



March 10, 2021

Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) of Oregon, we express our strong support for Senate Bill 513.

Our fragile democracy stands at a perilous place. Informed civil discourse and civic engagement have been replaced with partisanship and polarization. There are a number of explanations for this process, but at least one is that we have become "**civics deserts**."<sup>1</sup>

As so well stated by the Pew Center Research Center, "a truly democratic society relies on its citizens to be informed and ready to act. What good is a government of the people, for the people, and by the people if the people themselves have no idea of what their role as citizens entails or to what civic rights as citizens they are entitled."<sup>2</sup>

Research clearly not only shows that knowledge about the fundamentals of our government is appallingly low, but that this level of knowledge represents a steep -- and continuing -- decline since 2011. Nearly a third of Americans cannot name any of the three branches of government. The National Assessment of Educational Progress's most recent report card released in 2015 found that 77% of students scored below proficiency in civics and less than half of 8th graders knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights.<sup>3</sup>

The impact? Public trust in government is at an all-time low and voter participation has reached its lowest point since 1996.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that students who receive effective civics classes are more likely to be engaged citizens throughout their entire lives.<sup>5</sup> Informed citizens know how to ask tough questions of their public officials, which leads to accountability. As Americans decreasingly engage in community and civic activities, they interact less with their fellow citizens. This contributes to the fact that Americans today are becoming increasingly isolated and lonely individuals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Atwell, John Bridgeland and Peter Levine, *Civic Deserts: America's Civic Health Challenge*, National Conference on Citizenship, October 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *Key Reasons Why Students Should Learn about Civics*, Civics-Online, <https://www.civics-online.org/civics-education/key-reasons-why-students-should-learn-about-civics/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jake Thomas, Nonprofits, *State Office Try to Fill the Gap*, Oregon Capitol Insider, 1 January 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Annenberg Public Policy Center, "Americans' Knowledge of the Branches of Government Is Declining," September 2016, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-knowledge-of-the-branches-of-government-is-declining/>; Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958– 2017," 3 May 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Civic Deserts*, cited above.

It is difficult to determine the substance and scope of civics instruction in Oregon, but it's clearly a patchwork. If one examines a chart of high school civics education requirements by state, Oregon joins a handful of other states which require no civics education.<sup>6</sup>

Many of Oregon's schools attempt to populate the "civics desert" by providing some civics coursework as part of the Social Sciences curriculum, but offering courses is not the same as taking courses.

Non-profits have also attempted to fill the gap, but these programs often require payment of attendance fees which excludes a number of students, thereby depriving them of opportunities to mature into well-informed, active participants in our society.

If we wish to reinvigorate and strengthen our democratic process, we need to provide our young people with the tools to become citizens. This isn't a matter of which political party one is, or isn't, a member of, but of understanding what politics is and how it operates. It is a matter of fostering community, trust in our public institutions and knowledge of the democratic process.

We respectfully urge you to support Senate Bill 513.

Respectfully,

*Trish Garner, J.D., M.S.W.*  
*State Public Policy Chair,*  
*American Association of University Women of Oregon*  
*garner37@mac.com*

---

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, *The State of Civics Education*, Center for American Progress, 21 February 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/02/21/446857/state-civics-education/>.