



40 Professionals Sign Letter Supporting MA Civics Education Bill

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BOSTON, MA – A cohort of 40 professors and educators have signed a letter to support the passage of S.2375, one of the nation’s most innovative civic education bills. The bill has passed the Massachusetts Senate and House and will be taken up for consideration by a legislative conference committee. S.2375 provides for funding for the professional development of teachers, the opportunity for students to participate in civic projects, and establishes civic education as a priority for school districts.

The letter’s signatories support the bill because it gives students hands-on experiences to engage with their communities to solve problems and make policy. These educators believe that this bill will create informed voters and lifelong participants in political and civic life.

If signed, the bill will help ensure that students across the Commonwealth have access to a civic education curriculum that covers media literacy, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and conventional forms of political knowledge, such as the electoral process. Teachers will receive support to implement and teach the curriculum and facilitate civics projects to prepare students for civic service. The signatories applaud the Legislature’s commitment to securing robust funding to implement the bill, including the provision of funds for teacher professional development. The House and Senate versions of the FY 19 budget each provide at least \$1,000,000 to ensure that the legislative goals are implemented. The letter’s authors believe that this funding would allow students to access the benefits of this bill more equitably by helping low-income students participate in civic projects and creating professional development opportunities for their educator.

An Open Letter from Educators in Support of An Act to Promote and Enhance Civic Engagement

We live in an exciting time for American democracy. After a generation in which our political system got locked into rhetoric and voting patterns that turned off most young Americans, politics is cool again. Young Americans have announced that “slactivism” is over, and they are participating in politics in record numbers. A previously unmobilized voting bloc, these young people stand poised to revolutionize politics.

But to use this power responsibly, young Americans must understand the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

That's where we come in. As educators, parents, and citizens, we support S. 2375 to promote civics education in Massachusetts public schools.

American democracy has always depended on widespread and informed voting, and yet we are doing poorly in both areas among our younger citizens. Young people have recently voted in disproportionately low numbers: less than 50% of voters between 18 and 29 voted in 2016.

While that is now changing, students are missing out on the sort of education they need to be engaged and effective participants in democracy. In 2015, when they were asked if their students were getting sufficient education in civics, almost 60% of Massachusetts district superintendents said no. There is also a racial and class story buried in these numbers. Nationally, white students from privileged communities are three times more likely to achieve a "proficient" score in civics than poor students or students of color.

S. 2375 addresses the disjunction between our students' enthusiasm for civic participation and their lack of knowledge of how to go about it. This bill ensures that students will have both information and hands-on experiences that engage them with their communities to solve problems and make policy.

S. 2375 requires that all public schools teach American history and civics education. It integrates civics projects into existing curricula and defers to local communities and their teachers to tailor those experiences to their students.

To level the playing field between wealthy white communities and poorer ones, S. 2375 authorizes the funding necessary through the Civics Project Fund, a public-private partnership. This crucial aspect of the bill ensures professional development for teachers across the state, especially those in struggling districts. This funding addresses the concern that only wealthy schools will be able to adjust to this mandate without seed money, and reinforces the fundamental American principle that everyone should have an equal say in their government.

Finally, S. 2375 will encourage understanding of local issues, participation in the discussion surrounding them, voter registration, and voting.

Massachusetts has always led the nation in public education. We have understood that democracy depends on the active participation of an educated citizenry. In this era, as our politics become increasingly polarized and our societal problems loom ever larger, we must make sure the next generation has the skills to move us forward. Students must have the tools to sift through news sources and the understanding to see civic engagement as a process of debate to reach solutions. Demystifying the world of government and politics will help our children to be principled participants in American life. Studies show that students who are exposed

to high-quality civic education are more likely to be informed voters and lifelong participants in political and civic life.

Is it worth the expense to add civic education to Massachusetts public schools?

This question has come up before and been answered definitively. In the 1860s, after political debate had become so polarized it led to war, far-seeing government officials took up this very question at a national level. In the midst of the Civil War, with armies raging in the fields and the Treasury almost empty, congressmen dedicated significant resources to creating the nation's system of public universities. It was worth the sacrifice, congressmen thought, because the survival of American democracy depended on citizens who understood their rights and duties, and who had the tools to exercise them. The price tag for S. 2375 is smaller, of course, but its principles are no less ambitious.

Sincerely,

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Eric Bellone, Suffolk University

Eleanor Berke, Harvard University

Kathryn Parker Boudett, Harvard University

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