



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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Ways and Means Committee Senate Bill 762 – Education – Maryland Civic Excellence Program – Established March 25, 2024

Favorable Report (FAV)

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on Senate Bill 762. My name is Lena Morreale Scott and I serve as the Director of Civic Education & Engagement Initiative for the College of Education and as the Principal Investigator of the Maryland Democracy Initiative at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am also a co-founder and co-chair of the Maryland Civic Education Coalition. I have worked in the field of civic education for more than 35 years as a Maryland public school Social Studies teacher, as curriculum and professional development specialist in a Maryland-based nonprofit civic education organization, as a member and leader of multiple state and national nonpartisan civic education coalitions. At the College of Education, I have taught pre-service Social Studies teachers and I now lead our university's new Maryland Democracy Initiative, which leverages scholars and practitioners from our college as well as our School of Public Policy, the Philip Merrill College of Journalism, and the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences. Together, we strengthen democracy through research, innovative teaching and learning, and democratic engagement opportunities.

I am honored to be here with you today and to express my support for one of the most fundamental ways to strengthen our shared democracy: meaningful, equitable, and high-quality civic education. As you know, an informed and engaged citizenry is essential to representative democracy, responsive government, and to strong communities. SB762 will strengthen democracy education by incentivizing and celebrating students who are especially knowledgeable, prepared, and civically-engaged. It will also incentivize and celebrate schools that demonstrate excellence in preparing students for life-long service and civic engagement.

Survey after survey, study after study, test scores after test scores show that Americans' civic knowledge is remarkably low and that many people lack important civic skills such as dialogue, consensus-building, and information / media literacy. We also know that many people are losing confidence in their ability to make a difference in their democracy. Effective civic education makes a difference. Students who participate in high-quality civics are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and experiences to participate more successfully and they have the agency necessary to believe their participation matters.

With the creation of the Civic Excellence Program, Maryland can reverse an alarming trend which has marginalized the teaching of Social Studies to emphasize reading and math scores at the expense of other competencies, like civic competency. For example, federal spending per pupil spending on civic education is 50 cents compared to \$50 on STEM education. The Maryland Civic Excellence Program gives us the opportunity to rededicate our attention to teaching for civic engagement.

There is good news, too. While there is so much focus on partisanship and division, there are well-established “proven” and “promising” best practices in civic education --- that have been established by cross-partisan scholars and practitioners. There are also exciting innovations happening in civic education, including by many of the educators and civic partners who are members of our Maryland Civic Education Coalition. With The Maryland Civic Excellence Program, we want to ensure that all students have access to those high-quality experiences and that all teachers have access to professional development to ensure they can use high-impact practices with success and fidelity.

We believe SB762 has the power to amplify many of the priorities of the Moore Administration, including the programs and initiatives of the new Department of Service and Civic Innovation. As you know, students must complete 75 hours of service-learning to graduate from high school. Service-learning is one of those high impact civic education practices. Through the Maryland Civic Excellence Program, we can catalyze students’ positive experiences with service-learning to prepare and inspire young people to life-long service and civic engagement.

We recognize the importance of empowering each local school system to develop its own criteria for awarding students and schools with a Civic Excellence Seal, if it opts into the program. Looking ahead, we hope the University of Maryland and our many partners in the Coalition and the Maryland State Department of Education will be able to support district leaders in developing their programs in ways that are measurable, impactful, and equitable. As the program matures, we hope to partner with others to provide school leaders resources to support teacher professional development and innovation. We would also like to see future programs include opportunities for students to be celebrated for participating in civic-themed extra-curricular activities and elective courses from all content areas, not just Social Studies. We know student journalists who cover local news and student “citizen scientists” are engaging in their civic life and contributing to the public good, too! We would also like to see opportunities for outstanding elementary and middle schools to be recognized. Many of our most innovative approaches to service-learning and civic education start with our youngest learners. To be clear, we are not suggesting amendments to the current bill. We are simply enthusiastic about what may be possible in the future. We stand ready to support the program’s success.

Imagine building our shared democracy together, with teaching and learning that celebrates and elevates life-long service and civic participation. The Maryland Civic Excellence Program strengthens the civic mission of our schools and our democracy’s foundation. Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts regarding Senate Bill 762. I appreciate your leadership as well as the leadership of Senators Kagan and Ready on this bipartisan bill. I strongly urge a favorable report.



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