

Governor Murphy Signs Bipartisan Legislation Promoting Civic Engagement Among Students

01/16/2024

TRENTON— Governor Phil Murphy today signed S2304/A1271, passed with bipartisan support, permitting each public school student from grades 6 through 12 to have one State-excused absence per school year to be used for a civic event. These State-excused absences can only be applied to an event sponsored by a government entity, a community-based organization, or a nonprofit. The civic event is required to incorporate an element of service learning and address a public issue or concern.

This legislation had bipartisan support and contributes to long standing efforts by the Murphy Administration to expand civic engagement and empower New Jersey's youth. Earlier this month, the Governor signed the New Voter Empowerment Act, allowing 17-year-old students to vote in a primary election if they will be 18 years of age by the time of the general election.

"Providing students the option to attend civic events throughout their academic careers creates an opportunity for our future leaders to become more engaged in our democracy and society," **said Governor Murphy**. "These events will not only educate students outside of the classroom, but they have the potential to spark an interest in public service and community work. The next generations of changemakers are in New Jersey public schools, and it's crucial that we offer every resource available to help them achieve their dreams."

To apply the excused absence, parents or guardians of the student must provide a signed written notice at least five school days prior, as well as relevant documentation proving the event meets all established requirements. School districts may choose to allot additional excused absences for these same purposes.

"Legislating excused absences for students attending civic events is a significant milestone in efforts to promote civic education and participation," **said Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan, Acting Commissioner of Education**. "By recognizing the educational value of participation in civic events, we are not only providing students with an opportunity to be informed and engaged members of society; we are also sending a clear message that civic responsibilities are valued. This legislation aligns with the vision of nurturing well-rounded, responsible individuals who actively contribute to their communities."

Primary sponsors of S2304/A1271 include Senators Vin Gopal and James Beach, and Assemblymembers Ellen Park, Sterley Stanley, and Kevin Rooney.

"Certainly our students learn much through classroom instruction, readings and debates with their peers about the workings of government, and may also be made aware of public policy issues important to their communities," **said Senator Gopal, Chair of the Education Committee**. "Yet there are some things that can only be learned through direct participation and civic engagement. This law will help make that kind of eye-witness learning and development more accessible."

"Exposing students to civic engagement provides a unique educational experience," **said Senator Beach**. "By creating opportunities for students to step outside the classroom and witness government in action, we are instilling the values of citizenship at an early age."

"This bill recognizes that education doesn't only take place in a classroom," **said Assemblywoman Park**. "We hope to build the next generation of American leaders and to do so, we need to do everything we can to encourage our youth to get involved in their community, their government and in doing so, building their own future. I am glad to see this bill become law and I look forward to all the great stories our young folks will have in this upcoming election year."

"As elected officials we need to prepare the next generation of New Jerseyans to become effective members of their communities by understanding what it means to be engaged in civic life," **said Assemblyman Stanley**. "By allowing students excused absences to attend civic events we are taking an important step towards ensuring our civic institutions continue to receive the engagement that is vital to our ability to serve our residents by giving students

the experience necessary to become informed and engaged citizens.”

“Academics is just one part of a well-rounded education. While it is important to keep up with studies and homework, students should also be encouraged to be active, engaged citizens in the world from a young age,” **said former Assemblyman Rooney**.

“Students, whether they are testifying at the State House, running a voter registration drive, or attending a community event, will gain valuable real world and hands-on civic engagement experience,” **said Jesse Burns, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey**. “We applaud the Governor, the legislative sponsors, and the students who championed this bill for helping shape democracy’s future leaders.”

“New Jersey is sending a bold statement to the rest of the country by taking its students’ civic engagement to the experiential level,” **said Julien Catalon, Chair of the New Jersey High School Democrats**. “I applaud our state legislators’ bipartisanship in getting this law passed and leading our generation by example; I am incredibly hopeful and excited for young New Jersey students to have access to and feel encouraged to participate in the political process.”

“Giving young people more opportunities to be civically engaged is crucial to building the next generation of leaders,” **said Katie Mirne, Chair of the New Jersey High School Republicans**. “I’m proud of the bipartisan work our team has accomplished and look forward to helping forge the future of America.”

Governor Phil Murphy

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