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Sept. 26, 2016

The Hon. Stan Saylor
Chairman
Pennsylvania House Education Committee
The Hon. Stephen Barrar
Chairman
Pennsylvania House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

Dear Chairmen Saylor and Barrar:

My name is Kirsten Baesler. I am the North Dakota superintendent of public instruction, a nonpartisan, statewide elected official who oversees the education of North Dakota students preschool through grade 12.

I am writing today to share North Dakota's experiences with a civics education bill similar to Pennsylvania's.

I was part of a bipartisan committee that successfully advocated for a bill similar to HB1858 during our North Dakota legislative session last year. The bill was approved in the House and Senate by overwhelming margins and it took effect Aug. 1, 2015.

Our bill requires that this year's North Dakota class of 2017 score at least 60 percent on a civics exam before they may graduate from high school. In subsequent years, students must score at least 70 percent to graduate. They must answer all 100 questions on the federal exam that is used to test the knowledge of people who want to become American citizens.

This requirement has had a positive impact on our state and our North Dakota students. Starting with the Revolutionary War, our veterans have fought and died to preserve our country's traditions, with the ultimate power vested in the people. It is our responsibility to pass this knowledge on to our children. As a former president once said, "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction."

I fervently believe that our nation's students need this information to equip them to be voters and future leaders of their communities, their states, and our great country. Our North Dakota civics bill has been an unequivocal message to our students that knowing how our government functions is as important as math, science or English. It shows our support for the vital work being done by our civics, government and geography teachers.

Our civics bill has reinvigorated school instruction about government in North Dakota. It has given our teachers a starting point to explore the issues that our Founders confronted when they were writing our Constitution.

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A civics bill such as North Dakota's does not require new classes, extra expense or onerous recordkeeping. The information that is included in the civics test is already taught in our classrooms. Schools aren't required to report student civics exam results to the state. They may administer the exam in smaller chunks, distribute responsibility of questions to different courses and spread the administration over several months or several years if they desire. Each school district makes the decision that best suits their needs. Students may start taking the exam as early as the seventh grade and attempt the exam as many times as necessary to be successful. Students can focus on the parts of the test they didn't get correct in previous attempts.

In other words, schools have a lot of leeway in making sure their students meet this graduation requirement. This is not some heavy-handed mandate. In my opinion, it is important that this expectation be set but the bill be as flexible as possible in its administration of the test.

As an educator, I know there are many education priorities that legislators and administrators need to consider. However, every day that goes by without action means that more students will fall behind when it comes to civic knowledge, disengaging from the political process and damaging our democracy. This civics requirement has made our North Dakota students more interested in how our government works, the history and foundation of the United States and how to become more active and engaged citizens.

A newspaper in Jamestown, North Dakota, interviewed some high school students about the civics exam last spring. The story quoted a Jamestown High freshman as saying it was "awesome" to learn more about her country. She said the information in the test was beneficial and "something everyone should know."

Her sentiments have been echoed by a group of students that I call my Superintendent's Student Cabinet. The Cabinet is made up of 20 North Dakota young people from elementary through high school and college. The Cabinet meets quarterly to give me advice on education policy from a student's perspective.

When I mentioned this civics bill to them, they said they thought it was a great idea. Once our schools began implementing the civics test requirement student cabinet members shared with me the numerous engaging and innovative ways their teachers were making the questions relevant for them.

I regret I am not able to be with you in person to share our North Dakota success story but I believe this concept deserves the support of all Pennsylvanians. It has earned the statewide support of North Dakota.

I'll leave you with this idea. If you want your constituents to get excited about the prospects for this civics bill, you might consider calling HB1858 the Carson Wentz Knowledge of Government Act.

After all, Carson – one of my former students- is from North Dakota, too.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kirsten Baesler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kirsten Baesler
North Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction