

Subject: SUPPORT for S2233 / H7581 – Equity and Accountability in Civics

April 27, 2026

Dear Chairs O'Brien, Plume, and Members of the Finance Committee:

I am writing to express my strong support for **S2233 and H7581**, which will dedicate \$1 million in funding to ensure equitable civic education across the state of Rhode Island. My name is Natalie Fenn, and I am a licensed clinical psychologist and researcher with the Alpert Medical School of Brown University. My opinions shared are my own.

I support these bills because I am deeply invested in the civic health of our state. Research shows that civic engagement is associated with better mental and physical health. Further, civic engagement is critical to community well-being and upholding a healthy, democratic society. However, this work can be difficult and often comes with logistical, emotional, and political challenges to navigate. It is essential that we equip young people with the necessary skills to navigate these challenges successfully, both for their own health and for the health of our communities.

As a clinician and researcher, I have personally witnessed how civic education can transform lives. As one young adult shared with me, he was feeling depressed and isolated in his home most days until he joined a civic volunteer program that educated him on how to effectively organize in his community. Other clients have shared how investing in their communities has empowered them to become agents of change while connecting them to much-needed social support.

This work does not happen on its own, especially for those in our state who live in under-resourced areas. By prioritizing student population size, socioeconomic status, and various dimensions of need, RIDE can ensure that funding is distributed equitably and that students of all backgrounds can afford high-quality civics.

I also want to highlight the importance of the RI Civic Readiness Task Force. This bill ensures a continuous feedback loop where parents, students, and community advocates have a formalized role in advising the state. This isn't just about writing a check; it's about building an annual cycle of accountability and community-led improvement. Let's make sure every child in Rhode Island has the opportunity to become a lifelong, engaged citizen. The civic health of our young people depends upon it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N Fenn', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Natalie Fenn, PhD