

Permitted Civic Engagement Absence

State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council (SIYAC)

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Community Engagement Committee Chair

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Position

The State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council supports legislation allowing high school students one excused absence per year to participate in a civic-related activity or event. This opportunity would help students build essential knowledge and skills about local, state and national government, as well as the legal processes that shape civic life. By requiring school districts to excuse one day for activities such as voting, poll working, public commenting, candidate speeches, and civic or political forums, the bill would expand hands-on civic learning and engagement for students in grades 9-12.

Current Situation

Upcoming generations of students have become increasingly uninformed and detached from civic engagement and responsibilities. In Iowa, youth voter turnout dropped from 34.7% in the 2018 midterm elections to just 26% in 2022 [\[1\]](#). Many factors contribute to this decline, including limited understanding of voter registration rules and polling site locations, and low confidence among young people in their ability to vote responsibly [\[2\]](#). An issue like this is critical, as our youth make up an important demographic in our country. As John Holbein, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Education at the University of Virginia, stated “There is good scientific evidence that if young people turned out at the same rates as older citizens, American democracy would be transformed.” [\[2\]](#)

Knowledge of basic civics and participation in political or civic activities also decreased in a span of 4 years. From 2014-2018, the average civics score in eighth graders decreased by one point; 154 down to 153. This 2022 test was even more drastic: 153 to 150 [\[5\]](#). An Annenberg Public Policy Survey concludes that in 2016, roughly 1 in 4 Americans could not name the three branches of government. Furthermore, a 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education found that only 11 states require hands-on participation in civic events or community service. More than 70% of high school seniors report they have never written a letter to a legislator voicing their opinion on a political matter [\[3\]](#). This disengagement harms our country, as it leads to a disconnect

from our political sector. According to the Pew Research Center in 2019, “only 17% of Americans trust the government” [3]. While the basis of our country is founded on democracy and the will of the people, without further action, we stay complacent with future generations and remain detached from the civic process.

Rationale

The lack of civic engagement among youth is not only a growing issue but also has a significant impact on the political processes that are crucial to democracy. The youth of today are the voters of tomorrow. Through the support of SIYAC on this bill, the promotion of youth ideas, values, and perspectives will be instilled in civic activities. These opportunities exist in every student community, town, and the state of Iowa. Youth civic engagement opportunities allow our young citizens to gain knowledge on the roles and functions of elections, public office, governance, administration, and other various provisions of government. Civic engagement further promotes the sense of community and citizenship that promotes a high voter turnout. There is an inevitable link between civic engagement and electoral participation for young Americans nearing voting age. Yet, in Iowa and across the country, many socioeconomic groups remain largely absent from elections. A healthy democracy needs to stand for all people, to allow for the full potential of tomorrow’s leaders to be realized.

Many barriers can limit young people’s ability to participate in civic engagement activities. One significant barrier is the lack of a permitted, verified and exempted day from school for the sole purpose of civic participation. Providing this opportunity would encourage schools and legislators to support students in becoming more engaged in public service, government, and elections. Lifelong civic participation often stems from positive experiences as a youth, but this cannot be achieved without the support of educators, legislators, and community organizations to provide youth with such impacting, life-changing opportunities.

Recommended Action

SIYAC proposes a bill requiring the board of directors of each public school district and the governing bodies of accredited nonpublic school to provide middle and high school students with at least one day of excused absence from school to attend a civic or political event. Under this bill, civic or political events include activities such as voting, poll working, strikes, public commenting, candidate speeches, political forums, civic forums, and town halls. Students would be required to give advanced notice of their absence. Schools must excuse one such day each year, with additional days permitted at the discretion of school administrators.

Iowa's young people are the foundation of the state's future, and civic engagement is essential for helping students understand how community involvement drives meaningful change. Similar bills have already been passed in California, Delaware, Illinois, and Virginia. Iowa should be next. To direct and guide the next generation of Iowa voters, it is pertinent to provide intentional opportunities for youth to participate in civic life, starting with this bill.

Sources

- [1]: State-by-State Youth Voter Turnout Data and the Impact of Election Laws. 6 Apr. 2023, circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-youth-voter-turnout-data-and-impact-election-laws-2022.
- [2]: Holbein, John. "Why so Few Young Americans Vote." The Conversation, theconversation.com/why-so-few-young-americans-vote-132649.
- [3]: "The Need for Civic Education in 21st-century Schools | Brookings." Brookings, 4 June 2020, www.brookings.edu/articles/the-need-for-civic-education-in-21st-century-schools.
- [4] "Title 14 Education Free Public Schools Chapter.27 School Attendance Subchapter 1. School Attendance Requirements" State of Delaware delcode.delaware.gov/title14/c027/sc01/index.html
- [5] "NAEP Report Card:Civics" NAEP www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/