

(source: WanakaApp)

## MAC students take a course in civics 02 Jul 2017



Voter turnout among young New Zealanders is low. According to the Electoral Commission, in the 2014 General Election, voters aged 18 to 24 had a turnout of 62.73 percent, versus 88.06 percent in the 60-69 age bracket (our country's top voters), and 76.77 percent overall.

These figures are part of a general decline in voter turnout over time, with a New Zealand General Social Survey on why citizens chose not to vote finding the main reason for non-voting was that people "didn't get around to it, forgot or were not interested".

Is this political apathy reversible? Advocates of civil education think so, and Year 11 students at Mount Aspiring College are getting a chance to test this theory thanks to a pilot programme run through the LINK Upper Clutha community development scheme.

Facilitator Kathy Dedo, who is delivering a six-week 'Life Skills Citizenship and Community Belonging Module' as part of the Year 11 Life Skills class, said the course came about when she was talking with Deputy Principal Dean Sheppard as part of LINK's stakeholder interviews.

"We were talking about connecting with youth, and I asked him if the school had a course on citizenship. He said, 'No, do you want to teach one?'" she said.

The module, which is resourced through LINK, including funding from the Callis Charitable Trust, gives students the objective of: "Identify and understand the community you belong to and how you can make a difference in it. Look up and out."

"My interest is to get them looking beyond the immediate, and asking them to look at how they can connect with their community," Kathy said.

The course is delivered in six one-hour sessions:

'How community is created', in which students define what community means to them, present ideas for the future of the Upper Clutha and talk about how they can make a difference; 'How a community shares news and influences others, including a look at local media (the Wanaka App spoke to the class last week); 'How a community is governed', in which they learn about central and local government and the different roles they play; 'How a community supports its members', which includes a visit to Community Networks and learning about volunteering; 'How a community plans for its future', including looking at physical assets and infrastructure; and 'How a community is led', which looks at how local government elections and young people can be more involved.

Kathy said feedback from the students about how they felt about Wanaka included concerns about the high cost of living here and a lack of cheaper activities and shops. On a positive note, she said, they generally enjoyed living somewhere that was safe and not too big. "They like small," she said.

As for low voter turnout, she said students are often expressing variants on the feeling that “no one cares what we say” - a sense that young people have of not being part of a system which doesn’t care about them.

It is this issue that advocates of civics education, which a compulsory part of the New Zealand curriculum, would like to see addressed.

Kathy had a chance to meet one of the country’s strongest advocates of civics educations, Rhodes Scholar and author Max Harris.

She got in touch with Max when he was in Wanaka to speak at Aspiring Conversations. He connected her with Active Citizenship Aotearoa, a national group which promotes civics literacy as a way to encourage young people to become engaged citizens.

From the feedback Kathy has received so far, it sounds like the MAC programme is doing just that. On the last day of the module, she asks the students to write down some of the things they might do differently haven taken the class.

The answers they’ve given so far include “listen to the news more”, “coach a football team”, “speak up about the things I want to change in my community” and a simple “say ‘Hi!’” - good ideas for citizens of any age.

PHOTO: Wanaka App