

Electoral reform goes to school

Ontario spending \$200,000 for high school students' opinions

By James Wallace
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ONTARIO'S EDUCATION MINISTRY IS spending \$200,000 to help high school students participate in planned changes to the province's electoral system.

"We believe that all citizens, including young Ontarians, should have a meaningful voice in shaping their democracy," Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal Marie Boutrogianni said in announcing the funding.

The money has been earmarked to create a panel of 103 students from across the province that will travel to a Students' Assembly conference at Deerhurst Resort in Muskoka in mid-November.

The students will meet and discuss proposed changes to Ontario's electoral system and make recommendations to the provincially appointed body that has begun historic consultations on the way we vote.

"We see this as a very special opportunity for young people to get involved - to learn about our democracy and influence the electoral system they will inherit," said Taylor Gunn, CEO of Students Vote. "Ontario will be the first jurisdiction in the world to give its young people such a platform - and direct a say in the future of its electoral system."

Students between 14 and 18 years old can apply online until Thursday for selection as one of 103 participants in the conference at www.studentsassembly.ca.

One teen from each of the province's 103 ridings will be chosen for the student assembly.

High school students across the province will also study, discuss and vote between Nov. 13 and Dec. 14 on an electoral system they feel best reflects their values.

The votes from both the "classroom" assembly and the Students' Assembly, along with survey research and recommendations, will be included in a final report that will be submitted to the government-appointed Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in February 2007.

"Nearly half of Ontario's electoral districts are represented by these participating schools, while we continue to receive registrations by the hour," Gunn said.

"Already, 72 high schools, representing more than 5,000 potential classroom participants, have registered from as far away as Windsor, Ottawa and Sioux Lookout," he said.

The government's Citizens' Assembly began its historic consultations in April, randomly selecting 103 voters - 52 women and 51 men - from across the province to participate in series of meetings to learn about Ontario's electoral system, consider proposals for change and make recommendations to the government by mid-May 2007.

The initiative is being led by George Thomson, a Howe Island resident and former Kingston judge who is chair of the group.

Although there has been little fan-

fare over the work of the assembly to date, its recommendations may fundamentally change the method used since Confederation to elect MPPs at Queen's Park.

"Whether the ultimate result is a

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new system or not, the very exercise of examining our election system will reinvigorate and tighten our understanding of our democratic system," Boutrogianni said in announcing the assembly in March.

If the Citizens' Assembly recommends a new electoral system, Ontario voters will be asked to vote on any proposed change in a referendum.

Provincial election races in Ontario are decided in roughly the same way as horse races - the candidate with the most votes wins.

However, variations and alternatives to single member plurality are used around the world and are being studied and considered by the assembly for adoption in this province.

For example, in some jurisdictions that use a plurality system, voters rank



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candidates by preference and the winning candidate needs a majority vote to get elected.

In proportional-representation systems, political parties are awarded seats based on the number of votes they get (for example, a party that wins 30 per cent of the votes would get 30 per cent of the seats in the Legislature).

Then there are mixed systems that combine elements of all systems. There could, for example, be a system that sees several MPPs elected in some large urban ridings on one or two in other ridings with smaller populations.

The Citizens' Assembly's 103 members are halfway through their "learning process," meetings and discussions with electoral experts. Through a partnership with TVOntario, there are plans to carry and archive the learning sessions on the TVO.org website.

Following the learning phase, members will return to their home ridings to begin public, province-wide meetings and consultations.

Information on those meetings will be posted at the Citizens' Assembly's website at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.

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