

Submitter: isabela villarreal
On Behalf Of: Next Up Action Fund
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB5006

My name is Isabela Villarreal, and I am the Policy and Communications Director at Next Up. For over 20 years, our nonpartisan nonprofit organization has amplified the voice and leadership of diverse young people to create a more just and equitable Oregon. Our work centers on youth leadership development, civic engagement, and advocating for improvements to our democratic system. Thus, we are in strong support of HB 3012, which would allow eligible and registered 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in nonpartisan school board elections starting in 2029, giving students a critical voice in their education thereby strengthening our democracy.

We believe in the power and voice of young people to shape our future. Their firsthand, current experience as students provides them with invaluable perspectives and insights that deserve to be heard.

Every day, school board members make incredibly important decisions that directly impact the lives of students. Yet, most high school students don't have the opportunity to determine who is on their school board and shaping their educational home. HB 3012 is an excellent opportunity to build schools that foster robust and flourishing civic engagement opportunities and healthy school environments.

In 2021, our organization led and supported various legislative efforts to ensure that all students have the nonpartisan civics education they need to be engaged community members. SB 513, which passed with bipartisan support, now requires all high school students to graduate with .5 credits in a civics education class; SB 702 passed as well, which emphasizes civic education and nonpartisan information on how to vote. These are wonderful and laudable steps forward to increase the civic awareness and skills of young people, and yet, lessons on civic engagement can only become real when paired with concrete opportunities to exercise civic responsibility, such as casting a vote for nonpartisan school board races.

We have the responsibility to shepherd and instill a culture of civic engagement in the young people of Oregon. There is no better time — nor a more impactful and relevant opportunity — than to begin voting while students are still in classrooms taking civics classes, engaging in discussions about local government, and doing research. 18 is a time of enormous transition, whether it be starting their first full time job and/or going off to college or trade school. I'm sure many of us remember the many new experiences we were facing at that point in time, and how precarious it was to add on a completely new habit that had never been practiced before that point. Schools, families, and community members already trust 16 and 17 year olds to begin taking

on skills they will use for the rest of their lives, such as driving, working, and paying taxes. Healthy habits formed early are likely to last a lifetime and it stands to reason that voting is an incredibly important one to learn.

We thank the Oregon legislators who have continued to invest in improvements to our election system such as paid postage for all ballots, voter pre-registration for 16 and 17 year olds, online voter registration and much more. Our organization has supported these important efforts, and we believe that the Student Voice and Democracy Act is a critical part of Oregon's legacy to ensure that all eligible voters have the freedom to vote.

A dozen jurisdictions across the United States already allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote. Additionally, 19 states allow 17 year olds to vote in primary elections if they are 18 by the general election, thus demonstrating that this age bracket is well equipped to begin voting for their local school board members.

We urge you all to pass the Student Voice and Democracy Act, HB 3012.