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Testimony to the House Committee on Education Hearing on SB 513

Erin Esparza

Executive Director, Classroom Law Project

Portland, Oregon

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Erin Esparza

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I submit this testimony on behalf of Classroom Law Project in strong support of the *Civics Education Act* (SB 513) which ensures civics education for all Oregon students, and we urge this committee to support and pass this important bill.

Classroom Law Project is a nonprofit organization committed to preparing Oregon students to become engaged and involved participants in our democratic process through education and hands-on experiences. We oversee programs for students such as the high school Mock Trial and We the People Constitution Team competitions and Courthouse Tour field trips; and we provide extensive professional development opportunities for teachers, including the annual Oregon Civics Conference for Teachers, typically held at the Capitol in Salem. Each of you sponsors one or more teachers from your legislative district to attend the Conference, for which we, they, and their students are grateful. For more than 35 years, Classroom Law Project has been guided by the core belief that the best way to preserve democracy is to teach democracy.

We are advocating for SB 513 because while what Classroom Law Project and other organizations do to support teachers and provide engaging civics education opportunities for students is important – it is not enough. As the emphasis on civics education has declined over past decades, we have seen an alarming decline in the understanding of democracy and the fundamentals of our civic society:

- A 2016 survey revealed that only 25% of Americans can name all three branches of government, and nearly one-third of Americans are unable to name any.
- Only about 30% of Americans born in the 1980s think it is essential to live in a democracy – compared to 75% of Americans born in the 1930's.
- Only 24% of high school seniors – less than a quarter – test at or above proficiency level in civics.

However, research shows that students who do receive quality civics education are 40% more likely to vote. They are more likely to communicate with their elected representatives, and four times more likely to give back to their communities through volunteering and working on community issues. They are also more likely to complete college and to develop skills that lead to employment.

This is why Classroom Law Project strongly supports SB 513. The bill is straightforward, ensuring that every student will receive a civics education course as part of the existing high school social studies requirement. It does not increase the number of credits that students need to graduate. It simply ensures that one semester of the three years of social studies

currently required by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) will be focused on teaching civics. The requirement will apply to high school diplomas awarded in 2026, giving schools time to incorporate a civics course into their curriculum for every student.

The bill also does not require development of new academic content standards as ODE already provides strong standards for civics and government education. It simply ensures that all students will receive a solid grounding in those standards. Currently, while some students do benefit from dedicated civics classes, which are often elective courses, many students across Oregon do not. Teachers must incorporate these standards, where possible, into other courses such as history or economics. When that occurs, they tell us that the time allotted to that instruction does not allow them to teach the concepts in-depth, and really bring them together so that students are able to make the connections between the various pieces – the Constitution; how our local, state, and national governmental institutions are intended to function; current events that the students are seeing and experiencing every day – and the connections that they must make in order to understand and take on their roles as active participants in their communities and our democracy.

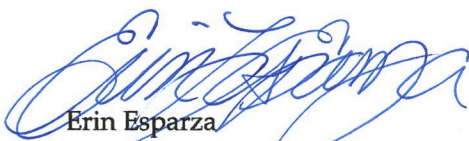
This also becomes an important equity issue since in districts with less funding, civics classes are less likely to be offered. Even in wealthier districts, civics-based classes are typically elective and not required, so that some students receive an adequate grounding, while many others do not – particularly in rural and underserved urban areas.

In his December 2019 Annual Year-End Report, Chief Justice John Roberts said *“we have come to take democracy for granted, and civic education has fallen by the wayside.”* He further went on to state that:

“Civics education, like all education, is a continuing enterprise and conversation. Each generation has an obligation to pass on to the next, not only a fully functioning government responsive to the needs of the people, but the tools to understand and improve it.”

Oregon is one of only 11 states that do not currently require a civics education class for graduation. We must do better by our students, our state, and our democracy. SB 513 will ensure that civics content, currently spread across many social studies courses for many students, is brought together in a single focus where students can see their role, their rights, and their responsibilities in our democracy not as an article of history or a question on a test, but as a call to constructively engage in that democracy and help us all to shape the future.

Please support SB 513 and ensure that all Oregon students receive a quality civics education.



Erin Esparza
Executive Director