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Testimony of Jonathan Weiner  
CBA Civic Education Committee

IN SUPPORT  
HB6619, AAC the Development of a Kindergarten to  
Eight Grade Model Curriculum

Education Committee  
March 17, 2021

Good Afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and Honorable Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for having me here today. My name is Jonathan Weiner. I am the Chair of the Connecticut Bar Association's Civics Education Committee, and President of the Board of Civics First, which is a nonprofit organization that works with the bar and bench to provide civics education programs to students in Connecticut's public and private schools. I am here to testify for HB6619, *An Act Concerning the Development of a Kindergarten to Eighth Grade Model Curriculum*, particularly as it relates to instruction in civics education, and to urge the addition of language from HB 6139, which would create a civics education task force, to this bill.

We believe that it is critical to lay the groundwork for an active, engaged citizenry, starting with our state's youngest students. Section 1 (b) of this bill requires the model curriculum to include instruction in social studies, including citizenship and government.<sup>1</sup> A report published a few weeks ago by the [Educating for American Democracy Initiative \("EAD Report"\)](#)<sup>2</sup> has provided guidance for improving the teaching of civics education via an inquiry-based model that asks students to understand how our democratic institutions work, along with their role in those institutions.

The time is now. As the EAD report states: "Civics and history education has eroded in the U.S. over the past fifty years, and opportunities to learn these subjects are inequitably distributed."<sup>3</sup> "Dangerously low proportions of the public understand and trust our democratic institutions. Majorities are functionally illiterate on our constitutional principles and forms. The relative neglect of civic education in the

past half-century . . . is one important cause of our civic and political dysfunction."<sup>4</sup> I suggest one need only look to the tragic events at the United States Capitol on January 6 as a symptom of the social illness caused by the decline in civics education nationally. This tragedy was an unsurprising result of a surge in voter participation accompanied by a surge in voter misinformation that was decades in the making as a result of the decline in civics education.<sup>5</sup>

Section 1 (c) of the bill requires the Department of Education and the State Education Resource Center to "consult with persons and organizations with subject matter expertise in developing the model curriculum." Connecticut is well positioned to assess and improve our students' civics education.<sup>6</sup>

We have a diverse array of organizations that are devoted to making civics education accessible and exciting, with many programs oriented to students in grades K-8. For example, [Civics First](#) organizes Middle School Debate and Mock Trial Competitions, which teach students how to research and engage civilly, either in the context of a court case or a discussion of a contemporary issue. The Connecticut Bar Association Young Lawyers Section runs [Lawyers in the Classroom](#), which sends volunteer attorneys into elementary school classrooms to engage with students about the rule of law; this program is being expanded to middle schools for Constitution Day. Finally, our friends with the [Connecticut Democracy Center](#), which has submitted written testimony, sponsor the very popular Kid Governor election for Fifth Graders each year. None of these programs would be possible without hours of volunteer support donated by our bench, bar, and elected officials.

The leadership of these organizations stand ready to partner with you, the Department of Education, and our state's teachers to support a bipartisan working group to examine how civics education is taught in our state's public schools. This working group was proposed earlier this session as a legislative task force through HB 6139, which was endorsed as a full association position by the Connecticut Bar Association. We join the written testimony of Secretary of State Denise Merrill in urging the addition of that bill's language to HB 6619.

In any form, we look forward to supporting a K-8 curriculum that will foster informed and active future generations. Thank you for your time.