

Andy Ellis  
Seeking the Green Party nomination for Governor  
HB 575  
FAV

When I was in high school, I regularly left school for Frederick City and County government meetings and trips to Washington. I was fortunate. I had teachers and principals who understood that those experiences were educational, not distractions. They made it easy for me to go. Not every student is that lucky.

I went on to become a national champion debate coach, and later served as coordinator of the Baltimore Urban Debate League's middle school program. Our students were frequently engaged in public debates, government hearings, and civic activities during school hours. The ones who participated came back fired up and more confident. Civic education is not something you absorb from a textbook. It is something you practice.

Maryland's public schools serve nearly 900,000 students. Every one of them is required to take a government course. But the system that teaches them about democracy actively discourages them from practicing it. A student who misses school to testify before a legislative committee, attend a public hearing, or participate in a voter registration drive currently risks an unexcused absence. The incentive is clear: stay in your seat and read about democracy. Do not go out and do it.

HB0575 fixes this. It requires the State Department of Education and each county board to adopt attendance policies that excuse absences for civic engagement activities. It does not give students a blank check to skip school. It tells school systems to treat civic participation the same way they treat a field trip — as something worth showing up for.

Students who show up to Annapolis despite these barriers deserve credit, not penalties. Right now the system only counts the students brave enough to take the risk. It misses every student who wanted to come but could not afford the unexcused absence. HB0575 changes what the system rewards.

Our campaign and the Green Party believe deeply in civic engagement. We want universal debate education in public schools. We want kids practicing democracy, not just reading about it. At least one Maryland school system, Howard County, already allows limited excused absences for civic engagement. HB0575 makes that the statewide standard instead of leaving it up to each district.

Maryland asks students to learn about government. This bill asks Maryland to let them practice it.

I encourage this committee to provide a favorable report on HB0575.