

Date: 3-19-21

To: Kansas Senate Committee on Education

From: Carl Maughan

Re: Statement in support of HB2039

My name is Carl Maughan, I am a lawyer, a proud naturalized citizen of the United States and a parent of two high school students who will enter adulthood in the society which we build for their generation to inherit.

First, I would like to thank the members of this committee for the opportunity to be heard on a subject which is close to my heart and important for our state, and for the United States of America.

Most of us who have run for public office at any level will have experienced conversations with intelligent and accomplished members of our society that reveal a shocking lack of knowledge and understanding of certain aspects of our system of government. Even if you have not had such an experience, I think that we can agree that the level of education about our constitution, history and our civic institutions is shockingly poor in many segments of our society and that making improvements in this area, and emphasizing the importance of civics will be good for our children, our state, and our country. The measure that you are considering here represents a small step toward that end..

As someone who has taken the naturalization test and helped others prepare for it, I have come to believe that it represents the bear minimum knowledge that a citizen of this country should have about our history and our civic institutions. Requiring passage of such a test is not setting a particularly high bar for graduation, nor for the level of civic education required of Kansas students. Any high school student who has paid even passing attention to their required civics courses or has simply lived in our society while being marginally aware of current events should have no difficulty passing such a test. Having them do so as they prepare to enter fully into the civil society is not too much to ask. While I would be a proponent of requiring a more rigorous understanding of the ideas upon which our constitutional system is founded, a basic requirement that every high school student pass a test such as the one proposed in this bill sends an important message that an understanding of the basic functions, structure and system of our government is essential to the role of citizenship and to function in a free society.

The state legislature has previously recognized the importance of civic education for our young people and entrusted our education system to do so. Requiring that high school students pass a civics test like the one required of new citizens is not only good for our society as a whole, but it represents a commonsense way to determine whether our educational system is properly discharging its statutory obligation to provide for the civic education of our high school students. While I am sympathetic to the idea that overseeing education curriculum and testing standards is generally entrusted to the State Board of Education, it is not unreasonable that the legislature should impose certain checks to ensure that where the legislature has imposed a duty to educate students in particular areas of study, that duty is being faithfully discharged. Our civic institutions are often built around the ideas of checks and balances. Requiring a test such as the one proposed in this bill is not a burdensome constraint upon the authority of the Board of Education but a commonsense check on the exercise of that authority.

More important than being a mere administrative function of the education system, elevating the importance of civic education by requiring that all high school students pass a test such as the one proposed here is a measure which will help strengthen and unite this nation at a time where unity is sorely needed.

I have had the opportunity to give the keynote address at several naturalization ceremonies including that at which my father was naturalized, and that at which I was naturalized. When talking to those who are poised to take on the rights and duties of citizenship, I have sought to highlight how exceptional and unique the United States is amongst the nations of the world. In doing so, I have emphasized the fact that most nations are bound together by a common language, a common culture, and common borders. While the United States shares these aspects of nationhood to some degree, we are different in that these are not the factors which bind us together as a nation. We are a nation made up of people who come from different backgrounds, different cultures, different geographical areas, and who's families speak, or have spoken, many different languages. What binds us together as a nation is not merely language, culture and borders (as important as those may be) but an allegiance to a constitutional system of government and to the ideas, philosophy and history which created that system. In this sense, civic education represents the very glue that holds us together as a nation.

We are in a time of great division in our country. A time in which our disunity is nearing existential

proportions. It does not have to be this way. Our Republic and our system of government can thrive in the face of, and fueled by an array of different voices, ideas and agendas, but only if those competing ideas are considered, and championed within the constraints of the civil society and our system of constitutional rights and obligations. To ensure that those constraints are sturdy enough to instill order on the beautiful chaos of freedom it is imperative that we take all possible steps to reinforce the bonds of nationhood and to the fortify the unity that comes from patriotism. Strengthening our common understanding of our history, and the ideas which lie at the foundation of our nation is essential to doing so and the passage of HB 2039 represents a baby step in that direction.

I would urge you to vote this bill out of committee and to advocate for its passage into law.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.



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Carl F. A. Maughan