

Michael Butkiewicz

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Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

SB 204 Public Schools - Maryland Civic Excellence Program - Established

Bill Hearing Date February 4th, 2026

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Honorable Committee Members,

My name is Michael Butkiewicz, and I am an author and civic-education researcher from Montgomery County whose work has appeared across regional outlets. I write today in support of SB 204, though my support is grounded not in the belief that this bill is a comprehensive solution, but in the recognition that Maryland currently lacks any statewide structure for recognizing civic engagement. In a landscape defined by absence, even an incremental step carries real value.

I want to be candid about the limitations. The bill decentralizes criteria for the Seal of Civic Excellence, which means students in different counties may face different thresholds for what “excellence” entails. That inconsistency is not trivial. It reflects a broader reality that Maryland has no statewide incentive structure that treats civic learning with the seriousness afforded to STEM or literacy under ESSA. Civics is taught, but it is not prioritized, and students often struggle to see how their civic knowledge connects to real-world participation.

While not a comprehensive solution, SB 204 creates an important opportunity to make civic engagement visible and valued. My research, spanning institutional design and the history of civic-republican thought, consistently leads me to the same conclusion: a republic cannot rely on participation alone; it requires a knowledgeable citizenry capable of judgment, dialogue, and responsibility. We have long taken for granted that these capacities will simply emerge. They do not. They must be cultivated.

Maryland’s civic educators already do extraordinary work, but they operate without a statewide signal that civic engagement is valued. A voluntary, additive recognition, one that does not impose new graduation requirements or unfunded mandates, offers a pragmatic way to elevate civic learning without repeating the

concerns raised during debates over HB 1157 (2021). This bill respects local control while creating a statewide incentive pathway that has been missing for decades.

SB 204 will not solve every structural challenge in civic education, but it will do something essential: it makes civic engagement visible. I hope this program can serve as a foundation the General Assembly may build upon as Maryland develops a more coherent statewide civic readiness strategy. It will tell students that their contributions to their communities matter. It will tell schools that civic development is not ornamental but foundational. And it will tell the state that, as we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we are willing to invest, modestly but meaningfully, in the next generation of Marylanders who will inherit the work of self-government

Please report favorably on SB 204.

Thank you for your consideration.