as a professional development opportunity can be found in five key areas. First, teachers were equipped to return to classrooms with a variety of resources for teaching about democracy. Second, tours familiarized teachers with



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Eric Neudorf attended the Saskatchewan Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary Democracy in 2014.

the settings where government work is accomplished. Third, briefings acquainted teachers with the roles of individuals in the parliamentary process. Fourth, the observation and imitation of Chamber proceedings solidified what teachers had learned in abstract during the tours and briefings. And finally, both formal and informal social gatherings enabled teachers to network with officials, politicians and other teachers. These five elements of the Institute can each bear further exposition and assessment.

Resource gathering

Orientation and Resource Fair

Upon arrival, the Institute provided teachers with a wide variety of resources, mainly, but not exclusively, for teaching about parliamentary democracy. I came away with a box of materials about law and legislation, the RCMP, the various parliamentary offices and roles, distinctions between jurisdictions, building edifices, and more. The Institute also provided participants with an orientation binder that included supplementary materials that could be adapted for the classroom.

Curriculum Connections

During our initial session, a Ministry of Education representative who had been involved in the development and application of Saskatchewan's new Social Studies curricula briefed us on how to apply the curricula to our classrooms. An abstracted list of curricular outcomes for each grade that are related to engaged citizenship and, by extension, democracy, was particularly useful. It served as the framework to learn about materials available on the Ministry of Education's website: edonline.sk.ca. This website includes a useful videos database, *R.O.V.E.R.*, and a large magazine, journal, and newspaper archive. *Canadian Newsstand*, which allows access to past issues of newspapers from across the country, was particularly useful for lesson planning.

CIVIX

The Teachers' Institute invited Taylor Gunn, president of CIVIX, best known for its extremely successful Student Vote program, to lead a session on the materials and programs offered by his organization. CIVIX is a non-partisan charity organization whose mission is to transform students into engaged citizens, a goal that teachers can certainly consider congruent to their own purposes.

At the municipal, provincial, and federal levels, CIVIX provides materials and broader structures to involve students in the electoral process. It provides polling stations and lesson plans for staging an exceptionally authentic and engaging mock election. The results of elections in individual schools are then calculated in correlation with results from thousands of other schools across Canada. The students can see those national results televised or online when election day occurs. Statistics suggest that Student Vote promotes civic engagement not just for students but for parents as well because students return home to discuss political issues in anticipation of voting. Student Vote has also been remarkably successful in predicting actual election results in almost all cases, refuting the contention that students will necessarily replicate teachers' perspectives. Evidence suggests that the habits of voting and developing informed perspectives on politics are maintained when students leave school, increasing voter turnout in subsequent elections.

In addition to Student Vote, CIVIX offers other programs designed to engage students in the parliamentary process between elections. For example,

CIVIX acts as a liaison between teachers and local MPs to bring these parliamentarians into school classrooms for Rep Day. Another program, Student Budget Consultation, provides a series of lessons aimed at helping students understand government budgets. Data generated in classroom polls are then paired with the information offered by students from across Canada and presented through info-graphics that help students to think critically about the budgeting choices and priorities they have expressed.

Outreach Programs and Classroom Visits

Throughout the Institute, various outreach programs were offered to and modelled for teachers. Of special note is the program offered by the Office of the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. The Speaker is available to travel to the schools throughout the province to speak to classes from Grade Four to Grade 12 about the role of the Speaker in presiding over the Legislative Assembly. The current Speaker, Dan D'Autremont, is a talented individual who engages students with his clear, down-to-earth manner of presentation. During an hour and a half talk, the Speaker leads students in a question and answer period; then he presides as Speaker over a mock parliamentary debate. The program is intended as a capstone lesson, and students are expected to be prepared in advance. Arrangements can also be made to conduct the debate with students in the Chamber at the Legislative Building if the students will be in Regina. Having participated in a version of the outreach program as a part of the Teacher Institute, I can attest that enacting the mock parliament with all the proper decorum and procedures helped me to understand the parliamentary process with new clarity, and I was able to watch the House proceedings in the afternoon that followed as a relative expert. Had I been able to experience the mock parliament as a student, I have no doubt that my engagement in Saskatchewan politics would have been greatly enhanced.

A visit from the Saskatchewan Ombudsman, who advocates for individuals who feel they have been mistreated by the provincial government, is also available for booking. It is helpful for students, both citizens and non-citizens of Canada, to know that they have an advocate on their side when so many government services, including the Crown Corporations, affect their lives every day. Materials from the Ombudsman office include several case studies that would interest secondary students and which could be adapted for middle years as well.



Saskatchewan Speaker Dan D'Autremont briefing the SSTI participants on the role of the Speaker in the Chamber in 2014.

Elections Saskatchewan has two outreach programs available for schools: *Your Voice Matters* is a program partnering Elections Saskatchewan and the Diefenbaker Canada Centre for Grades 4 to 8. It focuses on Canada and Saskatchewan's political history. And Elections Saskatchewan worked with CIVIX to bring the Student Vote Program to Saskatchewan schools for the recent April 4th provincial election.

Tours

The Legislative Building

I've toured the Legislative building three times over the years, and there is always more to see. Touring the building not only allows students to see

democracy in action, it also makes for an excellent arts trip. Students can observe the architectural scale and beauty of the building, both of which are unrivalled in Saskatchewan. On this particular visit, I was struck by the quality and variety of art on display in the building. From the portraits of the Premiers, Speakers, and Lieutenant Governors, painted in a variety of styles, to the wide variety of modern art on display in the alcoves around the rotunda, to the murals, to the changing exhibits on the second floor, the Legislative building tour allows students to observe world-class art in a pristine setting. While a tour of the building is fabulous in itself, knowledge of the building's history, art, and layout can aid a teacher in preparing students for the experience if their class is planning a trip.

Courthouse

During a visit to the Court of Queen's Bench we received a briefing from Justice Ralph Ottenbreit that helped me to recognize the stabilizing role that the courts play in government by ensuring that the Legislative Assembly does not create laws that conflict with the already established legal system or the constitution.

Government House

Our visit to Government House was a highlight of the Institute. I did not realize that this grand building, former home of the Lieutenant Governor, was available for public visits, or that it even existed. I had always assumed that the Lieutenant Governor's role was a minor one in our province, but Government House certainly communicates the office's importance. The building is now used as a museum, office space, and reception hall in service of the Lieutenant Governor. Our visit was particularly special because we were received by the current Lieutenant Governor Vaughan Solomon Schofield and we were banqueted like visiting dignitaries. Schofield described the role of the Lieutenant Governor from her own point-of-view and her words convinced me of the importance of dividing the roles of head of government and head of state. Moreover, I have rarely felt so honoured as I did enjoying the delicious food and gracious hospitality in the banquet room at Government House.

Briefings

Briefings from a wide variety of individuals on their roles and offices in the workings of government made up the bulk of our experience at the SSTI, allowing us to obtain greater clarity on what actually happens in the Legislature. These were typically an hour in length and nearly everyone who has a role in government was represented. From the Clerks, advocates, and security who report to the Speaker, to Ministers and private members – both government and opposition – to legislative staffers to members of the media, we were given first-hand accounts of day-to-day operations in the legislature. Individuals from across the spectrum committed themselves to educating the teachers about the parliamentary process without succumbing to the promotion of their political opinions.

I was struck by how seriously these individuals take their jobs. They work incredibly hard – some described regular eighteen-hour days! – because

they love and believe in the work they do. I was also surprised by the collegial and cooperative tone between members who sit opposite one another and spend a good portion of time debating and arguing with each other. We often had representatives from the government and the opposition sitting side-by-side, describing their roles in the Legislature. They knew each other personally and, in almost all cases, we observed a mutual respect between opposing members that cannot be seen in Question Period. Finally, as the week progressed, I gained an appreciation for the complexity of what happens behind the scenes in the Saskatchewan Legislature. It takes tremendous organization and effort to maintain a united front in Question Period with clear goals and objectives for engagement with the opposing side. Clear channels must also exist for interaction between Ministers and private members so that the needs of constituents can be adequately addressed. In addition, it takes a small army of Ministerial staff to ensure that the work of the executive government can be carried out. These observations were made possible through a steady stream of briefings over several days that were supplemented by observing proceedings in the Legislative Assembly.

Chamber proceedings

Observations of Proceedings in the Legislative Assembly

Chamber proceedings are the focal point of the Legislative Assembly, if not where most of the work is done. We heard repeatedly that Question Period is "a theatre," so it was very informative to see the preparation for this spectacle. Nonetheless, our various briefings brought home for me the significance of all aspects of what happens in the Chamber. It is in the Chamber that visitors are recognized, achievements are honoured, laws are passed, decisions are defended, and accountability is maintained. Acquiring a better understanding of the behind-the-scenes activities that occur in the Legislative Building meant the Chamber proceedings took on greater significance. My experience affirms whether the students watch the Legislature's proceedings in person or enact mock parliamentary debates of their own, having more pre-existing knowledge about the parliamentary system will provide greater value of their experiences.

Mock Parliament

Our learning experience culminated in a mock parliament, following the exact proceedings which occur in Chamber. We were forewarned that this

experience was coming and given time over the five days of the Institute to prepare platforms, questions, and statements in advance. The experience was filmed, just as a genuine parliamentary debate would be, and the DVD can be used for the benefit of students, providing them with a personal connection to the proceedings in the House by allowing them to see their teacher playing them out. There were both speaking and non-speaking roles for participants, some scripted and some improvised, the same roles as one would find when the MLAs meet together. After experiencing the mock parliament, I would not want to take students to the House without first performing a mock parliament with them. To enact parliament allows one to follow the proceedings with far greater clarity.

Networking

One of the most valuable elements of the Institute was the opportunity to network with politicians and other teachers. The camaraderie we experienced as teachers, sharing ideas and concerns, was a refreshing experience that encouraged me to regard the quality of educators in this province more highly.

Banquets

On most evenings our schedule concluded with a banquet supper. The first night we were welcomed by Speaker D'Autremont to dine in the Legislative Building. This was a relatively informal chance to get to know the Speaker, the Directors from various departments and the Officers of the Legislative Assembly. I was seated with the Children's Advocate, Bob Pringle, whose role is to advocate on behalf of young people against actions of government which affect them unfairly. A few nights later, we dined at the Lieutenant Governor's banquet, which was attended by the Speaker, the Lieutenant Governor and her staff. Finally, on our last night of the Institute a closing banquet was held for us, attended by a variety of Ministers and MLAs. I was able to spend time meeting the Leader of the Opposition, the MLA for Saskatoon Nutana, and the Minister of Advanced Education.

Meetings

Formal and informal meetings afforded the opportunity to get to know MLAs on a personal level. Informal lunches were held in the Member's Dining room in the Legislative Building. Here we often had briefings over a meal, and were joined by various

MLAs who took the time to meet us before and after they presented their material. On nearly all occasions, MLAs seemed to take pleasure in meeting and listening to teachers. When the participants separated into groups to visit various Ministers in their offices, despite their busy schedules, the Ministers seemed to enjoy their time with us, making the visit as much a social pleasure as it was an educational opportunity. A particular joy for me was an invitation I received, mediated by the leader of our group, to visit an MLA who had known my family years ago. The MLA had worked with my uncle in the Legislature, and wanted to meet me before I left. We talked about the past and the future, and he finished our time together, nearly a half hour, by praying for me and giving me a gift. This encounter brought home for me the reality that these politicians are also people who care genuinely for the people of this province and who want to govern or hold the government to account to the best of their ability. It was a pleasure getting to know them.

Downtime

While networking with politicians was both a privilege and a joy, it was the time spent with teachers in the evenings that was most enjoyable. The institute attracts talented teachers from rural and urban Saskatchewan, from a variety of teaching backgrounds, and with a variety of political perspectives. Despite its diversity, the group bonded quickly, and we were able to spend the latter parts of our evenings laughing and having fun together. I enjoyed taking the time to become acquainted with other teachers, comparing contexts and concerns, struggles, strategies, and stories.

Conclusion

Upon completing the Saskatchewan Teachers' Institute on Parliamentary democracy, I can safely say that it is an unrivalled opportunity for professional development. The networking experiences, materials gathering, scouting, and learning which occurred are directly applicable to teaching the citizenship-related objectives outlined in school curricula. When participants gathered for a round-table meeting at the week's conclusion, all the teachers agreed that this was the single best professional development experience that they had ever been a part of. The sense of gratitude we experienced at having seen parliamentary democracy in action overcame what lingering cynicism and frustration we had brought with us. We all left feeling excited to pass on the knowledge we had gained to our students.