



ROBIN J. VOS

SPEAKER OF THE WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY

**Testimony on Assembly Bill 563
Assembly Committee on Education
September 16, 2021**

Thank you Chair Thiesfeldt and members of the Assembly Committee on Education for holding a hearing today on Assembly Bill 563. This legislation creates a civics requirement for high school graduation and teaching of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, as well as, a comparative discussion in the governing philosophies around the world such as communism, socialism and totalitarianism compared to that of the founding principles of freedom and democracy in the United States.

Across the nation, we are facing a civics education crisis. Civility, respectful discourse, and a basic understanding of how the U.S. government operates is severely lacking among students and adults. Only 24 percent of students in eighth-grade were at or above proficiency in civics according to the 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics report. In other words, 75 percent of eighth-grade students are not proficient in literacy. Proficiency was even lower with only 15 percent of students at or above proficiency in U.S. History according to the 2018 NAEP U.S. History Assessment. These numbers are simply not acceptable.

Among adults, results aren't any better. In a 2016 survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, only 26 percent of Americans could name all three branches of government and 31 percent could not name any of the branches of government.

The Pew Research Center came out with a report in 2016 that among 35 developed countries, the U.S. ranks 31st in voter participation. The United States is a democracy. By definition, the government is run by the people, which makes it critical that our public education system teach students how our government works and the importance of engaging in it as informed citizens.

As a society, we should strive for maximum civic engagement. We live in the greatest nation in the world and experience freedoms that many people in countries around the world never have the opportunity to experience. We cannot take this for granted. We need to do a better job of informing our citizens of the vital role we all play in our government. We must fight against civic ignorance. As we emphasize civic education, we encourage diversity of thought, critical thinking, and open dialogue and debate.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robin J. Vos". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Robin J. Vos
State Representative
63rd Assembly District



DONNA M. ROZAR

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Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Education

AB 563

September 16, 2021

Thank you, Chair Thiesfeldt, Vice-Chair Kitchens, and members of the Assembly Education Committee for holding this hearing on AB 563, relating to required instruction in civics education in elementary and high school grades; high school graduation requirements, and requiring the exercise of rule-making authority. As explained in the analysis by the Legislative Reference Bureau, this bill requires the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to promulgate rules to develop a model curriculum and instructional materials for grades Kindergarten through 12, to prepare pupils to be critically responsible and knowledgeable adults. The model curriculum must implement the following five standards: an understanding of pupils' shared rights and responsibilities as residents of this state and the United States and of the founding principles of the United States, a sense of civic pride and desire to participate regularly with government at the local, state, and federal levels, an understanding of the process for effectively advocating before governmental bodies and officials, an understanding of the civic-minded expectations of an upright and desirable citizenry that recognizes and accepts responsibility for preserving and defending the benefits of liberty inherited from previous generations and secured by the U.S. Constitution, and knowledge of other nations' governing philosophies, including communism, socialism, and totalitarianism, with an understanding of how these philosophies compare with the philosophy and principles of freedom and democracy which are essential to the founding principles of the United States.

Under current law, students are only required to pass one civics test before graduation, the same test required to become a citizen of the United States. The State of Wisconsin requires three years of social studies for high school students, but there is no requirement for a separate civics course. Teachers are left with vague curriculum standards to instruct students on the rights and responsibilities of being a United States citizen. These vague themes have failed our education system, but more importantly, they have failed Wisconsin students for far too long. AB 563 creates a standard that can be reviewed and adjusted over time to create the best civics education curriculum in the United States.

The Fordham Institute released a report in 2021 on The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History. (This Institute has submitted written testimony for your information.) Wisconsin

received an F in both civics and U S. History. Wisconsin's civics education received a 1/7 for content and rigor, and 1/3 for clarity and organization. Wisconsin was heavily criticized for the lack of guidance that the standards provided for educators. The report also found Wisconsin's standards to be inadequate and vague, failing to provide our students with a basic understanding of the critical information needed to be contributing, productive members of our society. They also identified gaps in student's education regarding civics. The report recommends that the State of Wisconsin write more specific standards for each grade level and specifically detail the sequencing of civics curriculum across the education continuum. AB 563 requires the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to do just that.

It is time to address this crucial issue. Lack of knowledge of civics by students in this country and state is embarrassing. AB563 is a step in the right direction to improving Wisconsin's civic education. It creates a standard that will assist educators to deliver a consistent curriculum for students over their K-12 education by addressing Wisconsin's deficiencies, as noted in the Fordham report.

Thank you for your kind attention, and for your support of AB 573. I will be glad to answer any questions.

STATE SENATOR KATHY BERNIER
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From: Senator Kathy Bernier
To: The Assembly Committee on Education
Re: Testimony on Assembly Bill 563
Relating to: required instruction in civic education in the elementary and high school grades; high school graduation requirements; and requiring the exercise of rule-making authority.
Date: September 16, 2021

Thank you Chairman Thiesfeldt and committee members for accepting my written testimony on Assembly Bill 563 today. I was contacted by Speaker Vos about introducing this important bill and I could not be more excited to sponsor its passage.

We are a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The people make this system work. The people: you, me, our friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, everyone needs to have a good civic foundation in order for our government to work.

Just as we have a responsibility to be good citizens ourselves, we have a responsibility to pass along our civic values and duties to the next generation. As Ronald Reagan famously said, "Freedom is a fragile thing and it's never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by way of inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people. And those in world history who have known freedom and then lost it have never known it again."

Wisconsin received an "F" in both civics and U.S. History in the Fordham Institute's report on the State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History, published in 2021. According to the report, in addition to our standards being found to be inadequate and vague, Wisconsin is also one of the few states that does not have a civics requirement for high school students.

A foundational understanding of our system, and a deep appreciation for it, are the only ways that we can continue with our exceptional and representative form of government. Civics education is necessary, and should be mandatory.

Thank you again for your consideration.



TO: Members, Assembly Committee on Education

FROM: Rachel Ver Velde, Director of Workforce, Education and Employment Policy

DATE: September 16, 2021

RE: Support for Assembly Bill 563, required instruction in civic education legislation

Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC) appreciates the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Assembly Bill 563. We especially thank Speaker Vos for authoring this important legislation, which will create much needed model curriculum for Wisconsin's youth educating them on American founding principles.

WMC is the largest general business association in Wisconsin, representing approximately 3,800 member companies of all sizes, and from every sector of the economy. Since 1911, our mission has been to make Wisconsin the most competitive state in the nation to do business. That mission includes making sure Wisconsin's youth are ready and willing to participate in the workforce.

Unfortunately, too many young people lack an understanding of the founding principles of the United States of America and our representative democracy. They have not been taught how or even why they should petition their government. They are unaware that our freedoms and rights are enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Our schools have failed to teach our children American exceptionalism and the dire consequences of socialism, communism and totalitarianism.

The intention of public education is to create a ready and capable workforce. It is essential for employers to have employees that understand our governing principles, economic freedom and individual responsibility. If our workforce does not understand these basic principles, they will be unable to fully appreciate their ability to succeed.

WMC supports the development of a model curriculum to teach these founding principles, our system of government and a comparison of other nations' governing systems to our own. Assembly Bill 563 astutely adds the additional requirement that one-half credit of the three credit social studies requirement for high school graduation must be for civics instruction. This will ensure that Wisconsin's students receive a basic level of training from the model curriculum before they exit the K-12 education system.

WMC urges Members of the Assembly Committee on Education to vote in favor of Assembly Bill 563 to ensure our state's youth are well informed and responsible citizens.



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**TESTIMONY ON ASSEMBLY BILL 563
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2021
JULAIN K. APPLING, PRESIDENT**

Thank you, Chairman Thiesfeldt and Education Committee members, for the opportunity to submit by email this testimony on Assembly Bill 563. I regret that I am not able to attend the hearing today because of a previously scheduled out-of-state obligation.

Wisconsin Family Action provisionally supports this bill. To be honest, because of the extremely short notice, we have not had an opportunity to vet it as fully as we would normally do. After the hearing we will devote time to a more complete analysis and vetting as the bill works its way through the legislative process.

That said, we generally like and support the provisions in the bill, while at the same time, we find the reason for the bill lamentable. Schools should not have to be “ordered,” as it were, by state government to teach civics and to teach the components of it correctly and accurately. Unfortunately, however, surveys continue to reveal that we have a serious civics illiteracy problem on our hands.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center in its annual Constitution Day Civics Survey (results released this past Tuesday, September 14, 2021) found that while the number of Americans who can name all 3 branches of the government is getting better, we still have a lot of work to do.¹ This year 56% of US adults correctly named all 3 branches of government, the highest since the survey began in 2006. But that does mean that 44% of Americans are unable to identify correctly all 3 branches. When we drill down into some of the other data, we find that just over 1 in 3 people knows how long the term of office is for a US Senator and a member of the US House of Representatives. Regarding the First Amendment, while nearly 75% named freedom of speech, only 56% mentioned freedom of religion, with just 50% identifying freedom of the press, only 30% the right of people to peaceably assemble and 20% the right to petition the government. The Annenberg Survey did show that having a high school civics course correlated with more correct responses.

Even the best of these numbers shows considerable room for improvement and based on the Annenberg Survey, requiring a high school course in civics with a half a credit earned in order to graduate should help. We appreciate the intent of the authors to ensure that schools are addressing the important topic of civics.

One concern we noted in our admittedly hurried analysis is that while there is much specificity in the bill about what must be contained in the model curriculum and instructional materials, we know that without some form of “watchdog,” for lack of a better term, some schools will implement pretty much whatever they want and will unfortunately comply in both spirit and letter only if someone forces them to do so.

Again, the question is can we trust administrators, both at the district and building levels, as well as the individual teachers, to teach civics in a way that doesn’t revise our history, denigrate our founders and the form of government they gave us, interpret the Constitution using “living document” principles, and prepare our youth to be activists with the wrong motives and with a destructive and dastardly agenda? We would like to think so; but recent events involving school districts in our state raise serious questions about this very issue.

¹ <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/2021-annenberg-constitution-day-civics-survey/> (accessed 9/14/2021)

This bill actually heightens the need for full transparency that Assembly Bill 488 addresses. Parents will have a difficult time knowing what is truly being taught and what instructional materials are being used if they can quickly and easily find the information on the school's website and better yet if they actually visit the classroom. In a very real sense, parents must be the "watchdogs" if this proposal is going to accomplish what it sets out to do. To be appropriate "watchdogs," parents must have easy access to curricula and instructional materials.

We would assume that if this bill becomes law, the appropriate exam or exams in the Wisconsin Student Assessment System will be adjusted to include questions reflecting the model civics instruction as detailed in the bill. This would help ensure that schools actually plan and implement civics education as provided in this proposal.

One question we have is about the current law that requires that in order to graduate, a student in a public school or a private school participating in a Parental Choice Program must pass with a score of 65% or better a civics test that is identical to the 100-question test administered to immigrants seeking US citizenship. Would this law be repealed? Would the proposed bill be added to the test requirement? If it is added to the graduation requirements, would we want to consider increasing the passing score? It might be that the bill should be amended to address how these two related requirements mesh.

We do note that the civics test requirement was not mandated for private schools (those not participating in a Parental Choice Program) whereas the civics instructional requirement would be required for private schools as well as public schools. It does not appear that the bill is mandating that these private schools make a half-cred of civics instruction a requirement for high-school graduation. If there is a different intent, please clarify that. I should note that we have always recommended that the private schools we work with make the civics test a requirement for graduation even though the state does not require it for those schools. We think it's prudent for the schools to do so.

In summary, our initial vetting of this bill indicates we support it, but we have some reservations about its actual implementation and about how it would work with the current civics test requirement.

Given the short notice on the bill, we were tempted to submit this testimony "for information only," but decided instead to give, as I noted earlier, our provisional support for this bill. As the bill is more thoroughly considered, we hope appropriate consideration will be given to the concerns we've raised.

I am happy to answer questions related to this testimony. Thank you, again, for allowing us to submit this electronically. We will have a staff member attend the hearing and register Wisconsin Family Action as being in favor of (not speaking) Assembly Bill 563.



Dear Committee Members,

On behalf of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the nation's leading K-12 education think tank, I urge you to strengthen Wisconsin's policies on elementary and secondary civics and U.S. history education.

Civic literacy is the lifeblood of our democracy. Yet because of our chronic neglect of civics and U.S. history education, Americans' understanding of their country leaves much to be desired. For example, one recent survey found that only half of U.S. adults could name the three branches of government.¹

The goal of civic education is to prepare young people for effective citizenship, which in the United States means ensuring their knowledge of our nation's history and commitment to the system of government outlined in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and further articulated in Civil War and Voting Rights amendments, landmark Supreme Court cases, and acts of Congress. Above all else, students must internalize the core principles upon which that government is based, including but not limited to popular sovereignty, rule of law, limited government, individual rights, separation of powers, due process, and equal protection – something that is unlikely to occur if none of these things are taught.

In addition to understanding and recognizing those principles, today's students must learn to think critically, so they can successfully navigate an increasingly challenging information environment. In general, students should be motivated to educate themselves on major social and political issues and to make a difference in those that are important to them. Finally, they should respect their fellow Americans and their opinions.

As noted in our recent report on *The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021*, Wisconsin's current standards for these subjects are inadequate, and the Badger state is one of just nine states that don't specifically require high school students to earn credits in at least one of these subjects.

On both counts, the proposed legislation takes a crucial step in the right direction. Yet, even if it should become law, the task of strengthening civic education in Wisconsin would remain unfinished. For example, in addition to a semester of civics, most states require at least a year of U.S. History in high school (and some require two years). But the legislation doesn't address Wisconsin's weaknesses in this subject. And of course, much depends on how Wisconsin educators implement whatever standards, model curricula, or other guidance the state provides for civics.

Like the legislature, those charged with educating Wisconsin's youth must see it as essential content, or there is little chance that students will.

David Griffith
Senior Research and Policy Associate
Thomas B. Fordham Institute

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/09/17/civics-knowledge-among-american-adults-jumps-new-survey-hold-your-applause/>