

Testimony in Support of House Bill 753
Education—Student-Organized Peaceful Demonstrations—
Student Discipline and Policy

Senate Health, Education, and Environmental Affairs Committee

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The Maryland State Education Association supports House Bill 753, legislation that would prohibit a public school from prohibiting a student from engaging in a student-organized peaceful demonstration or imposing certain limits on a student's right to free speech. Additionally, it would prohibit a public school from disciplining a student for engaging in a student-organized peaceful demonstration under certain circumstances and allows a public school to impose certain limitations on said demonstrations.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

According to survey data from the PRRI/The Atlantic Civic Engagement Survey detailed in a 2018 report from PRRI¹, children who engage in civic and political activities when they are young are more likely to engage in civic activities later in life. Their survey found that,

Americans who say they went to a rally or demonstration with their parents are almost three times as likely as those who did not to score highly on the Civic and Political Engagement Scale, meaning participating in at least four different activities within the last 12 months (50% vs. 18%). Attending a community meeting, such as a school board or city council meeting, as a child

¹ *American Democracy In Crisis: Civic Engagement, Young Adult Activism, and the 2018 Midterm Elections*. Accessed online at <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Civic-Engagement-NovB.pdf> (February 3, 2021)



is also strongly associated with higher rates of civic engagement later in life. Americans who had that experience are about twice as likely as those who did not to report a high level of engagement in the last year (36% vs. 17%).

This same survey found that Americans who were influenced to become active by their teachers were more than twice as likely to be civically engaged and involved than those who said they were not influenced by their teachers (46 percent to 19 percent respectively).²

Educators take very seriously our responsibility to prepare all of our students for college, career, and citizenship. We are alarmed when we see that only 24 percent of our students scored at or above proficient in civics on the 2018 NAEP³ civics achievement assessment. An even greater cause for alarm: this score has not significantly changed when compared to score from both the 2014 and 1998 NAEP assessment.

Our democracy doesn't work if our body politic is uninformed and unengaged. The data is clear. We must teach our young people the importance of civic involvement and encourage them to actively engage at an early age. We must also teach them safe and effective ways in which to exercise their First Amendment rights to peaceably assemble and redress their grievances. School should serve as a laboratory where our students can learn their rights as citizens and practice these rights—at appropriate times and with fair and appropriate guidelines.

Our students deserve agency and a voice in their educations and in their lives. **Therefore, we urge the committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 753.**

² Ibid

³ <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/civics/2018/> (Accessed on February 3, 2021)