



**Testimony Before a Joint Hearing of the House Education and Veterans
Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee**

**House Bill 1858 – The Pennsylvania Civics Education Initiative Legislation
Monday, September 26, 2016
Offered by the Honorable Marjorie Rendell, Chair, The Rendell Center for
Civics and Civic Engagement**

Good morning, Chairman Saylor, Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Barrar and Chairman Sainato, and Members of the House Education and Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify on House Bill 1858.

I am going to focus my remarks on the benefits and necessity of civics education which the House Bill 1858 highlights. Let me begin with why civic education is important. Civic education is important not only for the substantive content-based knowledge about our country and democracy, but also for the development of the skills necessary for adult citizenship; the skills of critical thinking, problem solving and informed participation. Such skills transfer to all subjects, but more importantly they transfer to life, to be productive/active citizens and workers. The skills needed by the citizenry if our democracy is to survive.

The education of young people to assume their role as citizens in a democratic society is the central mission of our schools. The primary impetus for establishing public schools in the United States was to educate a diverse American population into a literate and informed citizenry. In his farewell address, President George Washington, argued for the creation of “institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge in a democratic society”. It is essential that the youth of our country understand this and have the proper knowledge, skills and dispositions of effective

citizens. As individuals serving in the public sector— you understand this; our veterans in the room certainly understand this having risked their lives to defend the Constitution of the United States. It is important that at every level we explore the principles of rights and responsibilities and the role of an active citizen. I do not believe that we are asking too much of our students to acquire basic knowledge about our democracy. In fact, I believe you will find that the Naturalization test fits nicely with our Pennsylvania Standards for Civics and Government.

The evidence of a decline in civic education is abundant and quite visible. From the many surveys of our fellow citizens' lack of basic civic knowledge; to the growing distrust of, and alienation from, the governmental institutions that “We the People” truly own. Evidence of the decline in effective civic education is all around us. An Annenberg Public Policy Survey released for Constitution Day 2016 showed that many Americans are unfamiliar with basic facts about their government:

- Only one in three Americans (26 percent) could name all three branches of the U.S. government, while just as many (31 percent) could not identify even one.

Of the survey Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center said: “Lack of basic civics knowledge is worrisome and an argument for an increased focus on civics education in the schools.” Something I believe this bill will bring about. On the last National Assessments of Educational Progress Civics test, done in 2014, barely 1/4th of the students tested could demonstrate a proficient understanding of this topic so critical to our nation’s future. The NAEP Civics test scores have remained flat since the first NAEP Civics was administered in 1998. A 2015 Xavier University study showed that while 97.5 percent of those applying for citizenship pass the test, only two out of three Americans can do the same.

There are many reasons for this decline, among the most significant are, an over-emphasis on a few curricular subjects over others; lack of attention to Civics because it is not

part of most states testing regimes; and a lack of appreciation for the central role the civic mission of our schools plays in maintaining the health of our Representative Democracy.

In the Judiciary, I see the consequences of a lack of civic education every day. The lack of understanding of and at times lack of respect for, the rule of law and independence of the judiciary makes me doubly concerned about the state of civic education.

Let me give you some background about my personal journey with the civic education movement and why Ed Rendell and I started the Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement. When Ed became Governor of Pennsylvania, I decided to focus my efforts as First Lady on promoting civics education. I formed a coalition known as PennCORD with the Pennsylvania Bar Association, Pennsylvania Department of Education, the National Constitution Center that did work in civics education across the Commonwealth.

The very positive feedback from teachers, administrators, students and parents regarding the need for the PennCord initiative and our own realization after spending 30 plus years in public service is what led us to establish the Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement. It is our vision that all students will have a basic understanding of our representative democracy (content knowledge), will have experienced public participation in the democratic process to include democratic deliberation (skills) and will be better prepared to be good engaged citizens who understand their rights and their responsibilities as citizens (dispositions). For educators, the Rendell Center creates curriculum content, pedagogical tools, and professional development experiences. For students, the Rendell Center develops literacy based programs and experiential learning exercises. The Center's program (*We The Civics Kids*) being piloted in Philadelphia Schools is designed to provide civic education to our youngest citizens through a rich interactive program that marries reading and civic literacy. The goal for the program is to create a culture of active citizenship in our schools through materials that build basic civic knowledge, promote engagement, and provide on-going opportunities for developing the art of democratic

deliberation. At the same time, *We the Civics Kids* materials are strengthening each student's reading, writing, speaking, thinking and problem solving skills. In our pilot school, we have seen a dramatic increase in their reading comprehension skills. During the PennCord years, the Allentown School District implemented a civics based school violence prevention demonstration program run by the Center for Civic Education. Allentown saw improved test scores and school climate. I share with you the work of the Rendell Center because it shows the benefits of an emphasis on civics education not just on knowledge development but on skills sets that are important for an engaged citizenry.

Constitution Day became a national observance in 2004, when Congress passed a law proposed by Sen. Robert Byrd that designated September 17 as the day for citizens to commemorate the signing of the Constitution and learn more about our founding document. This law mandates the teaching of the Constitution at educational institutions that receive federal funds, as well as federal agencies. There was no mechanism in the Byrd Amendment for tracking participation. However, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools estimates that 80% of Public schools and over 60% of Higher education engage in some observance on Constitution Day. Still it is no substitute for systemic and sustained civic education. One day is not enough. I mention Constitution Day because there was pushback at first against this mandate, but Constitution Day continues twelve years later with positive results. Similar to what I believe House Bill 1858 would do.

Bill 1858 is one way we can focus on the central mission of our schools - citizenship education and highlighting the importance of this education. Students will have several years to take the test and will need to pass with only 60% of the questions correct on a test that is already designed and administered by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to thousands each year. Others will speak of the mechanics of implementation, but what I would

like to stress is the necessity of providing this education to our youth. A student's readiness for the future should include not just college and career but readiness for active engaged citizenship!

I would like to end by sharing with you a quote from some young students on the importance of civics education which sums up why this bill is important. Our annual Lenfest Citizenship Challenge – (Essentially a class essay contest) has made in depth focus on an issue of civic importance a fun learning experience. Two years ago in the Rendell Center's Citizenship Challenge we asked 4th and 5th graders how to increase voter participation. We received over 250 essays from classrooms on this topic. I would like to share with you a portion of the words of the winning essay. These words from 5th grade students are powerful and relevant to our discussions today. It shows that emphasized civics education can bring about an informed and engaged citizenry.

We believe that it is essential that all students recognize their role in our Democracy and appreciate the importance of each vote. Our Founding Fathers would surely be disappointed by the lack of voter participation in our elections. The foundation of our society was based on the belief that power comes from the people; in fact, this is one of our Constitution's core principles. We declared our independence from Great Britain so that we could have representation in our government. And yet today voter apathy is widespread. Establishing civic education programs will allow the youth to learn about the importance of voting at a young age. Impressing upon young minds the significance of voting will ignite in them a desire to fulfill the legacy of the Founding Fathers who sacrificed so much to establish our country. The voice of the

people can only be heard if they participate to the fullest extent possible and the best way to have your voice heard is to vote.