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generationcitizen.org
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Members of the Joint Budget Elementary and Secondary Education Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to submit budget testimony on behalf of Generation Citizen about the New York State Fiscal Year 2021 Education budget. Generation Citizen (“GC”) is a decade-old national nonprofit dedicated to bringing civics education back into the classroom through a new, engaging pedagogy: Action Civics. Action Civics is a “student-centered, project-based approach to civics education that develops the individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for 21st century democratic practice” (National Action Civics Collaborative). It differs from normative, knowledge-based civic education in the same way that taking any “hands-on,” project-based, or experiential course differs from reading a textbook. Students learn about democratic structures and processes by directly engaging with them, as well as with each other, to address one or more issues they care about, which are impacting their community.

GC is the largest Action Civics education organization with a national model. GC will educate approximately 30,000 students this year through our work in New York and five additional regional sites: California; Massachusetts; Oklahoma; Rhode Island; where we were founded on Brown University’s campus; and Texas. GC partners with teachers and schools to help them implement our standards-aligned Action Civics education program over the course of a semester during in-school class time, often added to History, Social Studies, the state-mandated Participation in Government class, as well as increasingly through an interdisciplinary approach in ELA and science strands.

GC provides advocacy planning and support for educators, and supplemental resources for students, teachers, and schools. GC’s goal is to ensure that every student in the United States gains the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in our 21st century democracy as active, lifelong citizens.

GCNY has educated over 25,000 New York middle and high school students and helped them find their voice to advocate for systemic local policy reform through our

Action Civics curriculum. GCNY is educating 6,175 students and supporting educators in 247 classrooms in 70 schools state-wide, including in New York City, Ossining, Patchogue-Medford, and Yonkers School Districts.

In GC's Action Civics course, students are gaining the tools necessary to participate in 21st century democracy. Over the course of a semester, students debate issues directly affecting their community and work as a class to build consensus on one focus issue to address during the semester. Students then investigate systemic root-causes of their issue and identify a policy-aligned goal to address their issue. Next, they develop strategic action plans to achieve their goal and, finally, implement their plan by engaging directly with influencers and decision-makers. A Bronx high school class chose to focus on environmental sustainability at their school. After a couple of weeks of research, they decided to advocate for their school to register for K Solar, a state government funded program that installs solar panels at schools for free. The school is a large colocated campus, so the class organized a meeting with the six principals on campus and presented them with their proposal to register for K Solar. All six principals agreed to the program and are currently in the initial stages of the application process.

GC applauds the New York State Board of Regents for taking a major step forward by conditionally approving the Civic Readiness Task Force's recommendations at its January 2020 meeting. The Civic Readiness Task Force, which included DeNora Getachew, GC's New York Executive Director, recommended comprehensive civic readiness standards, including a new graduation Seal of Civic Readiness, as essential components of a pre-K through 12th grade education. This action builds on New York State's pacesetting decision to include a Civic Readiness Index as a component of its Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan to measure effective learning.

By conditionally approving the Task Force's recommendations, the Board of Regents' made significant headway in addressing a root cause of New York's long standing civic participation problem. While New York already has an existing civics education mandate through the one semester Participation in Government course, including the College, Career, and Civic Readiness standard as a fundamental component of a well-rounded education will further ensure that all youth are prepared to participate in our 21st century democracy.

While GC understands that all students take Participation in Government in high school, GC also knows that, as implemented, not every student receives meaningful civic engagement opportunities like the example above. As implemented, PIG does not educate students about local democratic structure, i.e. civic knowledge;, help them

develop civic skills, i.e. learn about processes for engaging with government or how to research, analyze, propose, debate, and advocate for their collectively determined solution(s). For most students in New York, PIG as implemented is civics as usual, a largely passive form of learning that is often a senior year after-thought based on rote memorization of random government facts.

The fact that PIG is being implemented inconsistently state-wide only further widens the Civic Engagement Gap through which youth in under-resourced school districts are receiving unequal civic learning opportunities, especially in rural, urban, and low-income school districts. The reality is that students from rural and low socioeconomic urban communities are 50 percent less likely to study how laws are made, and 30 percent less likely to report having experiences with deliberative discussions in their classes. Young people from these communities are not less likely to want to make a difference in their communities; however, this opportunity gap inhibits many young people from gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to participate and make change in our 21st century democracy.

It is well documented that New York's school system continues to be plagued by inequitable funding allocations, which further exacerbate the Civic Engagement Gap. From the CFE ruling, it is well-established that New York State is violating students' fundamental right to a "sound and basic education." The lack of resources and funding directly impacts student opportunities and outcomes, and New York is failing to provide resources to many schools and districts that need the funding the most.

Incredible momentum exists nationwide for including civics in graduation requirements, with many states adopting seals of civic readiness. GC is researching best practices and digesting lessons learned from other states that have adopted seals of civic readiness across the country to assess the cost of implementation for New York State. Based on GC's research with select districts, states, and programs, it is estimated that state-wide implementation of Action Civics will cost the state approximately \$10.8 million per year to ensure that all teachers receive the professional development and coaching support necessary. It is important that NYSED focuses on the equitable allocation of resources with a specific focus on high-need districts, including Title I schools, in order to ensure that this work supports those students who need it the most and does not deepen the Civic Engagement Gap already plaguing such schools. Teaching civics well requires robust professional development and curricular resources from the state in order to be taken seriously by district leaders. Even if teachers wanted to teach PIG as intended, many are not provided the resources or training necessary to do so effectively, let alone to support student capstone projects in connection with the

Seal of Civic Readiness. There are very few resources or professional development courses designed to equip educators to navigate the discussion and debate of community issues or local democratic structures, and implement nonpartisan, student-led project-based learning in the classroom.

In addition to updating curriculum standards, New York State must allocate funding and resources to develop assessments of classroom practices and student outcomes. Teachers need to be able to ensure that their students are Civic Ready as defined by NYSED upon graduation, meaning they have developed the civic knowledge, skills and actions, mindsets, and experiences necessary for lifelong civic participation in our 21st century democracy. In order to do that, there must be a system in place to help teachers measure student learning and ensure that they are making significant growth.

The Task Force's Civic Readiness recommendations position New York to be in the vanguard in defining civic readiness nationwide and adopting a modern civics education standard to ensure that ***all youth*** receive the the civic knowledge, civic skills and actions, civic mindsets, and civic experiences needed for sustained engagement in our political process. The promise of these recommendations cannot be fully realized, however, without a dedicated investment in professional development and support to prepare educators to embrace and implement these new standards.

GC is committed to continuing its work to ensure that New York is a model state for effective civics education and respectfully encourages Governor Cuomo and the Legislature to allocate sufficient resources to make this vision a reality. Now that New York State will soon adopt a rigorous Civic Readiness definition, the state must invest in professional development to prepare educators to teach modernized civics standards. Most importantly, NYSED must distribute funding equitably to districts, prioritizing those districts with greatest need to help them implement new mandates. Doing so would help strengthen New York's democracy by ensuring that more New Yorkers are Civic Ready and are prepared to participate in our 21st-century democracy. Anything less would only widen the Civic Engagement Gap.

GC appreciates the Joint Committee's investment in the state's students and teachers, and GC encourages state policymakers to prioritize the equitable implementation and support of civics project-based learning throughout the state.

DeNora Getachew, New York Executive Director, can be reached at dgetachew@generationcitizen.org and Martin Mintz, New York Program Manager, can be reached at mmintz@generationcitizen.org to answer any questions you may have as you delve deeper into this important and timely issue.