

Political interest

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The commitment of a group of 103 high school students who signed on for a five-day immersion in the nitty gritty of democratic voting systems is impressive. In an era when turnout rates for provincial and federal elections have fallen to the low 60-per-cent range, the importance of getting young people to pay attention to politics can't be underestimated.

Those 103 members of the Students' Assembly on Electoral Reform went beyond just showing an interest. Prior to their five-day session in Huntsville many of them spent hours studying the mechanics and implications of different voting methods. They also worked within their schools to get other students, teachers - even entire classes - involved.

And it worked, to a degree. Across the province, 2,372 students voted for the type of electoral system they would prefer for Ontario. More votes will come, but those students took part in classroom elections in time to have their results passed on to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

The Citizens' Assembly is a provincially appointed body that will make a recommendation to the legislature on electoral reform. Like the student group that mirrors it, the assembly has one member from each of Ontario's 103 ridings. Its work could be ground breaking. By mid-May the assembly is expected to recommend an alternative to the "first-past-the-post" voting system Ontario has used since pre-Confederation times.

As promised during the last election campaign, Premier Dalton McGuinty set up the assembly as the first step in giving Ontario voters the opportunity to change that system. If the assembly recommends some alternative - and all signs suggest it will - voters will get to choose between that system and the status quo in a referendum held as part of the Oct. 10 provincial election.

The student assembly is part of an ongoing project to bring young people, most of them not yet old enough to vote, into the election process. More than 3,000 schools across Canada held their own votes during last year's federal election. In-class elections and exercises like the Students' Assembly on Electoral Reform are immediate and practical ways to teach civics, history and politics.

The fact that they are catching on is good news, but the overall numbers could be much improved. Those 2,372 students who studied and voted on electoral systems, for instance, represent less than 0.4 per cent of this province's high school enrolment. More teachers should be signing their classes up for the program.

Whatever happens in the actual October referendum, the electoral reform process will score one success if it helps get more students involved in shadowing real-life politics. Dedicated students can't drive that process on their own. Teachers, school boards - and parents - will have to help. Brave new award A new award that shines a brighter light on city police officers honoured for acts of bravery or other outstanding service is both welcome and overdue.

The Peterborough Lakefield Police Services Board on Monday announced the first recipient of its Award for Bravery: Const. Dan Gemmiti. Gemmiti, who pulled a man from a burning car last October, will get a pin designed especially for the board during a public ceremony next month. Until now, bravery commendations came from the police chief's office. Officers got a certificate and a handshake during a police services board meeting.

Gemmiti and others honoured in the future will still get the chief's certificate. However the public ceremony and special pin which can be worn as a public reminder of recipients' accomplishments give the awards a higher profile. Civilian police staff and members of the public are also eligible for the awards.

Police officers who risk their own safety to serve the public deserve our appreciation. The police services board awards will make sure that message is delivered.