



February 2, 2026

Testimony on Information regarding Senate Bill 204: Maryland Civic Excellence Program

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

The News Literacy Project is a nonpartisan education nonprofit that works with teachers, school districts, states and community partners to ensure students receive news literacy instruction before they graduate from high school. During the 2024-25 school year, NLP's free resources were used by 15,000 educators to teach more than 575,000 students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In Maryland, this included more than 270 educators, 9,500 students and over 23 school districts.

Across the country, civic seal programs emphasize that democracy depends on informed and engaged citizens, and schools play a critical role in preparing students for that responsibility. In Maryland, SB 204 presents an opportunity to promote participation in the democratic process and celebrate young people's contributions to their community.

As the Department of Education develops guidelines under SB 204, we encourage lawmakers to affirm news and media literacy as an essential component of civic proficiency and to recognize its critical role in preparing students for democratic participation in the modern information environment.

Students cannot meaningfully engage in civic life if they cannot navigate the current information landscape. Students must learn to evaluate sources, distinguish facts from misinformation, understand how media ecosystems function and recognize how information can be used to influence public opinion. Today's civic discourse is shaped by social media, algorithmic amplification, a rise in misinformation and rapidly changing artificial intelligence technologies. Preparing students for civic participation without these skills leaves them vulnerable and undermines the goals this bill seeks to advance.

True civic literacy also includes understanding the role of the First Amendment and a free press in American democracy, and why an independent, ethical press is essential to an informed public. It also requires an appreciation for professional and ethical standards in journalism, and the ability to apply those standards when evaluating sources and claims. These skills empower students not only to consume information responsibly but also to recognize the difference between evidence-based reporting and content designed to persuade, provoke or mislead. Civic excellence in the 21st century requires news literacy.

Please reach out to me should you have further questions at csalter@newslit.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "CSalter", written in a cursive style.

Charles Salter

President & Chief Executive Officer