



Overview

Illinois has a historic opportunity to restore the role of our schools in educating our next generation of citizens. Legislation has been introduced that would require Illinois high schools to provide a civics education course. Illinois is one of only ten states that does not have such a requirement, and as a result nearly 50% of students in Illinois leave high school without a required civics or government course. As [Representative Deborah Conroy \(D-Villa Park\)](#) stated in sponsoring the legislation, “Many students graduate without even basic knowledge of current events and how to become active members of their communities.” The proposed legislation will help fill this civic education gap, and bring civics back to all our schools.

The Need for Civic Education

Illinois’ civic health is ailing, and our youngest residents graduate high school ill-prepared for informed, effective, and lifelong engagement in our democracy.

- Illinois Millennials (18-29) are less likely to vote in local elections, speak to or exchange favors with neighbors, or work within their communities to solve problems than young people in other states
- 70% of Illinoisans overall have little to no trust in state government
- Minority and low income students have less access to quality civic education, contributing to a lifelong civic participation gap

A [2014 study by the Paul Simon Institute](#) show 79.5% of Illinoisans favor a high school civics course requirement for graduation, with nearly 57% strongly supporting the requirement.

We Know Quality Civic Education Works

We know how to close the civic education gap. The Illinois Civic Mission Coalition (ICMC) made up of teachers, principals, schools, and not for profit leaders has been working for years to develop best practices in civic learning. These have been incorporated into an [Illinois Civic Blueprint](#) and are reflected in the legislation. Best practices include:

- Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, law, and democracy
- Structured engagement with current and controversial issues
- Service learning linked to the formal curriculum
- Extracurricular activities that encourage greater involvement and connection to school and the community
- Authentic student voice in school governance
- Participation in simulations of democratic structures and processes

We also have examples of many schools across the state that are already implementing high quality civic education. In the past decade, the ICMC has recognized 31 Illinois high schools as [Democracy Schools](#). With the mission to provide high quality civic learning opportunities for all students, Democracy Schools emphasize civic learning through development of professional faculty and staff capacity and foster a school climate that nurtures and models civic character and build relationships within the surrounding community.

Additionally, the Global Citizenship Initiative (GCI) with Chicago Public Schools is in full swing in more than 30 high schools, offering a civics course, multiple service-learning experiences and student voice committees that meet regular with the principal to discuss common issues of concern.

The Proposed Legislation

Rep. Conroy recently sponsored legislation ([HB 4025](#) and [HB 4024](#)) in the General Assembly that would require a high school civics course for graduation, and provide for professional development activities to prepare teachers of the new course. These proposals are based on the [recommendations of the Illinois Task Force on Civic Education](#) which was established by the legislature to study the status of civic education in Illinois and make recommendations on how to improve it. The Task Force was comprised of legislators, educators, school administrators, and community leaders from across the state.

Meeting the Need for Teacher Professional Development

In order to support statewide implementation of a new high school civics course, there is a need for teacher professional development serving all regions of Illinois. Teachers, schools, and districts outside of the Chicago metropolitan area are underserved when it comes to professional development opportunities, and more funding is required to expand training in the state.

Fortunately, Illinois has a very robust community of corporations, foundations and non-profit organizations that actively support civic education and youth civic engagement. Nearly 60 organizations are already active statewide and are poised to assist with training efforts to ensure all areas of Illinois are covered. This work is supported by significant philanthropic contributions from corporations and foundations in Illinois and will be extremely helpful in supporting implementation of the civics course requirement. However, there may still be unmet needs for professional development in some parts of the state.

To ensure adequate support for professional development activities, the corporate and foundation communities are creating a new public-private partnership including an implementation fund of at least \$500,000 annually for a three year transition period. Together with existing programs, there will be well over \$1 million annually invested in quality civic education professional development during the implementation period.

The fund will be coordinated by the [Robert R. McCormick Foundation](#), in collaboration with other funders, and the Illinois State Board of Education and its regional offices. Potential professional development providers include non-profit organizations specializing in civic education, university partners, and regional offices of education. Grants will focus on programs that are aligned with best practices in civic learning and will include related program evaluation.

Time to Act – Here’s What You Can Do

- [Contact your state representatives and senators](#) and urge them to support legislation implementing the recommendations of the Illinois Task Force on Civic Education (HB 4025 and HB4024)
- When the civics legislation is called in committee, [submit electronic witness statements and written testimony](#) in their support of the bill
- Visit the State Capitol in Springfield to advocate in favor of the civics legislation
- [Sign the petition at Change.org](#) calling for the Illinois General Assembly to implement the Civic Education Task Force’s recommendations.

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