

May 12, 2025

House Finance Committee  
Rhode Island State House  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Re: House Bill 5981: An Act Related to Education - The Education Equity & Property Tax Relief Act

Position: FOR

Dear Chairperson Abney and members of the Finance Committee:

I am Renee Hobbs from Newport, Rhode Island. I am a professor at the University of Rhode Island's Harrington School of Communication and Media and the Founder of the Media Education Lab.

I am writing to support of House Bill 5981, An Act Related to Education. I strongly support the bill which, if passed, would create a new fund that dedicates money towards giving students access to high-quality civics education and the unfunded mandate of the 2021 Civics Literacy Act. This bill would be used for comprehensive teacher professional development, curriculum development, student-led civic projects, community partnerships, and program evaluation.

In our [Media Literacy in Rhode Island](#) survey, we collected data in 2022 from more than 550 K-12 educators and school leaders from across Rhode Island to determine the extent to which media literacy instructional practices were occurring in classrooms. We learned that teachers lack confidence and knowledge in how to integrate media literacy into civic education. Rhode Island educators are aware of the importance of media literacy education as a component of civic education, and they see the clear consequences of fake news, political polarization, and disinformation spread through social media. Yet:

- Although survey participants believe that it's most urgent to improve people's ability to analyze information and recognize high-quality sources, **only 1 in 3 Rhode Island students learn how to comprehend and analyze news and current events in school.**
- **There are significant disparities between Rhode Island school districts**, with some communities offering media literacy education to most or all students in elementary, middle-school and high school, while other communities give students far fewer opportunities.
- **Most RI students do not encounter media literacy learning experiences that help them understand advertising** or the economics of media industries. To understand media's role in the democratic process, an understanding of the persuasive genres is essential. Today, algorithmic personalization leads people to receive highly customized persuasive messages that are designed to reinforce existing beliefs and attack opponents. Some kinds of persuasion have been shown to reduce trust in government institutions. **But our survey found that this important topic is rarely introduced in middle-school or high schools.**

**This law will enable funding to support the integration of media literacy in civic education in Rhode Island.**

Teachers specifically indicated they wanted to gain confidence in the following classroom activities:

- **Compare and Contrast.** Students compare and contrast two different forms of media to identify similarities and differences in content, format, target audience, and point of view.
- **Analyze the News.** Students determine the difference between a news story and an opinion story in print and broadcast journalism.
- **Create Media for an Authentic Audience.** A small group of students work collaboratively to create a video and their work is viewed by parents, peers, or the community.
- **Civic Dialogue.** Students reflect on how they use both online and face-to-face expression and communication in their social relationships and learn how to reduce conflict and disrupt hurtful or aggressive talk and actions through dialogue and active listening.
- **Research Project.** Students learn how to generate questions and gather information from multiple sources to learn something new and then summarize what they learned by creating a written work, video, oral presentation, podcast, infographic, or other media project.
- **Present a Strong Point of View.** Students write an article or create a media presentation that advocates for or against a specific action, using reasoning and evidence to defend their point of view.
- **Media Law and Policy.** Students learn about the First Amendment and other laws that empower them as citizens in a democracy and apply social responsibility as both creators and consumers of media messages.

As an internationally recognized expert in media literacy education, I am now working with the Massachusetts State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) on a large project to advance media literacy in social studies education, and we will be releasing our research findings and policy recommendations in August, 2025. Massachusetts state leaders intend their state to become the national leader on media literacy education in civic education. But with the passage of House Bill 5981, Rhode Island can demonstrate national leadership that makes civic education a high priority.

Please invest in the future of our students. There's never been a more important time to support civic education in our state!

Sincerely,



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