

RYAN A. BIZZARRO, CHAIRMAN

116 MAIN CAPITOL BUILDING
P.O. BOX 202003
HARRISBURG, PA 17120-2003
(717) 772-2297



HOUSE MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE

PAHOUSE.COM/POLICY

POLICY@PAHOUSE.NET

    @PADEMPOLICY

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Civics Education

Monday, September 8, 2025 | 1:00 p.m.

Representative Tim Brennan

OPENING REMARKS

1:00 p.m. Rep. Tim Brennan, D-Bucks

INTRODUCTION

1:05 p.m. Gov. Mark Schweiker
44th Governor of Pennsylvania

PANEL ONE

1:15 p.m. Rep. Joe Hoeffel, Former Congressman
U.S. House of Representatives (PA-13)

Rep. James Gerlach, Former Congressman
U.S. House of Representatives (PA-6)

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL TWO

1:45 p.m. Lauren Cristella, President
Committee of Seventy

Shannon Salter Burghardt, Educator
Allentown School District



Testimony Before House Democratic Policy Committee

September 8, 2025

Chairman and members of the committee – thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in today’s policy hearing regarding civics education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

I am Jim Gerlach and I co-chair, along with my former colleague in Congress, Joe Hoeffel, former Senate President Pro Tem Joe Scarnati, former House Speaker Keith McCall, and former State Reps. Karen Boback and Kathy Mandarino, a nonprofit, bipartisan coalition of 25 partner organizations called PA Civics. Our mission is to promote civics education in our state and, if you access our website at pacivics.org, you will note the broad array of organizations who have joined us in our efforts – from the National Constitution Center to the PA Bar Association, the Heinz History Center, the Rendell Center for Civic Engagement, the PA Chamber, Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts, Bill of Rights Institute, the Jack Miller Center, and many other great organizations. We are especially pleased to also have the Committee of Seventy, who I believe will also provide testimony today, be our lead administrative partner. For without their terrific day-to-day support, we would not have experienced the progress that our coalition has made in the past five years.

PA Civics began in 2018 when the Former Members of Congress Association (FMC) reached out to former members across the country asking for us to get involved in bipartisan efforts to promote and advance civics in our individual states. That call to action in turn got me and fellow co-chair Congressman Joe Hoeffel engaged in outreach to our early partners at the Rendell Center, National Constitution Center, and Committee of Seventy to strategize on how we can collectively help drive civics education forward. At that point, Act 35 had also just been signed into law by Gov. Wolf, so we specifically focused on how that Act was being implemented and what impact it was having on civics education in the state.

Unfortunately, just when we were anxiously awaiting statewide implementation of the Act, COVID hit and our schools, quite understandably, were unable to fully comply with the Act’s civic assessment provisions. Nonetheless, once our schools began fully implementing the Act, it became clear to us that the Act, while passed with a laudatory purpose, is relatively weak in uniformly advancing civics across the state. The Act simply requires that our students undergo a “civics assessment” at some point between grades 7–12 and that the schools, which determine what the assessment actually is and when it is given, then report their results to the state Department of Education. DOE then collects the assessment results from around the state and can report on how many schools complied with the assessment requirement and how many students passed the assessment in their school. However, these results really don’t tell us much in terms of actual civics proficiency since the substance of the civics tests can vary widely from school to school, and it can be given anywhere from grade 7 through 12. So DOE is, in reality, getting test results from students assessed in up to six different grade levels across over 501 school districts and charter schools utilizing a multitude of different assessment tools. As such,



trying to collate all of that information year to year to then determine the actual level of our students' civics proficiency is extremely difficult if not impossible. Consequently, we at PA Civics decided that if we want to truly advance civics education in the state, we have to focus on four primary areas.

In short, we believe the legislature can provide real leadership in shaping our state's civics education environment for this and coming generations. Here is where we believe you can really help—

1. We must work to update our state's civics and history academic standards, which haven't been updated pursuant to the PA School Code in over 20 years. Without clear, uniform, and grade-appropriate standards, the three pillars of outstanding civics education— (a) knowledge of our history and government structure, (b) skills necessary to engage in the community on issues of importance, and (c) pursuing pathways for civic action— simply cannot be properly taught consistently across the state. The Thomas Fordham Institute in 2021 recognized this weakness in our current standards by giving us the grade of “F” in the quality, clarity, and uniformity of our standards versus other states. And while we certainly believe our civics ed teachers in PA are as good as any in the United States, they can only work within the environment of the standards they are required to implement, so we need to move the State Board of Education process of updating and modernizing our standards forward as soon as possible so we can ultimately maximize the civics education experiences our students receive.
2. We must improve Act 35 itself so there is more consistency and uniformity around when students are tested, and the assessment tool that is specifically used to do that testing, which will thereby provide our teachers, government officials, and the public a much greater understanding—on a year-to-year basis—into how well we are preparing our future citizen-leaders regardless if they are in an urban, suburban, or rural district.
3. With better and more consistent information from our schools on how our students are performing year to year, we can continue to work with our civics teachers to provide them with best-in-nation resources, training, and professional development. Many of our PA Civics partners already provide outstanding teacher development programming, but year-to-year student assessment results will greatly help in developing new and innovative grade-based curricula and improving overall teacher development programming and resources over time.
4. And finally, when our students and civics teachers do great work, and our schools are markedly improving their civics education performance, we should all want to recognize and honor those achievers. So we believe civics seals on graduation diplomas, and teacher and school recognition initiatives, are wonderful ways to highlight civics education achievement across the state.



Of course, these initiatives cannot be undertaken overnight. However, as we head into our nation's 250th celebration next year, we have a tremendous opportunity to continue our collective efforts to build great citizens in our Commonwealth. As Baruch Spinoza once said—"Great citizens are not born, they are made!" And I think we can all agree that our schools play a pivotal role in the making of great citizens. In fact, our fellow citizens recognize the role of schools in this endeavor. In a 2022 Cyngal survey, 79% of those surveyed agreed that teaching civics is important and over two-thirds said that it is more important today than five years ago.

We agree! That is why we are extremely excited to be discussing various initiatives with House Education Chairman Peter Schweyer, Minority Chairman Bryan Cutler, Senate Education Chair Lynda Schlegel-Culver, and Minority Chair Lindsey Williams. We have been most impressed with their great interest in the future of civics education in Pennsylvania, and we look forward to continuing to work with them, you, and your colleagues.

Our PA Civics coalition firmly believes that the window of opportunity for bipartisan, collective action to move Pennsylvania to the top in quality civics education is right before us. And we can achieve that hugely important success if we all recognize that the future of America is closely tied to how well we prepare our children here in the Commonwealth to be the knowledgeable and engaged leaders we will need them to be.

Thank you so much for inviting us to join you today and for making civics education the subject of this policy hearing!

Former Congressmen Jim Gerlach and Joe Hoeffel

Co-chairs, PA Civics



Remarks to the PA House Majority Policy Committee
Lauren Cristella, President & CEO, Committee of Seventy
September 8, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Bizzarro and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to discuss how we can work together to improve civic education and increase civic participation in Pennsylvania. My name is Lauren Cristella, President and CEO of the Committee of Seventy.

The Committee of Seventy is a nonpartisan civic leadership organization that advances representative, ethical, and effective government in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania through citizen engagement and public advocacy. For more than 120 years, we have promoted, supported, and facilitated government ethics and civic participation.

The timing of this conversation is especially important as we approach the 250th anniversary of the founding of our nation, civic engagement remains historically low in many communities, and civic education has broad public support across the political spectrum.

My organization is based in Philadelphia, where we recently saw incredibly low levels of participation in our primary election. Some divisions reported voter turnout in the single digits. We know that your vote is your voice. But their absence from the polls is speaking volumes. This must serve as a call to action for all of us.

But we don't need to rely on anecdotal evidence of low engagement. Research consistently shows concerning trends regarding civic participation and respect for the rule of law. A 2023 survey from the American Public Media Research Lab found that only 27% of Americans aged 18 to 25 strongly agreed that democracy is the best system of government.

A poll from international research firm More in Common shows that a concerning 47% of Gen Z agrees that "sometimes it's okay for leaders to set aside democratic principles such as constitutional checks and balances to fix the economy." That is significantly higher than in other generations.

We should also recognize that we are too often faced with a false dichotomy in presenting how we are teaching civics that distracts us from increasing support for civic education. It is not a question of focusing solely on factual knowledge or dispositions and actions. It's knowledge, skills and actions.

Americans of all ideologies and walks of life want young people to learn about political issues, how the government works, how they can get involved in their communities, and how they can vote. Research out of the University of Southern California's Dornsife Center for Applied Research in Education shows that even in our polarized times, Civics Education garners bipartisan support. A national survey in 2024 demonstrates high overall support for civics education in schools across both parties:



- 64% of Republicans and 80% of Democrats think kids should learn about political issues and current events
- 95% of Republicans and 94% of Democrats think kids should learn about how the US government works
- 75% of Republicans and 84% of Democrats think students should learn how they can get involved in local government or politics (with a +6% increase in Republican support for this since 2021)
- 88% of Republicans and 90% of Democrats support teaching the requirements for voting
- 97% of both Republicans and Democrats believe being prepared for adult life and being good citizens are the most important educational outcomes for students

With this context, we see just how vital it is for students to not just learn more than just content knowledge. They also need to be taught what it means to be a citizen in a community, and to develop the skills to be engaged citizens. They need experience putting into practice their rights and responsibilities of citizenship. These three pillars (knowledge, skills, and actions) form the basis of a high-quality civics education that will allow students to engage in their democracy meaningfully upon graduation.

At the Committee of Seventy, we work to help teachers bring civic education to life through a variety of programs. Our mock election and student-candidate interview series give students practice understanding the candidates and offices on the ballot every election and prepare themselves to become voters when they are eligible. Our *Democracy for Kids* program invites students in elementary school to start thinking about how they can be engaged members of their community. Our *Can We Talk?* program gives students the tools to have productive civil dialogue with people from different backgrounds and beliefs. Our *How Philly Works* materials, which help Philadelphia residents understand the ins and outs of their city, have been adapted into a high school curriculum.

We are incredibly proud to sponsor PA Civics. PA Civics is a coalition of former elected officials and 25 non-partisan, non-profit organizations committed to supporting, promoting, and expanding civic education in Pennsylvania. PA Civics connects stakeholders who believe in the importance of civic education. It was formed after the passage of Act 35 of 2018 to support the state's implementation of the law.

At PA Civics, we aim for Pennsylvania to have the highest level of civic proficiency in the nation, among both students and residents. We further this goal through partnerships and by creating resources for teachers and schools. We recognize that classroom time is limited, curriculum requirements are high, and teachers' time is valuable. We want to help them engage their students in meaningful civic education to ensure they are involved in their communities after graduation.

Our work is focused around professional development for educators, providing out-of-the-box, ready-to-use classroom resources from our members, high-quality programs for teachers and the general public, and consultation on public policy for the General Assembly and PDE.



As you likely know, PA Civics is the convener of the Civic Education Working Group, which pursues bicameral, bipartisan solutions to the civics crisis. We work with input from legislators, PDE, education leaders, and community stakeholders across the Commonwealth. The Working Group helps identify improvements to state civics standards and requirements for instruction.

The adoption of Act 35 in 2018 was an incredibly important step in increasing civic education in our Commonwealth, but it falls short of what is needed for a comprehensive civic education. The review of three years of Act 35 assessment data highlights how little it tells us about the quality of civic education in Pennsylvania. We only know the number of students who took an exam, the number who passed, how many scored 100%, if the test was locally created or a copy of the USCIS Naturalization Test, the course affiliated with the assessment, and student grade level. This data does not even tell us what the tests are measuring, much less give us meaningful insights into the quality of civic education students receive. It's no wonder why in 2021, Pennsylvania was one of 20 states rated "inadequate" based on their state standards for civics and U.S. history.

There are opportunities for the General Assembly to pass bipartisan improvements to Act 35 in a way that avoids the partisan fights that have infected other states' discussions on this topic. Parents should be involved in the civic education of their students. Teachers should be trusted to talk about current events without framing them in a partisan lens. Districts should be provided with the resources to expand professional development opportunities for their educators.

For starters, Pennsylvania's state social studies standards have not been updated since 2002. Before the country focuses its attention on Pennsylvania for the semiquincentennial celebrations next year, we should be able to say that the State Board of Education has commenced that revision process.

Another area where we feel there can be immediate consensus is around the adoption of seals of civic readiness. These incentive-based programs have already been implemented in other states and give both students and schools the opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency in learning about and teaching the knowledge, skills, and actions that define a student who is ready to be an engaged citizen.

Several states now offer civic seals that require students to show knowledge, skills, and real-world engagement through action-oriented projects. In New York, educators report that the Seal of Civic Readiness has boosted students' confidence, critical thinking, and investment in civic life. As one teacher said of a capstone project, students were "not just worried about passing a test ... they feel like they have actually accomplished something."

These insights point to meaningful shifts in students' civic attitudes and behaviors. Let's act now to ensure every young Pennsylvanian leaves school ready to participate fully in our democracy. Our country's 250th anniversary is the perfect moment to recommit to civic education. Together,



we can equip every student with the knowledge, skills, and experiences to be active citizens and ensure our democracy thrives for the next 250 years.

TO: Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee

FM: Shannon Salter Burghardt

Teacher, Allentown School District

Adjunct Professor, Social Studies Teacher Preparation, Reach University

Steering Committee Member and Teacher Leadership Task Force Chairperson,
Educating for American Democracy

Re: Civics Education: Ensuring Civic Preparation for All Students in the Commonwealth

Date: September 4, 2025

To the honorable members of the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee,

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania justifiably prides ourselves on being the Cradle of Liberty. The 250-year-old experiment in democratic self-government was born here in 1776, an event we all look forward to celebrating in just a few months. As soon as our Founders turned their attention from the fight for independence to the needs of a newly-born republic, they concluded that this experiment in democratic self-government would require an investment in publicly-supported education if it was to succeed. If people are to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to serve in their role as “We the People,” they need preparation. As we approach the celebration of 250 years of government by the people, it is only fitting that we take stock of our performance here in the Commonwealth, to ensure that we are making good on that promise of educating the next generation to inherit the rights and privileges of democratic self-government.

Unfortunately, an assessment of our delivery of civic preparation to Pennsylvania’s students finds our Commonwealth lacking in several key areas. We can measure commitment to and delivery of high quality civics education by looking for some key indicators: graduation requirements, state standards, and accountability for student learning. In 2021, the Thomas B Fordham Institute published [The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021](#), which included a state-by-state report card based upon those indicators. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania received a grade of “F” for both US History and Civics. The following 3 factors lead to this assessment.

1. While PA does require 3 ½ years of High School Social Studies, including 0.5 credit of “US Government,” it is rare for US History and Civics education to occur in earlier grades - especially K-6.
2. PA’s official standards for Social Studies were adopted in 2002. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) refers to a set of “voluntary standards” for social studies (not legally adopted) that were written in 2012. All of this is despite the fact that [22 PA Code 4.12](#) requires all standards to be reviewed and revised every 3 years. In other words, PA’s current official social studies standards are 20 years overdue for revision.
3. While there are elements of the PA Voluntary Social Studies Standards that describe currently accepted best practices in the discipline, the Commonwealth lacks a valid and

reliable accountability measure (for example, an assessment) to ensure student learning meets those standards. PA Act 35 (2018) created an honor system of accountability for the delivery of civic education for PA's 500 school districts, but this system allows Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to decide what they test, how they score the tests, and what level of proficiency is required for a passing grade.

The absence of clear expectations and accountability for the civic preparation of students in the Commonwealth leads to dramatic variability in the opportunities given to our students. School leaders, faced with competing demands for performance in higher stakes content areas (especially ELA, Science and Math where students face Keystone Exams prior to graduation), understandably place less focus on instruction in the invisible content area of social studies. Social Studies teachers are less frequently offered discipline-specific ongoing professional development than their peers in tested subjects. Organizations that support teacher development and collaboration in social studies - such as the Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies - are less robust here than in other states. The lack of PDE-facilitated goals for civic learning also means that we are challenged to even provide reliable data about the civics proficiency of Pennsylvania's students.

As bleak as that assessment of the state of civics education in Pennsylvania is, we are also at a moment of great opportunity. The arrival of America 250, with all the related public attention and celebration, creates an ideal atmosphere in which we can rededicate ourselves to the cause of ensuring that every PA student, regardless of learning context, emerges into adult civic life fully prepared to engage. Earlier this year, the [University of Southern California Center for Applied Research published a report](#) confirming the nearly universal, bipartisan support for increased civics education in schools. In focus groups conducted by PA Civics at multiple teacher-events, the social studies teachers of Pennsylvania have shown tremendous capacity for delivering high-quality civic engagement opportunities for students, while sharing a universal desire for greater support and resources. In the years since the Carnegie Foundation supported CIRCLE at Tufts University to produce the [Civic Mission of Schools](#) report in 2002, tremendous innovation has happened across the field with regards to state standards, incentives, and accountability surrounding civics learning. We now have the opportunity to learn from the field-tested models of a diverse collection of states. There is also still room for PA to lead the nation with additional programs suggested by ongoing research but not yet implemented anywhere in the country. Among the practices we have the opportunity to consider:

1. As many as 10 states have implemented *Seals of Civic Literacy* as tools to create both incentives and accountability around student civic learning. These graduation-level seals offer the ability to measure and reward student acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (the three pillars of civics education), in ways that simple assessments cannot capture. Civics Seals also offer flexibility and respect for local decision-making (crucial in a local-control of education environment like Pennsylvania) that is hard to achieve with standardized testing alone.
2. Many states are considering, but have yet to adopt, an Elementary Civic Seal. Pennsylvania could pioneer the creation of a celebration of elementary engagement in

civic learning. A program such as this would be a tool for fostering re-engagement with social studies content in younger grades - a practice already [shown to increase literacy development more substantially than increasing direct instruction in reading](#).

3. Many states have completed revisions to their social studies standards guided by non-partisan frameworks that articulate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for effective civics education. Few states have done this without support. Pennsylvania's primary partner for facilitating standards revision - [the American Institutes for Research](#) - is experienced in supporting the social studies standards-revision process in diverse contexts.
4. Pennsylvania is the home to a robust coalition of civics-related institutions and organizations. These organizations are ready, willing, and able to support the teacher-development needed for PA schools to rapidly increase their capacity to deliver more rigorous civics learning. In addition, there are many leading national civics education organizations eager to engage with greater numbers of Pennsylvania teachers as we grow the ability of our educators to deliver excellence in civics education for all students. These organizations include (but aren't limited to):
 - a. In Pennsylvania: The National Constitution Center, The Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement, The PA Bar Association, the National Liberty Museum, the Senator John Heinz History Center, the Jack Miller Center, PA Youth Vote, Founding Forward, Eastern State Penitentiary, the Committee of Seventy.
 - b. National Organizations: The Bill of Rights Institute, iCivics, the News Literacy Project, Generation Citizen, the Center for Civic Education, Sphere Education

We have work to do in the Commonwealth in order to deliver what Abraham Lincoln called a *new birth of freedom* when he visited Pennsylvania in 1863. Our potential is great and our democratic values are strong. In 2024, Pennsylvania saw 68% of eligible voters participate in the election - higher than the national average of 65%. Our young people are interested in voting and elections, as seen by the popularity of our [Governor's Civic Engagement Award](#), which recognizes schools for youth voter registration and creates a framework for training and hiring high school students as poll workers. Our young people are ready and willing to become the next generation of *We the People*, and our teachers are ready to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to do so. What we need now is action from our elected representatives to build the infrastructure to guarantee that every student in Pennsylvania has equal opportunity to take their place as well-informed and capable members of our civic communities.