

Testimony to the Senate Committee on Education

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As a teacher of Monroe Middle School, and a citizen of Oregon, I am here to testify about the importance of civic and social studies education to our students.

Introduction

As a teacher, teaching in the 21st century, I have experienced first-hand the challenge in finding resources and support for real authentic learning in my social studies classes. However, this year I saw a real turn around with my students when I began using some of Classroom Law Project's experiential programs. History and civics can be merely a "reading of the past" added to, "why do I have to know this," if you cannot find a way to engage students in an active and meaningful way. Using these programs, I was able to connect the, "learn about the past," with civics and democracy today! In a world where today's young people are bombarded with social media to learn about their state and their country, the active inquiry that comes from learning through Mock Trials and Project Citizen have combined to create thoughtful students with a genuinely meaningful desire to understand the workings of their community.

My Story

As a middle school teacher of 20+ years I am in a special position to be the first person, outside a student's family, to introduce young people to civics and the process of democracy in our country. This is a huge responsibility and one I do not take lightly. *It is imperative that we educate this generation to be an educated, thoughtful and engaged population.* Which is why teachers, me included, spend so much time trying to find and develop civic lessons that engage students in the democratic process. Not just superficial lessons, but lessons that combine with the history of our country, the constitution and include, analytical inquiry, writing, accurate research, and most importantly, discussion and collaboration with their peers and their community. I have spent the greater part of 20 years trying to create the wheel on this. Then a year ago I participated in CLP workshops to create Mock Trials and Project Citizen, and my toughest class has turned into my most engaged class.

With budgets tight and class sizes of 35 and more at the middle level, there is rarely enough money for professional development for social studies. Most money is spent on areas that are tested, specifically: math, reading, writing and science. One of the most valuable aspects of the

experiential programs is their ability to combine Active Civics engagement with tested areas, as well as history content.

Let me give you an example: as a block teacher I wanted to bring civics and our study of the constitution together. Working with CLP, we created a Middle School Mock trial that did just that. We combined the Bill of Rights, Three Branches of government, Constitutional Amendments, together with the Literary story, *Harrison Bergeron*, and created a Mock Trial. Students, working at the end of school year, around SBAC testing were completely engaged and excited about their learning. With CLP's support, we were able to arrange for our Mock Trial to culminate before a real judge at the Federal Courthouse in Eugene. All of our 8th graders pled their cases, presented evidence, listened and objected to irrelevant information and spoke in front of their peers with confidence. Our school's 8th graders consider it the greatest activity that got to do in middle school. Suddenly, reading, writing, speaking and research, became fun and meaningful.

I also recently attended the Project Citizen Showcase here at the Capital in Salem. Again, complete engagement of a class of students who worked with their local communities to solve real problems in their city. Mobile hygiene centers, deforestation issues, and many others became projects tackled in a classroom. They reached out to their mayors and legislators and partnered with other non-profit organizations to work on solving these tough and complex issues. They even testified using their research and knowledge before their own town councils and were awarded \$1,000,000.00 to put their plan into action. How can you not want more of this kind of active engagement for today's youth? The students I questioned after their presentation said they were excited to continue working with their classmates on this project even though as a class it was concluded. Students were empowered to take their learning out of the classroom and apply into their world. It is the dream every teacher who teaches wishes to find.

What this committee should know/do about civics/social studies education in Oregon.

Democracy is by definition a governing through the participation of its members. That participation helped establish universal public education in America for all its citizens. That education of our children to not only understand democracy but to *participate* in it preserves democracy itself. But, because of the focus on literacy and math testing, funding for civics and social studies has been limited and the classes themselves have been reduced. In some schools in our district, social studies has been reduced to an elective or cut so small very little history is covered, much less civics. This limits our students' opportunities to learn civics skills and knowledge that are so important to their future's. It also leaves teachers fending for themselves to find quality resources and materials to teach civics in an engaging but meaningful way.

Why Civics Education matters.

However, with programs like the ones I've described to fulfill this need there is hope for our Civics future. It truly takes a village to bring so many amazing pieces together for an authentic experience for our students. And trust me, it's worth it. To see those light bulbs go on and see their excitement, it was worth every extra hour it took to bring them this opportunity.

I truly believe that teachers do not need to recreate the civics wheel. But they do need training and access to it. By expanding access to vibrant student programs like these and the teacher professional development to support them, you would help revive civics education throughout all regions in Oregon. A revived spirit of civic participation that engages students, and can be witnessed by parents, teachers and civic leaders, is a win for us all.

Conclusion.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story and to express my opinion on the importance of Civics Education for Oregon. These students truly are our future and they will give back to us all that we invest in them today. I believe a strong civics education will enhance that investment and create a brighter future for us all.