



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

April 28, 2026

Re: Testimony in Support of House 7581: RELATING TO EDUCATION -- THE EDUCATION EQUITY AND PROPERTY TAX RELIEF ACT

Dear Chairman Abney and distinguished members of the House Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on H7581, which establishes a new categorical funding category for civics education.

My name is Hillary Lima, and I serve as Policy and Coalition Strategy Manager for Generation Citizen's New England team, specifically supporting the State of Rhode Island.

Founded by two students at Brown University in 2010, Generation Citizen is a leading national civic education nonprofit dedicated to providing hands-on, community-based civic education. We work to build our democracy by equipping and inspiring young people to be civically engaged in their local communities. Currently, Generation Citizen is working with over 3,600 students across 10 districts in Rhode Island, and this year, we are training and coaching 62 teachers in the state.

Generation Citizen founded the Rhode Island Civic Learning Coalition in 2020, which now includes more than 40 active organizations, students, teachers, and community leaders committed to supporting and prioritizing civic engagement and learning in RI. In 2021, we supported the Civic Literacy Act, which took a crucial step towards ensuring that Rhode Island students receive high-quality civic education by establishing a required half-credit in civics. This act gave students hands-on opportunities to build and apply their knowledge of our system of federalism, make evidence-based claims, and tackle real-world problems at a local scale. Our extensive work in RI and across the country has me here today in support of H7581 so that we can take the following steps to realize the promise of the Civic Literacy Act.

Civics has historically been seen as a nice-to-have across the country. H7581 would create a substantial and much-needed funding source through a categorical line item for comprehensive teacher professional development, curriculum development, student-led civic projects, community partnerships, and program evaluation. Currently, federal funding for civic education is less than 50 cents per student, compared with \$54 per student for STEM. Before 2023, federal funding for civics was about 10 cents per student. At the state level, 18 states offer some form of funding for civic education programs, with 4 providing only one-time/pilot funding. Other states vary in how much money they direct and the specific programs and areas they direct money towards, such as teacher professional development vs money for agencies to implement policies like Civic Excellence Recognitions. Notably, in 2020-2021, Massachusetts established a

\$1.5 million Civic Trust Fund to fund some of the categories addressed in H7581 and has increased their commitment to the trust fund over the past few years to \$2.5 million.

The historical underfunding of civic education has directly contributed to our country's growing civic illiteracy today. This was observed in our students recently through the first dip in NAEP civic scores in over two decades. Moreover, the lack of resources and access is felt even more intensely by underserved communities such as low-income and rural communities, and mainly by Black and Brown students. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and RI Civic Learning Coalition study reported that non-white students and those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds expressed much less confidence in their civic knowledge and civic dispositions than their white and high-socioeconomic-background peers.

A slew of data underscores the same underlying point: young people's faith in democracy is faltering at an alarming rate, and we must heed the call to action. A report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and Protect Democracy, published in April 2025, demonstrated that only 36% of Gen Z believe our democracy as it is today is sufficient to address the issues facing the country today, while only 16% agree that democracy is working well for young people. The Institute for Citizens and Scholars' Civic Outlook of Young Adults in America found that 57% of 18-24-year-olds are dissatisfied with our political system, while over half expressed little to no trust in government institutions. The only way to combat this is to equip our youth with the tools they need to assert their agency and understand their stake in ensuring our democracy functions and evolves as necessary.

Now more than ever, in a time of great uncertainty and faltering faith in our democracy among our young people, it is essential to invest in our teachers and students to ensure they are equipped with the tools and skills needed to teach and participate in a 21st-century democracy. This committee has an opportunity to ensure that RI leads the country in delivering a high-quality civic learning experience for our future leaders by committing to ensuring that all students, not just those who can afford it, have access to a civic education that engages them beyond the rote memorization of historical facts and towards the applied action and repetition of civic skills that are necessary for continued civic engagement. As they do in science courses when they take science labs, our young people need hands-on, experiential civics to engage in their learning meaningfully.

This legislation is particularly personal for me, as someone who had the privilege of growing up with parents who paid attention to current events, both local and national, taught me how to engage with my local government and how to vote, and supported my passion for civics beyond the classroom. I believe that every child should have the opportunity to learn durable skills that empower them in their professional and personal lives and prepare them for productive and responsible civic leadership - regardless of their socioeconomic status and educational circumstances.

Thank you for your time and for giving me the opportunity to speak in favor of Bill H7581. I urge you to move this bill to a vote.

Sincerely,

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