

Testimony of Edwin C. Yohnka
Director of Communications and Public Policy
American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois
Illinois Task Force on Civic Education
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My name is Edwin C. Yohnka and I serve as the Director of Communications and Public Policy for the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois. Let me begin by thanking the Task Force members for making time to hear from our organization and from the public at these hearings. This is a discussion that we are extremely pleased to join.

We want to commend the Illinois General Assembly, first, and the Task Force members, in particular, for their diligence and for the thoughtful approach they have taken to this process over the past several months. You have initiated a long-overdue discussion, one that deserves broad dissemination and public attention. Thank you for engaging this process.

Moreover, the ACLU of Illinois is proud to support the recommendations that you have included in the report. Rather than repeat the import of the goals you already have outlined, I hope you will permit me to discuss three broad areas of concern related to implementing these recommendations across the State. These areas, we believe, are critical to ensuring the effectiveness of these recommendations.

As a beginning point, there must be a focus on ensuring universal implementation of these recommendations across the State. Your recommendation for an additional course requirement is a great point of departure, but more must be done. Civics education ought to be available equally across Illinois, whether in a large, suburban school, a rural school district (like the one where I grew up) or in the elite, college prep schools in the City of Chicago.

Over the past few years, the ACLU of Illinois has been fortunate to appear as a guest speaker in a number of school settings across the state (especially across the Chicago metropolitan area) as part of Constitution Day activities. These appearances are, I can assure you from personal experience, are rewarding and informative. This exposure also makes clear a number of things.

First, the depth of knowledge about basic civics and the operations of our government tend to range broadly. The most important factor, quite often, in determining the quality and energy with which civic education is approached in a schools is the activity, the energy and the knowledge or the teachers at the school -- or, at least, the lead teacher in the Social Science department.

But even in those schools with high-quality, high-energy, highly-motivated teachers, one sees that the focus of civic education was primarily high-achieving students in advanced placement courses or those on a college prep track.

Civic educations must be treated more equitably, since every student can be a participant in our body politic, regardless of whether they continue their education.

Next, we applaud your specific recommendation (#6) to increase student and youth involvement in the electoral process. Broader student involvement should not be limited to elections -- for civic life does not begin and end with the electoral process. Almost each day, there are critical policy questions that affect students' future -- questions being debated on the federal, state and local level. Students should be given opportunities -- and credit whenever possible -- for working on

issue-oriented campaigns. Early engagement in these campaigns provide students with a number of valuable lessons, from cooperation and coordination, to advocating without offending, to the need for compromise and gradual progress. Students should know that our greatest societal successes almost never come in a single moment - but after years of advocacy, often dotted by numerous setbacks and losses.

Lastly, we raise two matters about the curriculum for civic education in Illinois classrooms. We recognize and accept that most of the decisions about the curriculum for this area will be left to local officials. But any meaningful civic education curriculum must explicitly recognize the critical nature of protecting individual rights in our society and the importance of the independence of the judiciary.

The lack of any real understanding about the importance of recognizing and protecting individual rights in America today -- beyond a rudimentary recitation of the rights protected in the Bill of Rights -- harms our national debate. Too many adults -- let alone students -- view the protection of individual rights as critical and important only when they perceive their own rights to be affected or violated. Otherwise, they neither engage or simply accept that the majority ought to be able to limit the fundamental rights of a minority. Let me give you an explicit example.

Our nation is reaching the end of a decade-long discussion about the fundamental right to marry, specifically the fundamental right for gay and lesbians to marry the person they love. More recently, the refusal of the Supreme Court to take a number of cases from appellate courts confirms that same-sex couples have a fundamental right to marry. But this right did not emerge just now-- indeed, it has been a fundamental right over the entirety of this debate.

Yet, over the past decade, this basic right has been put up to a popular vote in state and state and subject to misinformation and out-right lies for political gain.

In short, without a real, in-depth education and understanding about the importance of individual rights -- and how we all benefit when we protect individual rights -- we create fertile public opinion to be abused and misused by political demagogues and aspirants who single out minority groups for their own gain.

Likewise, any new focus on civic education curriculum must pay special attention to the critical role played by our courts in our divided system of government. Today, we often see the judiciary attacked using the phrase "judicial activism." But that phrase is little more than a loser's lament, whenever a court decision goes against one parties or one ideologies interests.

Our courts continue to serve as the bulwark of protecting against government overreach. Given that they are, as we know historically, also the branch of government that is least able to defend itself, it is critical for an informed citizenry to have a deep understanding of how the courts work and how they approach that work.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present these views. We applaud you for your work and look forward to seeing this process move forward.