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Senate Bill 381 Opposition - Written Testimony Only  
Senate Committee on Education  
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Chair Erikson and Senate Committee on Education Members:

My name is Thomas Barker and I am writing as a public school educator, parent of a public school student, and a former researcher on civic education in opposition to Senate Bill 381 (SB381). Having completed my Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Kansas, I choose to work in the K-12 setting instead of further working in higher education. That said, my research focused extensively on civic education and how to increase civic and political efficacy in adolescents, particularly in rural schools.

Over the past several years there have been a couple of bills that are similar to SB381. In testimony given on those bills, the committee discussion has largely focused on the concern of a rising decline in civic and political engagement and how we can stop this decline in students to further our democracy. These concerns about political and civic participation are not new. In the 1980s Benjamin Barber in his book *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* and Robert Putman in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, that came out at the turn of the century, all denote the decline of adult participation in local communities in a variety of venues.

Research on civic education over the past two decades has given us a better understanding of what works and does not work. These studies increasingly show that high-stakes testing, especially standardized tests tied to graduation, does not meaningfully increase civic engagement among adolescents. For example, Jung & Gopalan (2024) recent research analyzing multiple U.S. states requiring high school students to take or pass a civics test to graduate found that this mandate did not produce statistically significant increases in youth voter turnout when compared to peers in states without such requirements.

One reason high-stakes testing fails to foster civic engagement development in adolescents is that it focuses on rote memorization rather than giving students opportunities to practice skills that have been shown to increase efficacy later on in life. Research on civic education suggests that such hands-on, participatory experiences are more strongly linked to later civic and political involvement than purely test-oriented curricula (Wood, Larson, Brown, 2009; Hillygus & Holbein, 2023). In many ways, going back to this type of high-stake testing, regardless of the form it takes, could possibly lead to many of the issues that we saw during the No Child Left Behind era when civic and social studies education as a whole revolved around memorization of facts and not the skills that helped students be civically and politically engaged later on in life, and are a crucial part of being college and career ready.

My own dissertation research found that few school factors were of importance in increasing political and civic efficacy. However, school environments that encouraged open discussion and argumentation around current events were strongly associated with higher levels of civic and political efficacy among students. In classrooms where students were regularly invited to discuss contemporary issues, evaluate competing viewpoints, and connect course content to real-world events, adolescents demonstrated a stronger sense of civic and political efficacy. These discussion-based settings treated students not as passive recipients of information, but as emerging civic and political participants whose perspectives mattered. As a result, students were more likely to report intentions to vote, follow the news, and engage in civic activities beyond school.

Requiring a 100-question high-stakes examination modeled on the U.S. naturalization exam is not the answer to strengthening civic education or democratic participation. This legislation reinforces a compliance-driven model that treats citizenship as a checklist of facts to be memorized and recited, rather than as a set of skills, dispositions, and practices that must be developed through sustained engagement. The naturalization exam was designed for adult immigrants to demonstrate baseline knowledge, not for adolescents who are still forming political identities and learning how democracy functions in lived, contested, and evolving contexts. By elevating this test as a central measure of civic learning, schools are incentivized to prioritize rote instruction and test preparation over discussion, inquiry, and participatory experiences.

I hope that you will vote in opposition to SB381.

Hillygus, D. S., & Holbein, J. B. (2023). Refocusing Civic Education: Developing the Skills Young People Need to Engage in Democracy. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 705(1), 73-94.

Jung, J., & Gopalan, M. (2024). The Stubborn Unresponsiveness of Youth Voter Turnout to Civic Education: Quasi-experimental Evidence from State-Mandated Civics Tests. *Education Evaluation Policy Analysis*. 46(4): 764-787.

Wood, D., Larson, R. W., Brown, J. R. (2009). How adolescents come to see themselves as more responsible through participation in youth programs. *Child Development*, 80(1), 259 - 309.