

2168 STRONGER CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES PROJECT

Children's Parliament Evaluation Summary Report

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Children's Parliament Evaluation

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The Young and Resilient Research Centre and Western Sydney University acknowledge the Darug, Tharawal (also historically referred to as Dharawal), Gangangarra and Wiradjuri as the first inhabitants of the nation and the traditional custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work.

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Young and Resilient Research Centre

The Young and Resilient Research Centre is an Australian-based, international research centre that unites young people with researchers, practitioners, innovators and policy-makers to explore the role of technology in children's and young people's lives and how it can be used to improve individual and community resilience across generations.

<https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/strategic-research-initiatives/young-and-resilient.html>



KEY TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

This report uses the following key terms and abbreviations:

'Ambassador': Policy, research and community representatives appointed as Parliament Ambassadors to respond to, and advocate for Parliamentarian's views

'C4C Program': Communities for Children Program. The overarching funding program for the 2168 Children's Parliament which also guides the strategic direction of the project.

'LGA': Local government area

'Mission Australia': Mission Australia - Miller Pathways. The Facilitating Partner of the 2168 Children's Parliament

'Parliamentarians': Students who have been appointed to the Children's Parliament

'Participants': Participants in the 2168 Children's Parliament evaluation

'Parliament': The 2168 Children's Parliament, a core activity of Stronger Children and Communities Project, which Parliamentarians participate in, incorporating the formal Parliament sittings and the accompanying training program for children

'Project Officer': The 2168 Stronger Children and Communities Project Officer responsible for coordinating the activities of the Parliament

'SCCP': Stronger Children and Communities Project. The project funded by the Communities for Children Program, with the 2168 Children's Parliament being its core activity

INTRODUCTION

Informed by the Scottish Children's Parliament model and guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 2168 Children's Parliament is a unique child-centred governance initiative in the Liverpool Local Government Area (LGA) in New South Wales, Australia. Over the last five years, the 2168 Children's Parliament (the Parliament) has worked with 179 children from 11 State and Catholic primary schools in the 2168 postcode area to raise children's awareness and understanding of their rights and to encourage civic participation. The initiative provides a platform for children to develop and voice their opinions and ideas on matters that are important to them, and to advocate for action.

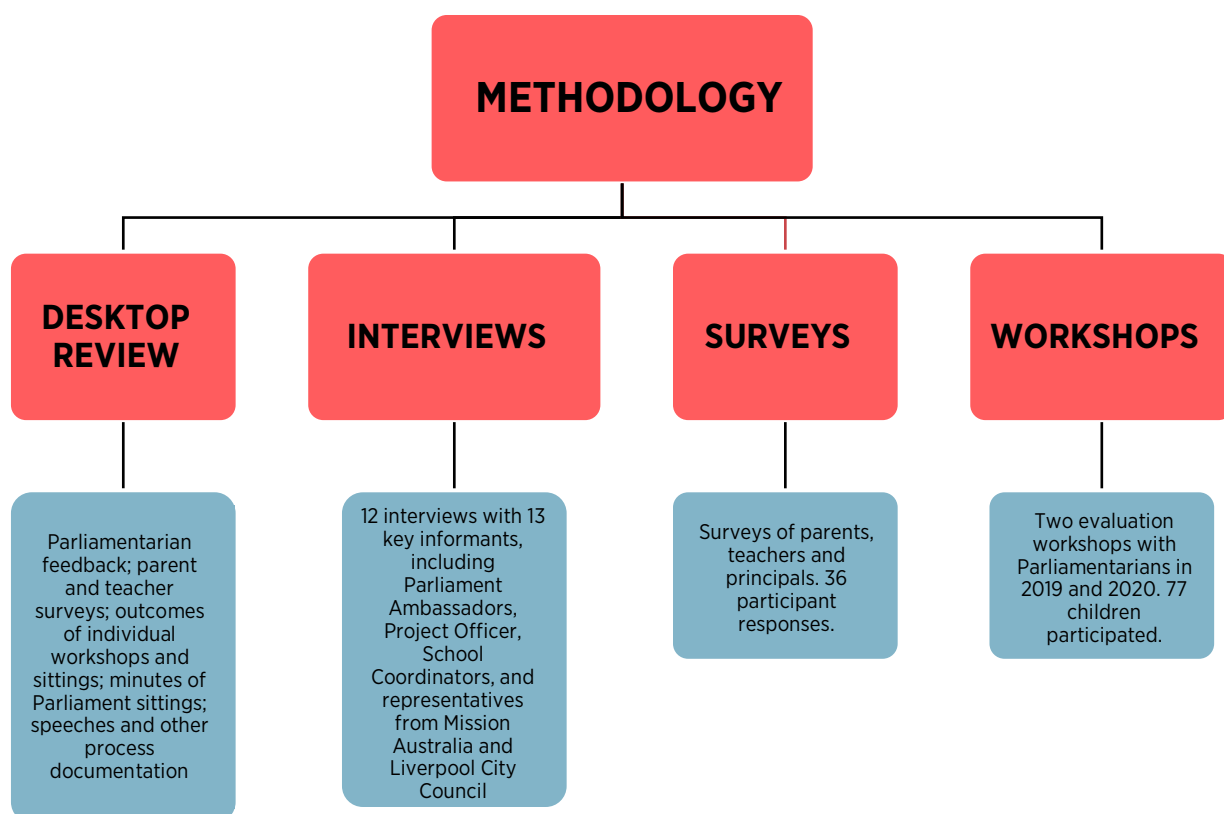
The Parliament is a partnership between Liverpool City Council and Mission Australia under the Australian Government funded '2168' Communities for Children Programme. Liverpool City Council contributes funds toward operational costs of the program.

Each year, a total of four 9-12-year old primary school children from each of eleven local schools are elected to represent their school in the Parliament (total = 44 Parliamentarians). Newly elected Parliamentarians partake in a series of expert-led workshops to build their research, speech writing and public speaking skills; to learn about their rights and responsibilities under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; to learn about the levels and processes of democratic government in Australia; to learn about resilience and environmental sustainability; and to explore the issues that are of concern to them. Parliament convenes twice a year in Council chambers in the presence of the Mayor and/or Councillors and a range of Ambassadors, who are charged with the responsibility of responding to the issues raised by Parliamentarians by advocating for change in their circles of influence.

In the first sitting each year, Parliamentarians present their research and advocate for change on their chosen issues. In the second sitting, Council and the Ambassadors report back to the Parliament on the actions they have taken. Parliamentarians are supported throughout their term by a Project Officer, who leads the implementation of the Parliament; representatives from facilitating partners, Liverpool City Council and Mission Australia; their school principals and teachers.

From December 2019 to March 2021, the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University conducted an evaluation of the Parliament. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the impacts of the Parliament and its accompanying training program on individual participants, schools and other participating organisations, and to examine the effectiveness of its processes. The evaluation also sought to identify key learnings generated through the implementation of the Parliament in order to strengthen future implementation and thereby maximise its potential, as well as to share the learnings with other similar ventures.

Using a mixed methods approach, the evaluation comprised a desktop analysis of key materials generated through the Parliament; surveys of 36 parents, teachers and principals involved in the Parliament; interviews with 13 key stakeholders (e.g. Parliament Ambassadors, school coordinators); and creative workshops with 74 child Parliamentarians. All evaluation activities were conducted with the children, parents and others associated with the 2019 and 2020 cohorts of the Parliament.



Participants in the evaluation reported that the impact of the Parliament on Parliamentarians, their families, and their schools was overwhelmingly positive. The evaluation found the following:

IMPACTS ON CHILD PARLIAMENTARIANS

Child Parliamentarians explained how, at the beginning of their term, they experience self-doubt, shyness, fear and nervousness. However, with the support of the Project Officer, their school and their families, through their exposure to new experiences, they gradually overcome these challenges. Participants in the evaluation described significant positive changes in Parliamentarians' knowledge, skills, behaviour and values, including:

- **Increased knowledge of children's rights**, as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as an awareness of differentials in children's capacities to access those rights due to socio-structural disadvantage;



- **A greatly enhanced awareness and understanding of local and global issues**, including environmental sustainability, poverty, food security, mental health, gender equality, multiculturalism, domestic violence and discrimination.
- **A stronger understanding of democracy, government and civic participation**, including knowledge of the democratic processes of local, state and federal levels of government, and the differences between policy and law.
- **Substantial improvements in their existing skills and the development of new skills**, including in the design, implementation and analysis of research; speech writing; public speaking; communication; critical thinking; teamwork; and collaboration;
- **Increased confidence** in expressing themselves; articulating their emotions and ideas; and communicating with adults;
- **Stronger leadership qualities**, including taking initiative, supporting others, confidently speaking up to demand change in accordance with their rights, and adopting a sense of responsibility for their schools and communities – all of which translate beyond the Parliament setting into their schools and wider communities.
- Parliamentarians develop a **deep sense of responsibility towards their communities**; become **more engaged and proactive citizens**; and feel **more empowered to effect change in their communities**; and
- Parliamentarians **develop strong, new friendships, as well as networks that include teaching staff at other schools, Council employees, politicians and others in position of influence**, which both enhances their sense of being able to effect change, and inspires them to think about what they will do in their futures.

Evaluation participants attributed the above changes to the way that the Parliament empowers children, makes them feel valued and heard, and gives them a sense of ownership and influence in their communities. Notably, for many participating children, the Parliament represents the first opportunity they have had to speak on important issues and to have their opinions taken seriously. This is particularly significant for children living in a LGA that experiences socio-economic disadvantage, which can limit opportunities to participate in advocacy and policy making.

IMPACTS ON THE FAMILIES OF PARLIAMENTARIANS

A total of 61% (n=19) of parents felt that they have learned a lot through their child's participation in the Parliament, and 47% (n=19) agreed that their family has benefited. The evaluation highlighted **positive impacts on parents' knowledge and understanding of both children's rights and their capabilities**, with parents reporting that they were surprised by the degree to which participation in the Parliament boosted their children's levels of confidence, concern regarding community and global issues, and ability to express their thoughts.

The evaluation observed an **increased sense of community** among parents of Parliamentarians as the Parliament brings parents from different schools together and provides opportunity for them to recognise their similarities, regardless of background. The evaluation found that holding the sittings in Council chambers has significant benefits for **parents' sense of belonging** to their local community.

IMPACTS ON PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

The collaboration, participation and support of principals, teachers, and the broader school community is critical to the successful implementation of the Parliament. Over its history, the Parliament has been fortunate to have had strong and continuing commitment from eleven schools in the LGA.

Schools' commitments have paid off. Two thirds of teachers and 100% of principals said that they felt that their school has gained a lot from their participation, highlighting that networking between local schools is a key benefit.



At the level of school policy and practice, activities initiated by the Parliament have resulted in a series of innovations, including the provision of new canteens promoting healthy eating; the introduction of the school-based Breakfast Club Program; and the strengthening of safety and anti-bullying programs in some schools, including teacher training on this issue. The Parliament has also demonstrably enhanced collaboration between schools, encouraged cohesion and reduced competition. And the Parliament has been a key catalyst in a cultural shift in some schools towards listening and responding to children's views and perspectives, particularly those from disadvantaged communities.

IMPACTS ON COUNCIL

The Parliament has played a key role in strengthening the Liverpool City Council's understanding of children in their community and their needs. Parliamentarian's deliberations in the Parliament have impacted Council's policies and procedures including the development of a Child Safe Policy and input into planning for recreation and open space, and child and age-appropriate playgrounds and facilities, both of which are grounded in the UN Child Safety Framework guidelines. The Parliament has evolved to become a formal platform for engagement, participation and consultation for the Council outside of the bi-annual sittings. Council regularly consults Parliamentarians on a range of matters at the local, state and national level. Most recently, child Parliamentarians contributed to the Woodward Park Masterplan and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

This engagement has led to concrete infrastructural investments to improve the quality of children's experiences in the 2168 LGA. For example, six parks, including Formica Park, Starling Park and Fassifern Park were assessed for improvements and upgrades as a consequence of children identifying these needs in the course of the Parliament. Repairs to existing soft and hard infrastructure, waste disposal, and children's play areas were identified and carried out in 2017/18 and improvements proposed in the 2018/19 financial year. This included the addition of swings, universal access design solutions and shading structures.

IN CONCLUSION...

Overall, the 2168 C4C Program has provided a unique opportunity to understand the extent to which a systematic approach to the meaningful engagement and active participation of children might impact their learning and growth, as well as bring about change in the community. The Parliament has had a tangible impact on the local community by giving children a voice and representing a key demographic in local governance. It has become a platform for advocacy that allows many child participants to overcome socio-economic disadvantages and counter negative stereotypes prevailing in Western Sydney. It has also contributed to a greater sense of community in the area, not only among children participating in the Parliament but among families and between schools, encouraging collaboration over competition.

It is our hope that this evaluation will help to ensure that the Parliament continues to support children's rights and civic participation, while maximising the impacts for future cohorts and the wider community, in the Liverpool LGA. We also hope that this report might inspire other local governments in Australia and beyond to replicate the 2168 Children's Parliament model.



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