

# Program helps youth add voice to election

BY MITCHELL BROWN  
Staff Writer

Kristine Tran is trying to remember the names of the leaders of the top three provincial parties.

"Um, Dalton McGuinty, I know he's with the Liberals," the 18-year-old student at King City Secondary School says.

"I've heard about auto insurance and how the NDP want to regulate it, how the Tories want to cut taxes ... I've heard a lot about the issues, but not really focusing on the leaders."

The Maple resident and student trustee with the York-Region District School Board is excited about the fact she's old enough to vote for the first time in this election, but doesn't know how she will vote because it's hard keeping up with what's going on, a conundrum shared by many students.

"Right now, most 18-year-olds are either just caught up in university ... or they're kind of feeling the ripple effect of the double cohort," she said, explaining it's tough to interest students in politics at the start of a school year.

She also thinks most students are turned off by what they see as a negative campaign style among candidates.

"I think how they're kind of carrying on ... it turns off a lot of students because they're not showing a lot of respect for one another," she said.

"I think if they just kind of present themselves and stand behind themselves 100 per cent, I think students will see that."

*I've heard a lot about the issues, but not really focusing on the leaders.*

Historically, youths aged 18 to 25 are among the least likely to vote in elections, but a new program aimed at high school students hopes to reverse that trend.

The brainchild of 25-year-old Toronto resident Taylor Gunn, Kids Voting Canada will give more than 800,000 high school students a chance to take part in the election.

Their votes won't count, but the results will be broadcast by the CBC on election night, side-by-side with the official results.

"What we're doing is providing them with an opportunity they've never had before, an opportunity for their voice to be recognized in

public," Mr. Gunn said.

"That's what the students love about this; they're getting the same ballot as adult voters."

To be fair, it's not only young people who are staying away from polling booths.

The last provincial election, in 1999, saw only 58.3 per cent of eligible voters turn out, a drop of more than 6 percentage points from 1990 and the lowest turnout since 1929.

David Christie, a history teacher at Keswick High School, says anything that can reverse that trend is a good thing and he's seeing firsthand the enthusiasm Mr. Gunn's program is generating among his students.

As part of the program, students in his civics class are divided into four groups, each one assigned to research the platform of one of four parties (PC, Liberal, NDP, Green) in the election.

Students debate which promises and policies are most relevant to people their age and devise a campaign strategy on behalf of their adopted parties aimed at students in their school.

Then, on Oct. 2, all 1,100 students at Keswick High, as well as almost every other York-Region high school, will cast a ballot for their preferred candidates.

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