

Written Testimony on House Bill 2039 Senate Education Committee  
Presented by Thomas Fulbright, Teacher March 22, 2021

Good afternoon Chairwoman Baumgardner and members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Thomas Fulbright, a high school teacher in Topeka, Kansas, and I am testifying in support of civics education, but not this bill.

After much time spent reviewing House Bill No. 2039, I have come to believe that the title of the Bill does not accurately reflect the intentions and potential impacts of the legislation. I think it is confusing to those who it is intended to direct - Social Studies Educators. I am therefore going to present to you a series of alternative titles for the bill.

\* I am delivering the testimony in this way, because of my experiences searching through the text of the Congressional Record. When my students study primary documents drawn from the speeches in the Congressional Record as we investigate past political debates, they are always interested by this persuasive technique used by Lawmakers. I am particularly drawing inspiration from Illinois' Republican Senator James R. Mann, who said in his speech to Congress on S.4563 in 1907 - which was a bill aimed at prohibiting corporations from donating to political campaigns, "I do not believe it ought to be the policy of the Government of the United States to provide that nobody but a rich man can run for office. This, properly labeled, would be labeled "a bill to prevent a poor man from holding office in the United States."

I suggest removing from the bill the title language as written below;

*AN ACT concerning education; relating to civics instruction; requiring students to pass a civics examination for high school graduation; amending K.S.A. 72-3217 and repealing the existing section*

**And replacing that title with one of the following suggestions:**

1. AN ACT to lower the bar for our State Social Studies teachers and students

*Explanation: I encourage you to attend the State's Civic Advocacy Conference when the Pandemic has ended. You will see students are doing great things in their classrooms and their communities, because their teachers have not been asked to focus on preparing them to take a test required for graduation. Redirecting those teachers to focus on preparing students to pass this test will hurt the progress made in Civic Education in Kansas.*

2. An Act to have students memorise the nuts and bolts of the machinery of our Government, but not develop an understanding of the machine, nor prepare them for the responsible operation and maintenance of said machinery. (A.K.A. An Act to emphasize civic factoids over democratic understanding)

*Explanation: Teaching students with the goal of drilling and killing content so they can pass a multiple choice question test in order to graduate can not possibly teach students to understand the complexities of our Government, and prepare them to be Civically Engaged in a meaningful and constructive way.*

3. An Act to establish in Kansas, chemistry classes where students memorize the periodic tables, but do not conduct the experiments that promote the scientific curiosity which will foster the next generation of scientists.

*Explanation: We want our students not just to KNOW things, we want students to be able to DO things. In just the sense that we want schools to foster the development of future scientists who will be able to address current, and the unknown scientific problems of the future, we want schools to foster the next generation of citizens who will be able to address current, and the future unknown troubles which our Democracy will face.*

4. An Act to ignore the wisdom of John Dewey, the author of *Democracy and Education*.

- “Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth ... a revolution in teaching would be worked.”

*Explanation: Reflect on the purpose of studying civics. Will a Civics Exam reflect that purpose?*

5. An Act to fix a problem with students' knowledge of the United States Government that is neither real, nor new...

*Explanation: Generations of elders have wrung their hands worrying about how little "kids" know about their Government. The only thing these tests since 1917 have shown is that young people are not great at multiple choice tests.*

- See: 2004, Wineburg S. Crazy for history Journal of American History. 90: 1401-1414

6. An Act to ignore the advice of leading researchers and organizations in the field of social studies education, and focus learning objectives not on developing skills such as critical thinking, but on memorizing information that they can find on google. (shortened title: An Act prioritizing for students civic information over civic engagement and knowledge)

*Explanation: Dr. Wineburg, formerly of the Stanford History Education Group, recently published a book arguing the focus of Social Studies Education should be developing our student's skill sets related to critical thinking, civic engagement, etc. - not the memorization of facts.*

- Wineburg, Samuel S. Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone). The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

7. An Act to allow presidents at 1600 Pennsylvania to write tests for pupils at 1900 Hope Street.

*Explanation: The Civics Exam is sometimes used as a political document. Do we want political whims from the White House dictate what our students learn? Given the inevitable rotation of the Parties in Power, I think it is best to avoid that.*

8. An Act requiring teachers to answer “is this going to be on the test?” questions from students, and therefore remove the content that draws on students interests, supports them in making connections between the ideas and events of the past and the ideas and events of today, but is not on the Civics Exam.

*Explanation: If it isn't on the test, teachers are disincentivized from including it in their classroom.*

9. An Act to ignore our own experiences as students, and have students memorize information which they will forget after the test just as we had.

*Explanation: For most of us here, our last history class may be a distant memory, but do you remember all of the names, dates, locations, etc. you once had memorized for a high school civics test?*

10. An Act to ignore the current reality of youth civic engagement, and focus on a task which neither encourages, nor supplements that trend.

*Explanation: While Civic Engagement has a historic trend of lagging below what we hope for, trends since the 2018 midterm election show youth are participating at record levels. We should be spending our Civics classes making sure young people are given the skills to make their participation well thought out and constructive.*

- See research done by the Tufts Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

<https://circle.tufts.edu/understanding-youth-civic-engagement/dispelling-myths-about-youth-voting#myth:-young-people-are-apathetic>

11. An Act to increase the shortage of social studies teachers.

*Explanation: I, and many other past and present teachers went into the profession because we were lucky enough to have teachers who taught us history and Civics in a passionate and dynamic way. Skill and Drill pedagogy stifles passion and creativity in teachers, and does not develop a passion in students. Without fostering that passion in students we will continue to experience a shortage of teachers.*

12. An Act to ensure a Kansan never gets highlighted on “Jaywalking”

*Explanation. Yes, those videos are embarrassing. I would hope everyone could name the three branches of Government, but should that alone drive our decisions?*

13. An Act to ignore the lessons of Hamilton, specifically how telling the story of history sparked interest in our founding era in both young and old alike.

*Explanation: Teaching civics, and social studies in general, that focuses on the memorization of facts - not the fascinating stories that brought those events and governmental systems to life ignores the lesson the musical Hamilton displayed as how to really increase civic mindedness in our Country.*

14. An Act to allow 501(c)3 organizations not rooted in Education Policy, and based outside of our State dabble in our State's education policies.

*Explanation: If we open this floodgate, it shows 501(c)3 organizations from across the country and political spectrum that, through the Kansas Legislature, Kansas classrooms are fertile ground for them to plant their ideas on how history and civics should be taught.*

15. An Act to develop a good fourth member for bar trivia teams.

*Explanation: At least those students who possess better memory retrieval skills will be able to regurgitate facts they memorized in highschool years later when participating in bar trivia.*