



Dear Chairperson Abney and members of the Finance Committee,

My name is Nancy Xiong, and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of **ARISE (Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education)**, a youth-led, BIPOC-centered organization rooted in the leadership of Southeast Asian students and families organizing for education justice.

We write in strong support of **House Bill 5981**, which would establish a \$1 million categorical fund to implement and sustain high-quality civic education across Rhode Island. This is a necessary and long overdue step toward fulfilling the promise of the 2021 Civics Literacy Act and ensuring our schools prepare every young person—not just those in wealthier zip codes—to be active participants in our democracy.

At ARISE, we have seen firsthand how transformative civic education can be. From running student-led Ethnic Studies campaigns, to mobilizing for fully funded schools, our youth organizers have led civic projects that go beyond theory—they're shaping policy. But this work often happens despite systemic barriers: a lack of dedicated funding, overworked teachers, and uneven access to civic learning across schools and districts.

The data is clear:

- Only 21% of RI administrators report offering a standalone civics course.
- Over half of teachers lack access to civics-related professional development.
- Students in low-income districts are half as likely to know their rights and responsibilities as U.S. citizens compared to their high-income peers.

House Bill 5981 would correct these inequities. It provides funding for:

- **Teacher professional development** in culturally responsive pedagogy and media literacy;
- **Curriculum development and support** for student-led civic projects;

- **Community partnerships** that link classroom learning to real-world civic action; and
- **Public accountability**, including district-level assessment and a statewide showcase of student work.

For ARISE youth, civic education is not a luxury—it's survival. It is how they build power, tell their stories, and fight for futures that center justice and belonging. This bill aligns with the spirit of the Civics Literacy Act and gives it the teeth it needs to be meaningfully implemented.

"A civics education encompasses far beyond what could be perceived as information regarding policy. A civics education is key to understanding and advocating for one's self and values, especially in a society which fails to equip its people with the minimum required to sustain oneself. Funding civics education is funding the people." ~ Oscar, 12th Grader

"I support the Civics Funding Bill because teachers lack training and resources for teaching civics. Students cannot be well prepared to go into the world civically involved if their teachers are not. Even so, in civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and participation, there are inequities for our most vulnerable populations due to their identity markers." ~ Milia, 11th Grader

"I'm in support of civic education for all schools. As a student who took a civics course at my high school, it helped me understand my rights and responsibilities as a U.S. citizen, as well as understanding political processes such as processing a bill. All students, in fact, everyone who lives in the U.S. should be allowed access to civic education to better understand how to engage in our political climate." ~ Sila, 12th Grader

"I am writing in support of this bill because I believe that everyone should be able to know their own rights, be informed about the powers of the government they live under, and the responsibilities of a citizen. Civics assists people in being informed and involved in political participation that allows America to further democracy. Funding civics ensures that all citizens and students, regardless of their backgrounds, understand their freedoms and their roles within the community, building an informed and active society." ~ Anthony, 10th Grader

"I support this bill because civics education will help people be more educated about their local and national governments. Students who do not feel prepared enough about issues they care about in their state, or even their schools, might not speak up about it because of the lack of confidence. Due to the lack of funding, schools and teachers are not given the proper resources to use for

teaching, or simply there are no teachers to give a course on this topic! By allowing this course to be funded and taught in schools, students can advocate for issues they want to see the changes to and have knowledge on how the governments work!" ~ Sarah, 12th Grader

"I am writing in support of this bill because helping youth understand how the legislative process works in their city— or just in general— would foster a generation of people that are engaged, educated, and help people get involved in their community at a much larger scale. Civics education would help people understand the way law works, and help them get to know their rights as citizens and as human beings." ~ Alex, 11th Grader

"I am writing in support of this bill because accessible and substantial funding for civics education serves as the foundation for equipping people with the tools to be engaged in the political systems that directly impact them. Without funding for civics education, how could we possibly prepare our professionals to teach civics and encourage young people to be civically engaged?" ~ Kasandra Kue-Rojas, Lead Organizer

"I am writing a testimony in support of House Bill 5981 which is related to funding Civic education in Rhode Island because being someone who graduated from the Providence Public School District, once I entered the adult world I had no idea how to engage with my community civically. Young people should be able to leave school with the ability to identify how to go about making changes to the laws and policies that impact them everyday. Without this form of education being implemented into schools, we are allowing our future generations of students to go into the world accepting whatever is thrown at them. There are many students throughout Rhode Island who do not have access to resources that would be able to teach them, and we can not expect this to be something that is just taught at home by parents. This bill will also increase the amount of people that would be able to engage with our country's government, which is what our democracy is all about!" ~ Law-Rel Butler, Lead Organizer

We urge the Committee to vote in favor of House Bill 5981 and invest in the next generation of Rhode Island's civic leaders—many of whom are already doing the work.

Thank you for your time and for considering our testimony.

In solidarity,

Nancy Xiong

On behalf of ARISE (Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education)

