

Re: SUPPORT for Rhode Island House Bill H7581 - Strengthening Civic Education & Workforce Readiness

April 25, 2026

Dear Chairman Marvin Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Ande Diaz. I am a trained poll worker in the East Bay and a Tiverton resident.

I am also an educator and scholar-practitioner focused on civic health and workforce development, with over two decades of experience in higher education and nonprofit leadership. I am also a member of the League of Women Voters - Civic Engagement and Voter Education Working Group. **I urge strong support of House Bill H7581** (also known as Senate Bill S2233). Once approved, these bills establish a \$1 million categorical fund for Rhode Island civics education to support implementation of the Civic Literacy Act.¹

The Civic Literacy Act established an important vision: preparing Rhode Island students to live and work in a participatory democracy. This legislation provides dedicated funding for teacher development, student learning, and equitable implementation - specifically \$600,000 for professional development, instructional materials, and student-led civic projects, and \$400,000 for RIDE oversight, accountability, and equitable implementation.²

Without dedicated funding for statewide implementation, the vision of preparing all students cannot be realized - particularly in financially stressed districts - creating new requirements without corresponding resources or sufficient implementation support. As of June 2028, many Rhode Island students in grades 8-12 will not meet graduation requirements.³

Why does this matter to the Finance Committee? Because this is fundamentally an investment decision about whether Rhode Island will fund a policy it has already adopted - so that investment can yield returns for our workforce, economy, and communities.

From my experience in education and workforce development, this investment is clearly needed in three areas:

- **Experiential Learning for Students:** Civics is most impactful when students engage real-world issues through applied learning that supports workforce readiness and prepares students for careers and civic participation.⁴
- **Support for Educators:** Over half of Rhode Island educators currently lack access to civics-focused professional development.⁵
- **Equity and Accountability:** Current policies risk uneven implementation, where access depends on a student's zip code.⁶

By way of example: Last year, I attended a civic showcase in Massachusetts, where I witnessed a gymnasium full of eighth-grade students eagerly presenting their work. Their projects addressed real-world issues - from AI use to water quality and environmental sustainability.

What stood out was the depth of engagement: students explaining their research, weighing multiple perspectives, and proposing solutions to their local elected officials. These same skills are developed through project-based civic learning and structured dialogue across differences - what scholars call the arts of democracy, and what experienced educators simply recognize as good teaching.

These are not abstract outcomes; they are directly tied to workforce readiness. Employers want to hire graduates who bring these skills - teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and innovation - into the workplace. Massachusetts is already doing this, supported by sustained investment in civic education that is paying dividends. Without the proposed \$1 million allocation, Rhode Island risks falling behind neighboring Massachusetts in preparing students with these essential skills.

Investment in K-12 civic education yields measurable returns by strengthening both workforce readiness and long-term community stability. It develops critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving aligned with employer demand and long-term economic participation.⁷ Evidence from the Rhode Island Foundation Action Guide further demonstrates how civic education contributes to economic resilience and community wellbeing.⁸

Next month, I will attend the Rhode Island Civic Showcase at the State House on Friday, May 22. I invite members of this Committee to join me. After the event, I would gladly meet for a drink or coffee to reflect together on what we observed. Please know if I can be a resource to any colleagues working towards the shared goal of strengthening Rhode Island's education system and workforce - I would be honored. Rhode Island has made a clear promise of civic education for our youth. Categorical funding allows us to keep that promise.

I urge a favorable vote.

Sincerely,
Dr. Andrea N. Diaz
140 Hooper Street
Tiverton, RI 02878

Endnotes:

1. Rhode Island Civic Learning Coalition (2024). Policy Overview - <https://www.ricivics.org/policy>
2. Rhode Island General Assembly (2026). House Bill H7581 - <https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/BillText/BillText26/HouseText26/H7581.pdf>
3. CIRCLE at Tufts University (2022). State of Civic Education in Rhode Island - <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-civic-education-rhode-island>
4. CIRCLE at Tufts University (2022), pp. 6-9 - <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-civic-education-rhode-island>
5. Rhode Island Civic Learning Coalition (2024) - <https://www.ricivics.org/policy>
6. CIRCLE at Tufts University (2022), pp. 10-14 - <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-civic-education-rhode-island>
7. CIRCLE at Tufts University (2022) - <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-civic-education-rhode-island>
8. Rhode Island Foundation (2023). Civic Health Action Guide - https://assets.rifoundation.org/documents/RI-Action-Guide-for-Improving-Civic-Health_FINAL.pdf