

Statement submitted to the House Committee on Higher Education and Workforce
Development
May 8, 2013
Re: **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Submitted by:
James Gorter
8041 SW 8th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97219

In 2011, I chaired the City Club of Portland's Civic Engagement Study Committee and currently serve on the Civic Engagement Advocacy Committee.

Research at the national level shows that young people are not civically literate and are not civically active. Our research leads us to the conclusion that Oregon's young adults are no different from their counterparts across the country and that our educational system is not preparing them for higher levels of civic engagement.

Over the course of a year, our committee did an extensive literature review and interviewed over forty expert witnesses. With the limits of time and resources we focused our efforts on the high schools of the Portland Public Schools. However we feel our conclusions and recommendations are applicable throughout the state at all grade levels, including university and college level.

Democracy requires civic participation. The knowledge, skills and dispositions for civic engagement cannot be learned by osmosis and observation. Direct instruction through the social studies curriculum is essential. High school is the last and best chance for society to reach almost all young people as they transition to adulthood. And there are proven practices schools can use to promote civic engagement, including direct instruction, community service, involvement in school governance, and real world involvement.

Social studies is not a priority in the Portland schools or in the state of Oregon. . We heard repeatedly that what is tested is what gets taught and that means reading, writing and math. Time, resources, rewards and punishments are all directed towards the testable subjects: (The committee emphatically did not recommend making social studies a testable subject.) One elementary teacher told us that she doesn't even teach social studies until after the testing window closes in February.

Civic preparation is not a priority in Oregon's public universities, colleges and community colleges either. Civics or governments courses are not required for graduation.

And the expectations for citizenship have been lost in the shuffle at the state level. The mantra repeated from Washington DC to Salem to Portland is that of College and Career. Good citizenship is never mentioned.

State social studies standards at the high school level are strong on critical thinking skills but weak on content and devoid of anything on civic disposition.

Education for citizenship needs leadership and support. In the Portland Public Schools, there is no one at the school district level responsible for leading and coordinating efforts in social studies. What limited staff development resources there are in social studies are devoted to reading and writing skills, not to subject content, skills and strategies. At the Oregon Department of Education, just twenty percent of one person's time is assigned to social studies for the entire state.