



Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life

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SUBMITTED TO: Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education
Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz and Representative Alice Hanlon Peisch, Chairs

REGARDING: S215 filed by Senator Chandler and H2016 filed by Representative Campbell, *An Act to promote and enhance civic engagement*; S278 filed by Senator Lesser, *An Act relative to civics and new media literacy education in schools*; H280 filed by Representative Kaufman and S244 filed by Senator Donnelly, *Resolve to promote better citizenship, civics education and civic engagement*; and S248 filed by Senator Donoghue, *An Act promoting civics education*; et al.

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As the Joint Committee on Education today considers a group of bills relative to civics education in Massachusetts, we offer this testimony to provide: background on the current state of civics education in the Commonwealth; key practices, supported by research, that we believe should be incorporated into any bill that moves forward; and recommended next steps for your consideration. We offer this testimony from a place of expertise, as Tisch College at Tufts University is a leading voice on the political and civic engagement of young people in America.

National Trends

Although some American students receive good civic education, overall outcomes are unacceptable. At the national level, only a quarter of young people reach “proficient” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, and wide gaps persist. White, wealthy students are four to six times as likely as Hispanic or Black students from low-income households to exceed the level of proficient. Gaps in civic knowledge by race and class are related to substantial differences in opportunities to learn civics.¹

States have made various policy choices regarding civics. As of 2013, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had standards that included civics and that prescribed civics topics to be covered. Forty states required a course in civics or government to graduate. Twenty-one states required a state-designed social studies test. In eight of those states, at least one state-mandated test was entirely concerned with civics or U.S. government. Eight states included social studies in their assessments of schools’ performance, usually as a small proportion of

schools' scores. Ten states required teachers of government or civics to be specifically certified in these disciplines.ⁱⁱ

A related challenge relates specifically to media literacy—or news literacy—which has become an urgent topic in light of the 2016 election. A 2016 Stanford study concluded: “Overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*.” Students “are easily duped,” the researchers found, by fake news or by clearly biased information.ⁱⁱⁱ Teaching news literacy is effective,^{iv} but no states make it common in their schools.

Civics Education in Massachusetts

Though a leader in many other areas of public education, Massachusetts is an outlier in civics, having neither a required course nor a test specifically on civics, though the Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, published in 2003, is being revised. In addition, access to civics education appears to be uneven across the Commonwealth and disproportionately available to students in higher-income public school districts. Finally, news literacy is not a significant theme in the current Massachusetts Curriculum Framework.

Despite the lack of a required course and test, it is possible for students to learn civics well in Massachusetts. The subject can be integrated into history and other disciplines and complemented by co-curricular activities and a school- and community-wide culture of civic engagement and public discourse.

Key Practices

Civic education experts have developed and tested civic learning practices that respond to both the need to develop strong disciplinary knowledge, and actively engage students in civic experiences that will help them become active and informed citizens in the future. We recommend that you consider the inclusion of these practices in the final set of bills that emerges from your deliberations:

- learning about government, social issues, law, and related topics in the classroom;
- developing media and news literacy;
- discussing controversial current issues;
- student-centered pedagogy that involves deliberation, collective decision-making, research on issues, informed action in local communities, and reflection;
- integrating student voice on school issues and climate; and
- simulating adult civic roles (e.g., in mock trials or simulation games about democratic processes).

An essential component running through these key practices is a commitment to providing high-impact civic learning practices to all students, regardless of their background, social and

economic status, or the school district in which they reside. Equally important is the development of an inclusive school climate that encourages the discussion of contentious issues, incorporates students' own voices, and empowers them to take informed action. To meet these two overarching goals, educators and school districts should be supported with resources, training, and clear guidance so that each district can understand the elements of the law and determine how to incorporate civic learning experiences in a way that is responsive to existing local needs and priorities while working to integrate civic learning into the curriculum.

Next Steps

As a necessary first step, and to assess the state of civics and to support improvement, **a large sample of students, their teachers, and those teachers' school administrators should be surveyed**. The survey should ask about: civic learning opportunities and experiences; students' and teachers' knowledge, values, and commitments; and the local context for civic engagement. The results should be shared with state leaders and educators.

Overall, we believe that the best policy for any given state depends on the state's norms and policy structures (such as its stance on testing and local control).

Testing, in and of itself, is not necessarily the answer. For example, in lieu of a new set of tests that students or prospective teachers must pass, the **state could offer optional certifications for educators** who demonstrate competency in civics teaching, **for students** who demonstrate advanced civic skills, and **for schools** that offer compelling civics education for all their students (building on a successful program of "Democracy Schools" in Illinois). These "badges," or portable demonstrations of civic capacity, would have value for teachers seeking social studies positions and for students looking toward college and careers. The certificates could also focus on Action Civics and News Media Literacy, two forms of advanced and applied civic skill not easily captured by a conventional test. Validated measures of essential skills and knowledge for civic participation such as problem-solving and critical thinking are available as rubrics.

To put this another way, what matters most is the follow-through: **high-quality data must be regularly collected, analyzed to reveal needs, and used to give feedback** to teachers, administrators, and leaders.

As importantly, the **Commonwealth should support and fund professional development for civics**. Professional development is essential, and pre-service education, standards, and curricula must be well designed and continuously improved.

Conclusion

As you consider the set of bills before you, we hope you will also keep in mind that well-crafted action civics embedded in the curriculum empowers students with agency in their own communities, and it prepares them with many skills that are valued today's workforce: team-building, collaboration, critical thinking, public speaking and communication.

At a time when our civic health is badly bruised, and our political discourse seems more polarized than ever, the prospects for knitting together our fraying democracy may well rest on what happens in classrooms across the state.

We need to return to educating young people for democracy, and Massachusetts should stop playing catch up. The Commonwealth should take the lead.

ⁱ Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, “All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement,” CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University, 2013:

<http://civicyouth.org/commission-on-youth-voting-and-civic-knowledge-releases-report/>

ⁱⁱ Surbhi Godsay, Whitney Henderson, Peter Levine & Josh Littenberg-Tobias, “State Civic Education Requirements,” CIRCLE Fact Sheet (2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanford History Education Group, “Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning: (2016) via

<https://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%2011.21.16.pdf>

^{iv} For strong recent evidence, see Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation,” *American Educational Research*, online November 1, 2016