



# The Eagle Tribune

## Now's the time to invest in civics education

In an era dominated by standardized testing, preparing teenagers for citizenship in Massachusetts middle and high schools has taken a back seat to core subjects such as English, math and science.

Lawmakers and education advocates worry that without such instruction, today's students will have little connection with the civic life of their communities, either locally or across the country, when they become adults.

A bill introduced last week would require that schools offer courses teaching students about local, state and the federal government, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, state and local elections and the "roles and responsibilities of a citizen in a democracy." Students would also have to complete a civics project to pass the class.

Danvers Selectman Bill Clark, a former teacher, called such a project "a great hands-on system for kids to learn. Under a democracy you need an informed electorate, and you don't get an informed electorate if you don't have a course like that."

At a press conference announcing the bill, state Rep. Andy Vargas, a Haverhill Democrat, said working with the youth advocacy group Teens Leading the Way as a 16-year-old helped set him on the path to public service.

"It's truly a surreal feeling for me to have sat on the other side of the table from many of these legislators here that were so supportive then, and then be standing here today as a 24-year-old legislator," Vargas said. "And the reality is that I wouldn't be here today without that experiential learning, without that project-based learning that Teens Leading the Way gave me, and that is so core to the experience behind civics."

Giving the next generation of voters the knowledge and tools they need to succeed in civic life is a noble goal, and state lawmakers, including House sponsor Linda Dean Campbell of Methuen, are right to push for such classes in Massachusetts elementary and high schools.

But they need not worry whether the younger generation will be engaged in the world around them. One need only look to the thousands of young people who made the trip to Boston Common over the weekend for the March for Our Lives rally against gun violence to know they already are.

Saturday's event, one of many held across the country, was a response to the Feb. 14 school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where 17 people, mostly students, died.

Danvers High School junior Clea Matt said the rally wasn't the end of students' efforts.

"I think it's going to start the conversations with politicians and, kind of being like, 'We're tired of this happening so you need to change something,'" she told reporter Arianna MacNeill.

Students everywhere say this is simply the beginning of their engagement in civic life.

"I just think people should know that even though the march and the walkout are over, there are still things they can do to stay involved and keep talking about it, and not just let it all fade out," said Newburyport High School senior Margaret Dener, who took part in Saturday's march.

And the students have done more than rally. Earlier this month high-schoolers in Ipswich started a letter-writing campaign to legislators. A local

rally in Beverly Saturday featured a voter registration table. In Peabody, students organized one of the most thoughtful programs during the March 14 National School Walkout. Whatever your thoughts on gun control, one of the highlights of that program was the defense of the Second Amendment by junior Peter Kadel.

"This is the power of the First Amendment in action and it's the power of Peabody youth, as usual, setting us on the right path," Peabody Superintendent Herb Levine said after the March 14 event. "These kids have done a fabulous job."

The surge of interest in politics -- though spurred by tragedy -- makes this a perfect time to invest more heavily in civic education. We have a generation of youth eager to take part in public life. What better time to introduce them to the wide range of opportunities to participate in civic life, from taking part in the traditional New England town meeting to leading voter registration drives?

One of the bill's sponsors, Senate President Harriette Chandler of Worcester, said implementing a statewide civic curriculum would "set a foundation for the next generation of leaders."

Recent events show that generation is ready to lead. Introducing them to all aspects of civic life at a young age will give them the tools to do so.