

# Community Outreach: Bringing Parliament to Life

The Community Outreach program offered by the Parliamentary Protocol and Public Relations Branch of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario brings the experience of Queen's Park to communities and schools in a way that transcends financial and distance barriers. Participants get a hands-on experience learning about how Ontario's parliament works, the responsibilities of the three levels of government, and civic engagement.

## Chelsea Scherer

Learning the responsibilities of government and how the electoral and legislative process works is something every Ontarian should be familiar with. Unfortunately, travel costs preclude every resident from travelling to their federal, provincial and territorial assemblies to get a first-hand look at legislatures in action. To bridge this distance, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario has created the Community Outreach Program. Groups of children, young adults and ESL (English as a second language) learners have all gained an opportunity to learn the basics of parliamentary processes through this service. Shaped around the participating group's existing knowledge, the program aims to fill the gaps of what they don't know in an informative and entertaining way.

Since the first pilot project in December 2012, the program has travelled to cities big and small, visiting more than 2,300 Ontarians around the province. The program has especially picked up its pace within the last year, as more schools, community groups and organizations like the Ontario Public Service have become aware of this free service. Heather Tulipano, a grade six teacher from Orillia, wasn't aware the program existed until she attended the Teacher's Forum – a professional development opportunity designed for elementary and secondary teachers – at Queen's Park in Toronto in 2014. "Cost is a huge factor now with bussing," she says "When I found out they did Outreach [and] it didn't cost us anything - That's a goldmine for us."

The Outreach program captures the experience of a visit to Queen's Park for participants without them actually having to take a trip there. In addition to saving the time and cost involved in travel, patrons can also feel more comfortable asking questions in a less intimidating setting. Tulipano's grade six class, for example, welcomed the program to their school in June 2015. The class learned the responsibilities of the three levels of government in Canada. Led by two information officers, the group of about 30 students began their session by playing a matching game to identify the role and duties of the municipal, provincial and federal tiers of government. Afterwards, the class watched their local MPP Garfield Dunlop (Simcoe North) make statements in a recorded broadcast of a recent Question Period. For every school and community session, local MPPs are notified when the two-hour program will be visiting so they have the opportunity to sit-in if their schedules allow. The students' programme concluded when they participated in a mock debate similar to one they might see in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

The topic of debate, chosen by the grade six class was whether or not the students should alter their school's dress code. Being an issue all of the students could relate to, they were asked to fully support the side to which they were assigned. With the Speaker, Sergeant-at-arms and Clerk dressed in their role-play costumes provided by Outreach – a few black silk robes, tri-cornered hats – the cardboard mace was carried into the classroom to signal the beginning of their debate. Their faces lit up particularly as they watched their peers act out the roles of parliamentary officers. Facilitators suggest it is a fun and interactive way for students to become engaged and learn about how parliament functions. When selected to speak, both students in the government and the Official Opposition were required to start their point with, "Mr. Speaker" – just as the Members of Provincial Parliament do in their debates.

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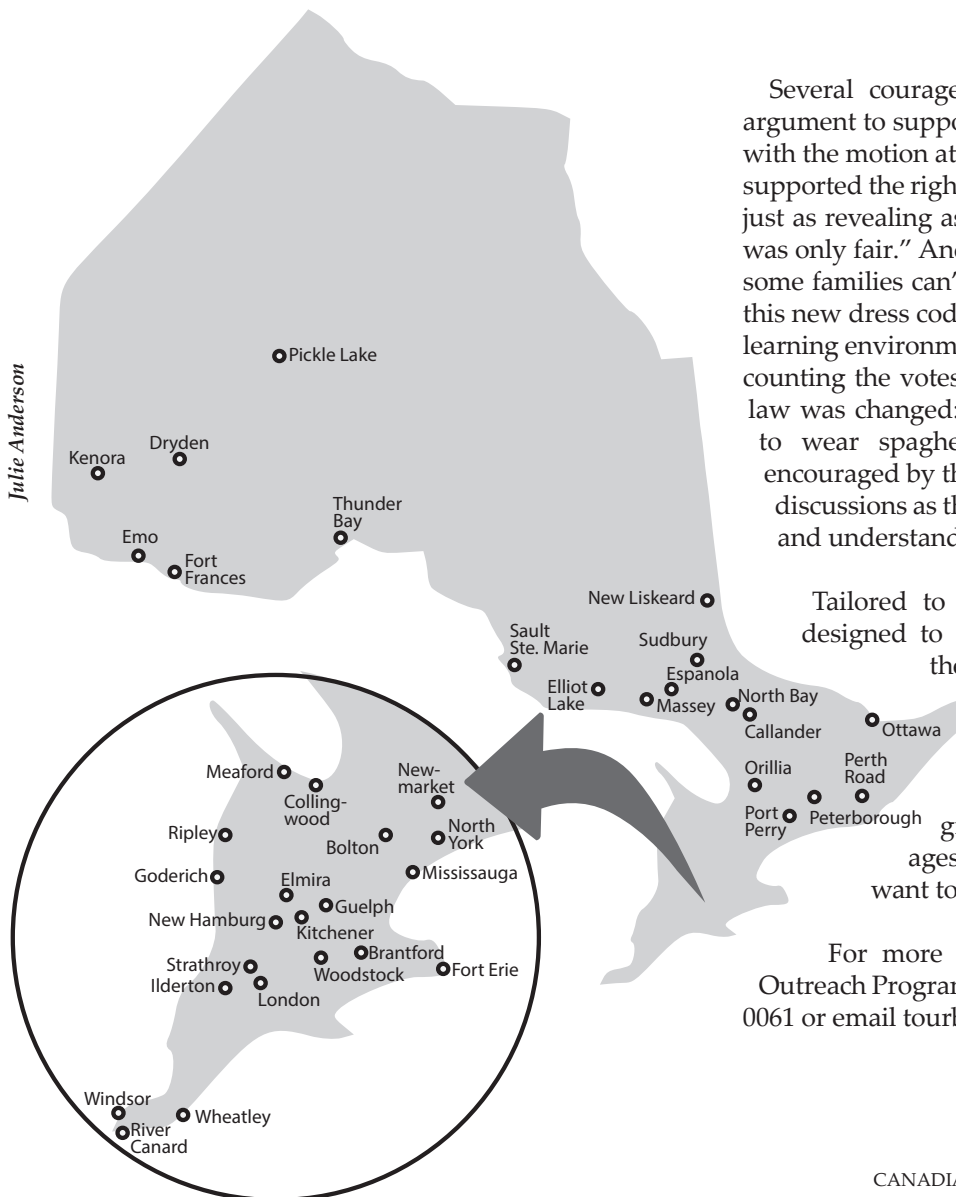
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Chelsea Scherer



A member of the Opposition makes a point against revising the school's dress code in a mock debate.

Julie Anderson



Several courageous students stood to make their argument to support whether they agreed or disagreed with the motion at hand. The government side strongly supported the right for female students to wear clothing just as revealing as their male counterparts because “it was only fair.” And the Official Opposition argued that some families can’t afford to buy new clothes and that this new dress code would be “too inappropriate” for a learning environment. The debate ended with the Clerk counting the votes for both sides and the hypothetical law was changed: female students were now allowed to wear spaghetti-strings to school. Students are encouraged by the facilitators to take the lead in these discussions as they debate topics that they care about and understand.

Tailored to each group, program sessions are designed to support the school curriculum and the particular interests of the patrons.

The program is ideal for junior and intermediate students, newcomers, ESL learners, adult organizations and community groups. Outreach is available for all ages and communities in Ontario that want to learn more about parliament.

For more information about the Community Outreach Program, contact Tour Bookings at (416) 325-0061 or email [tourbookings@ola.org](mailto:tourbookings@ola.org).