

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Signs Legislation to Expand Civics Instruction in Schools

07/23/2021

Civics Instruction Will Now Be Required at the Middle School Level

MIDDLETOWN - Governor Phil Murphy today signed legislation (S854) requiring civics instruction at the middle school level. Currently, New Jersey is one of a minority of states which does not require civics instruction for middle school students. Under the legislation, the New Jersey Center for Civic Education at Rutgers University will be directed to prepare civics curriculum guidelines for local school boards, ensuring that middle and high school students study the values and principles underlying the American system of constitutional democracy, the function of government, and the role of a citizen in a democratic society.

The bill also directs the New Jersey Center for Civic Education at Rutgers University to provide professional development and other resources for high school social studies teachers as they fulfill the requirement of integrating civics into the existing United States history course. Under the bill, beginning in the 2022-2023 school year, each board of education is required to provide a course of study in civics at the appropriate grade level.

The legislation is also known as “Laura Wooten’s Law” in honor of the longest continuously serving poll worker in American history. Laura Wooten worked polls in New Jersey for 79 years before passing away in 2019.

“By deepening civics instruction in middle school and high school, we are giving students the tools they need to be more engaged and informed citizens,” **said Governor Murphy**. “An understanding of civics strengthens our democracy by ensuring an understanding of the role that everyone plays in the future of their community, our state, and our nation. I am proud to sign this bill into law and honor Laura Wooten’s incredible civic legacy.”

“While civics has been a key element of our state’s learning standards for decades, this new law greatly increases the focus and attention that schools will place on civics instruction,” **said Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan, Acting Commissioner of Education**. “The additional instruction that students will receive will ultimately lead to a well-informed and well-rounded citizenry.”

“Government leaders have been sounding the alarm about the civics crisis in this country for years, and I am grateful we are finally taking action,” **said Senator Shirley Turner**. “The crisis reached a breaking point after the November election, which culminated in an insurrection at our U.S. Capitol in January. Safeguarding our democracy is now more urgent than ever, and one of the best ways we can do that is by teaching our future generations about the importance of civic skills, engagement, and participation and the value of a democratic process. The lack of civics knowledge creates a challenge to maintaining a perfect union, establishing justice, and ensuring domestic tranquility. We must learn to work together for the good of all of our communities and begin to bridge the deep political divide that exists in this country.”

“A well-rounded education in civics is essential for creating knowledgeable, engaged citizens who understand the sacrifices and hardships made on behalf of our democracy,” **said Senate Republican Leader Tom Kean**. “The law signed today will help provide students with the skills and background necessary for them to actively participate in democratic society. Every student in our public schools will have the opportunity to learn about how our government functions, the rights of citizens, and the values our nation was built on.”

“By definition, civics is the study of the rights and obligations of citizens in society. It is critical that we teach young people to understand their role in their communities and our democracy so that they have the tools they need to be well-informed, active citizens,” **said the measure’s Assembly sponsors, Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Assemblywoman Linda Carter, and Assemblywoman Mila Jasey in a joint statement**. “The social studies

curriculum in our schools currently focuses on a chronological history of the United States. In a country built on the engagement of ordinary citizens, civics must play a central role in our students' education. Requiring civics lessons in our schools will inspire the next generation to appreciate and participate in our democracy."

"I think we all appreciate how critical teaching civics is to the continuation of our democracy," **said Arlene Gardner, President of the NJ Center for Civic Education at Rutgers.** "This new requirement for a civics course in New Jersey middle schools is a well thought-out and carefully considered effort to address an educational and citizenship need. As president of the New Jersey Center for Civic Education at Rutgers University, I am both humbled and proud to be able to help in the implementation of this new course and in bringing New Jersey to the forefront of reimagining civic learning for the 21st century."

"My mother would be so honored to know that a bill would be passed recognizing her legacy of civic responsibility," **said Yvonne Hill, the daughter of Laura Wooten.** "She always felt that the youth should be involved in exercising the hard-fought right to vote and help make change. Her famous words were 'Don't say you can't make a difference. How can you make a difference if you don't vote?'"

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