

Chair Bowman, Vice Chair Drazan, Vice Chair Pham, and members of the House Committee on Rules,

Good morning. Thank you for being here and for taking the time to listen.

My name is Devon Lawson. I am a resident of Springfield and a student at McKenzie High School in Blue River. I serve as Senior Class President, representing the high school students of my district. I want to be clear that I am not here on behalf of the McKenzie School District—only as an individual speaking for the interests of my peers.

I'm a student, a worker, and a now a voter, after turning 18 last month. I am here because HB 3012 is not just about sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds getting the right to vote—it's about whether we, as a state, stand by the principles of democracy or whether we continue to exclude those most affected by its decisions.

I want to start by saying this: I should not have to be here today.

Right now, my classmates are back at school, attending their first classes of the morning. But I am here—an hour and forty-five minutes away from my school—because I knew that if I didn't show up, there was a good chance the voices of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds would not be heard in this room today.

I made the choice to miss my own education so that I could come here and fight for the right of my peers to have a say in theirs.

Think about that for a moment.

A student had to give up class time to come and testify about a bill that directly impacts students—because if I didn't, who else would be here to represent us?

That is the problem. That is why I am here. And that is why I am asking you to pass HB 3012.

Students across Oregon are stepping into their schools—the same schools where they will spend over 1,000 hours this year. Some are walking into classrooms with broken desks and outdated textbooks. Some are sitting in rooms so crowded that their teachers barely have time to answer their questions. Some are relying on free lunch programs to get their first meal of the day.

And yet, none of them had a say in the elections that decided how much funding their schools would receive, what programs would be cut, or whether their classrooms would be safe.

Imagine working hard every day, showing up, following the rules, preparing for your future—only to be told: *"These decisions are about you, but they're not for you."*

That is what we are telling sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds right now.

And that is what HB 3012 can change.

I want you to take a moment and think back to when you were sixteen.

Remember what it felt like to sit in a classroom, looking up at the adults making the decisions that shaped your education, your future, your opportunities.

Some of you had great schools, great teachers, and every resource you needed. Some of you didn't.

But here's the thing—you had no control over that. You didn't get a say in what your school board decided.

You could work hard. You could care. You could want things to change. But when election time came, you weren't allowed to participate.

And that's still the reality today.

Let's talk about what life looks like for many sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in Oregon.

- They work long hours to help their families pay the rent and put food on the table. Their paychecks are taxed—but they have no say in where that money goes.
- They drive. We trust them to make life-or-death decisions on the road.
- Some of them live alone. If legally emancipated, a sixteen-year-old makes every major decision about their future—except the one that lets them choose the leaders who shape it.
- At seventeen, they can enlist in the military. They can sign their name, take an oath, and commit to defending this country with their lives—yet they can't vote for the people who will send them into service.

Does that make sense to you?

Because to me—and to thousands of young adults across Oregon—it doesn't.

If we trust them to work, pay taxes, drive, live independently, and serve this country, then why don't we trust them to vote?

Now, I know that when we talk about lowering the voting age, some people hesitate. Change makes people uncomfortable. I respect that.

But let's look at the facts—not fear, not assumptions, but facts.

Some say "Sixteen-year-olds aren't mature enough to vote."

Mature enough for what?

- To work and pay taxes?

- To drive and follow the law?
- To be held accountable for every other decision in their lives?

We don't wait until eighteen to trust people with these responsibilities. Why are we waiting to trust them with a ballot?

And here's the science—studies show that sixteen-year-olds engage in the same logical, well-reasoned decision-making as adults when it comes to voting.

Some say “They'll just vote like their parents.”

Do you?

If we all voted exactly like our parents, elections wouldn't change. But they do—because people think for themselves.

And the research proves this. In the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, 40% of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds voted differently from their parents.

Young adults form their own opinions. We are not anyone's echo.

I was talking with a legislator about this bill, and they basically said, “This will just benefit one political party.”

This is a democracy, not a game of political strategy.

And let's be clear: The data shows no guaranteed political outcome. A 2014 Pew study found that 50% of young voters don't belong to either political party.

Even if they did—voting rights should never be granted or denied based on who benefits. That is not democracy. That is voter suppression.

In 2023, I was here testifying on HJR 20, a similar bill, and was asked by this Committee, “Why sixteen? Why not younger?”

My answer is because sixteen is when we start taking on real adult responsibilities.

- It's when we start working and paying into the system—without a vote.
- It's when we start driving, following laws that affect public safety.
- It's when we are directly impacted by school board decisions—decisions we currently have no voice in.

This is not a slippery slope. This is a logical correction to an outdated system.

We are at a turning point.

We can sit here and argue over whether young adults *should* have a voice, or we can recognize that they already do—and give them the ability to use it.

Every single person in this room was once sixteen.

Do you remember what it felt like to be told to work hard, to prepare for the future—only to realize that your future was being decided without you?

Do you remember the frustration of knowing decisions were being made that affected you—and there was nothing you could do about it?

Now, imagine if someone had changed that for you.

Imagine if someone had seen your potential, trusted your ability, and given you a voice.

That is what we have the chance to do today.

This isn't just about lowering the voting age. It's about trusting the next generation.

You have a choice today.

You can choose to keep things the way they've always been—to continue shutting out young adults from decisions that directly affect them.

Or you can choose progress.

You can choose fairness.

You can choose to make our democracy stronger, more inclusive, and more representative of the people it serves.

HB 3012 is not radical. It is right.

It is about recognizing that young adults are already responsible, already engaged, already contributing.

Now, it's time to let them vote.

What will you say to the sixteen-year-old who is working early morning before school and late night shifts after school and paying taxes? That 16-year-old was me. What do you have to say to me?

What will you say to the seventeen-year-olds ready to serve their country?

What will you say to my classmates who are sitting in class right now, watching this live, wondering if their voices matter?

You can say, "*Wait.*"

Or you can say, "You are seen. You are heard. And your voice belongs in this democracy."

There is only one choice that aligns with our values.

There is only one choice that strengthens democracy.

Vote YES on HB 3012.

Not later. Not next year. Now.

Thank you.