

# Citizen schools offer a chance to rebuild our democracy from the bottom up

By Democratic Audit

*The Conservative Party's 'Big Society' was supposed to bring about a new age of public involvement and active citizen participation in public affairs. But as that agenda crumbles, **Jamie Audsley**, the co-author of a new IPPR [report](#), argues that to achieve those ends, we must place the citizenship agenda at the heart of every school.*

The story that we use to encourage are children to do their best at school – that old maxim of ‘work hard, get good qualification and you’ll be a success’- will have been the message promoted to pupils across the country as they returned to school this month after the summer holidays.

Whilst this narrative is by no means unimportant in so far as academic and vocational achievements are vital in both opening doors to further study and work opportunities and providing children with the necessary social skills, there are limits to this approach. Most importantly, this way of thinking focuses on the success of the individual rather than of the collective.

But citizen schools engage with an extra level of achievement: that of creating a democratic culture that encourages equality and broadens the purpose of education through the role that schools can play as civic organisations. In this role, schools develop their students’ citizenship and ability to contribute to a democracy. A new story can then be told where achievement is not quite so linear.

This new story sounds a lot like the Conservative’s ‘big society’ agenda: surely schools are an ideal focal point from which to build upon this message? Sadly, though, the coalition government has been hesitant to develop the idea of citizenship via the one democratic institution we all have in common: school.

As Chris Waller of the Association for Citizenship Teaching has [previously said](#), there is a total disconnect between the government’s aim to build a big society and the direction in which our education system is travelling. Thanks to the current changes to the citizenship curriculum that threaten to undermine the development of the skills for being an active citizen, it will be a challenge to develop a clear plan to put citizenship at the heart of the school experience and ethos, but it can be done.

As part of my Clore Social Fellowship, working in collaboration with Clyde Chitty, Jim O’Connell, David, Watson and Jane Wills, I carried out some research into the potential of citizen schools. The resulting IPPR report, [Citizen Schools: Learning to rebuild democracy](#) tries to work out how schools can support students in their development as active citizens by looking at four schools that all put citizenship at the centre of their purpose and their culture as schools.

The four schools were recommended by the Institute of Education and each embodies different approaches to citizenship education. These were Nower Hill High School, which possesses an excellent citizenship curriculum; St Clere’s School, a co-operative school that emphasises these values; RSA Academy Tipton, which has citizenship as one of its strategic purposes; and Prendergast Ladywell Fields College, where young people are trained in community organising.

Although they approached citizenship from different angles, we found lots of common ground. For example: each school works hard to ensure citizenship is an integral element of the school's purpose and tries to create a democratic and participative culture of citizenship. The schools also enable learning through action; which takes citizenship beyond the classroom to achieve tangible changes in the community. These schools link citizenship education to their improvement strategy and work to raise overall educational standards.

What this means is that rather than relying solely on the citizenship curriculum, these schools embed it in their ethos and ensure it is delivered through key features. These include giving a senior leader responsibility for championing civic elements; engaging with community organisers and organisations; ensuring governors are drawn from local leaders in the community; and developing strong parent and community forums.

Ultimately, the four schools develop their notion of citizenship from their relationship with civil society, and don't rely on the state to develop it for them. Each school is an inspiring example, and in order to support this work and spread it further, we devised three recommendations to complete our report:

- Ofsted, the National College for Teaching and Leadership and the National Governors' Association should disseminate best practice demonstrated by our case study schools
- Regional and area-based curriculums should be updated to include relevant active citizenship opportunities and map civil society actors to support schools to take practical action with their communities
- Current and future government citizenship initiatives should be devolved to a more local level to ensure they are institutionalised, sustained and shared. Current programmes are the National Citizen Service and the Cabinet Office Democratic Engagement Programme

With significant gaps between schools, civil society and the efforts to renew democratic culture, the findings of this report show that other schools can also take on this agenda. As children move through our education system, it's time we gave them something to aspire to outside the exam hall.

**Shortened URL for this post:** <http://buff.ly/18FbN9B>

*Note: this article represents the views of the author and not of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

**Jamie Audsley** is a Clore Social Fellow with a background in teaching and community organising

