

1 S.221

2 Introduced by Senator Westman

3 Referred to Committee on

4 Date:

5 Subject: Education; courses of study; civics education; Agency of Education

6 Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to require school  
7 districts to provide civics education in kindergarten through grade 12; allow  
8 project-based assessments in civics education; recognize students, schools, and  
9 school districts for exemplary achievements in civics education; and create the  
10 Civics Education Special Fund to provide funding for civics education.

11 An act relating to creating an equitable vision for implementing civic  
12 education

13 It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

14 Sec. 1. SHORT TITLE

15 This act shall henceforth be known as the “Civics Strengthens Democracy  
16 Act.”

17 Sec. 2. FINDINGS

18 The General Assembly finds that:

19 (1) Neglect for civics in our elementary and secondary education system  
20 has contributed to polarization, distrust in institutions, and a citizenry and

1 electorate who are poorly prepared to understand, appreciate, and use our form  
2 of government and civic life.

3 (2) All students need to have the civic knowledge, skills, dispositions,  
4 and behaviors necessary to participate in, preserve, and strengthen our  
5 republic.

6 (3) Vermont should embrace civic education that:

7 (A) inspires students to want to become involved in their  
8 constitutional democracy and help to sustain our republic;

9 (B) tells a full and complete narrative of America's plural, yet shared,  
10 story;

11 (C) celebrates the compromises needed to make our constitutional  
12 democracy work;

13 (D) cultivates civic honesty and reflective patriotism that leaves  
14 space to both love and critique this country;

15 (E) is relevant and engaging for students and teaches history and  
16 civics in an integrated and inquiry-based manner; and

17 (F) teaches history and civics through a timeline of events and themes  
18 that run through those events.

19 (4) Students who experience comprehensive, high-quality civic  
20 education are more likely to vote and discuss politics at home, complete  
21 college and develop employable skills, volunteer, and work on community

1 issues and are more confident in their ability to speak publicly and  
2 communicate with their elected representatives.

3 (5) The civic strength of our country relies on prioritizing and investing  
4 in quality, comprehensive civic learning for the next generation of civic  
5 participants.

6 Sec. 3. 16 V.S.A. § 914 is added to read:

7 § 914. CIVIC EDUCATION

8 (a) Definitions. As used in this section:

9 (1) “Agency” means the Agency of Education.

10 (2) “Civic seal” means a recognition awarded by school districts to  
11 individual students who have demonstrated civic excellence through their high  
12 school project-based assessment and related coursework.

13 (3) “Civics” means a nonpartisan educational program that addresses:

14 (A) civic knowledge, which includes the acquisition of knowledge,  
15 including an understanding of the history, heritage, civic life, and civic  
16 institutions of the United States;

17 (B) civic skills, which includes the acquisition of skills, such as the  
18 ability to analyze text and determine the reliability of sources, as well as an  
19 understanding of the ways in which civic institutions operate and how  
20 individuals may be involved in civic life;

1           (C) civic dispositions, which includes the acquisition of dispositions;  
2           values such as appreciation for free speech, civil discourse, tolerance, and  
3           inclusion; and an understanding of perspectives that differ from one's own, as  
4           well as a disposition to be civically engaged; and

5           (D) civic behavior, which includes the development of behaviors,  
6           including civic habits and practices such as voting, serving on juries,  
7           engagement in deliberative discussions, volunteering, attending public  
8           meetings, and other activities related to civic life.

9           (4) "Educating for American democracy pedagogical principles" means  
10          the following evidence-based instructional methods:

11          (A) Excellence for all, which requires teachers to commit to learn  
12          about and teach full and multifaceted history and civic narratives. Teachers  
13          shall appreciate student diversity and assume all students' capacity for learning  
14          complex and rigorous content. Teachers shall focus on inclusion and equity in  
15          both content and approach as they spiral instruction across grade bands,  
16          increasing complexity and depth about relevant history and contemporary  
17          issues.

18          (B) Self-reflection and a growth mindset, which requires teachers to  
19          have a growth mindset for themselves and their students, meaning they engage  
20          in continuous self-reflection and cultivate self-knowledge. They learn and  
21          adopt content as well as practices that help all learners of diverse backgrounds

1 reach excellence. Teachers need continuous and rigorous professional  
2 development and access to professional learning communities that offer peer  
3 support and mentoring opportunities, especially about content, pedagogical  
4 approaches, and instruction-embedded assessments.

5 (C) Building and educating for American democracy-ready  
6 classrooms and schools, which requires that teachers cultivate and sustain a  
7 learning environment by partnering with administrators, students, and families  
8 to conduct deep inquiry about the multifaceted stories of American  
9 constitutional democracy. They set the expectation that all students know they  
10 belong and contribute to the classroom community. Students establish  
11 ownership and responsibility for their learning through mutual respect and an  
12 inclusive culture that enables students to engage courageously in rigorous  
13 discussion.

14 (D) Inquiry as the primary process for learning, which requires  
15 teachers to use inquiry prompts as entry points to teaching full and complex  
16 content and cultivate students' capacity to develop their own deep and critical  
17 inquiries about American history and civic life, and their identities and  
18 communities. Teachers embrace these rigorous inquiries as a way to advance  
19 students' historical and civic knowledge, and to connect that knowledge to  
20 them and their communities. They also help students cultivate empathy across

1 differences and inquisitiveness to ask difficult questions, which are core to  
2 historical understanding and constructive civic participation.

3 (E) Practice of constitutional democracy and student agency, which  
4 requires teachers to use their content knowledge and classroom leadership to  
5 model constitutional principles through democratic practices and the  
6 promotion of civic responsibilities, civil rights, and civic friendship in their  
7 classrooms. Teachers deepen students' grasp of content and concepts by  
8 creating student opportunities to engage with real-world events and problem-  
9 solving related to issues in their communities by taking informed action to  
10 create a more perfect union.

11 (F) Assess, reflect, and improve, which requires teachers to use  
12 assessments as a tool to ensure all students understand civics content and  
13 concepts and apply civic skills and agency. Students have the opportunity to  
14 reflect on their learning and give feedback to their teachers in higher-order  
15 thinking exercises that enhance as well as measure learning. Teachers analyze  
16 and utilize feedback and assessment for self-reflection and the improvement of  
17 instruction.

18 (5) "Media literacy" means nonpartisan educational content that  
19 addresses:

20 (A) digital literacy, which means being technically fluent and able to  
21 make informed decisions about what an individual does and encounters online,

1 recognizing how networked technology affects behavior and perceptions, and  
2 creating and effectively communicating with digital media tools;

3 (B) information literacy, which means understanding how to find,  
4 evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make  
5 a decision;

6 (C) news literacy, which means the ability to discern verified  
7 information from spin, opinion, and propaganda, and produce news accurately,  
8 fairly, and responsibly;

9 (D) visual literacy, which means the ability to find, interpret,  
10 evaluate, use, and create images and visual media, such as photographs,  
11 videos, illustrations, drawings, maps, diagrams, and advertisements; and

12 (E) digital citizenship, which means understanding and following the  
13 norms of safe and responsible technology use.

14 (6) “Project-based assessment” means a nonpartisan educational civics  
15 project as defined by the Agency that may be individual, small-group, or class-  
16 wide civics projects and that are designed to promote a student’s ability to:

17 (A) reason, make logical arguments, and support claims using valid  
18 evidence; and

19 (B) demonstrate an understanding of the connections between  
20 federal, state, and local policies, including issues that may impact the student’s  
21 community.

1           (7) “Recognition program” means a civic excellence designation as  
2           defined by the Agency that is aligned with the educating for American  
3           democracy pedagogical principles, with the purpose of formally recognizing  
4           and highlighting the accomplishments of school districts or individual schools.

5           (b) Civics course time.

6           (1) In all public schools, the history of the United States of America and  
7           social science, including civics, shall be taught as required subjects to promote  
8           civic service and a greater knowledge thereof and to prepare students, morally  
9           and intellectually, for the duties of citizenship. The Agency shall require  
10          universal, equitable access to high-quality civic learning experiences,  
11          including:

12           (A) dedicated class time for social studies in each elementary grade,  
13          including:

14           (i) two 45-minute blocks per week for kindergarten, first- and  
15          second-grade students; and

16           (ii) four equivalent blocks per week for third-, fourth-, and fifth-  
17          grade students;

18           (B) a one-semester, stand-alone civics course in middle school; and

19           (C) a full-year, stand-alone civics course in high school.

20           (2) Secondary students shall take and pass a stand-alone, full-year civics  
21          course as a prerequisite for graduation from high school.



1           (3) Public schools shall also embed units of instruction of media literacy  
2           across subject areas and may consider a stand-alone, semester-long high school  
3           media literacy course.

4           (c) Project-based assessments.

5           (1) In addition to instructionally embedded assessments in stand-alone  
6           civics courses, middle and high school students shall engage in a minimum of  
7           one project-based learning, field-based learning, or community-based learning  
8           activity as an alternative form of assessment, such as service learning or  
9           showcases and competitions.

10           (2) Project-based assessment civic learning projects shall be consistent  
11           with State standards and learning time requirements.

12           (3) No fee shall be charged to a student or the student's family for a  
13           student to participate in project-based learning opportunities, notwithstanding  
14           fees already required by schools to participate in school-sponsored field trips,  
15           clubs, or other activities.

16           (d) Civic seal.

17           (1) The Agency shall develop and provide student credentialing  
18           benchmarks for use by school districts for the purpose of awarding student  
19           civic seals on high school diplomas to students who have demonstrated civic  
20           excellence through their project-based assessment completed in high school

1 and related coursework. School districts and individual schools shall not be  
2 required to participate in the civic seal program.

3 (2) A school district that participates in the civic seal program shall:

4 (A) provide information to all students regarding the civic seal  
5 opportunity and criteria for being awarded the recognition;

6 (B) maintain appropriate records in order to identify students who  
7 have earned the civic seal;

8 (C) record a student's civic seal recognition in the student's official  
9 transcript; and

10 (D) affix the appropriate insignia to the diploma of each student who  
11 earns the civic seal.

12 (3) No fee shall be charged for a student to receive the civic seal under  
13 this section.

14 (e) School and school district recognition program.

15 (1) The Agency, in collaboration with Vermont's civic learning  
16 community and civic education researchers, shall develop and establish an  
17 educating for American democracy recognition program to:

18 (A) recognize school districts and individual schools that show  
19 excellence in producing and promoting civic learning and civic project-based  
20 assessments under this section; and

1           (B) provide credentialing benchmarks for schools and school  
2           districts.

3           (2) The purpose of the program shall be to formally recognize and  
4           highlight the accomplishments of school districts and schools and to provide  
5           teachers and administrators with the components and stages of successful civic  
6           learning.

7           (3) The Agency shall:

8           (A) develop an application process for school districts and individual  
9           schools to apply for the recognition program; and

10          (B) adopt rules pursuant to 3 V.S.A. chapter 25 to govern the  
11          program created under this subsection (e), which shall:

12           (i) prioritize school districts and individual schools that promote  
13           equitable access to civic learning and project-based assessments; and

14           (ii) require schools and school districts that apply to be evaluated  
15           annually.

16          (4) The Agency shall develop a website to showcase school districts and  
17          individual schools that are recognized for civic excellence and the civics projects  
18          produced by the students of said school districts and individual schools. School  
19          districts and individual schools shall not be required to apply for the recognition  
20          program.

1           (5) No fee shall be charged for a school or district to earn recognition  
2           pursuant to this subsection.

3           (f) The advisory council and Civics Education Special Fund.

4           (1) Advisory council. The Agency shall establish an advisory council to  
5           oversee the implementation of the Civics Strengthens Democracy Act and to  
6           advise and assist school districts and individual schools in implementing  
7           universal, equitable, comprehensive, and quality civic learning. The  
8           responsibilities of the advisory council may include providing:

9                   (A) technical assistance;

10                  (B) competitive, needs-based funding to districts;

11                  (C) educator professional development;

12                  (D) administrator professional development;

13                  (E) models of best practice;

14                  (F) maintenance of a comprehensive database of civic education  
15           resources; and

16                  (G) monitoring of the fidelity of policy implementation by schools  
17           and districts.

18           (2) Civics Education Special Fund.

19                  (A) There is established the Civics Education Special Fund, which  
20           shall be managed by the Agency in accordance with 32 V.S.A. chapter 7,

1 subchapter 5, to provide funding to school districts for the provision of civics  
2 education under this section.

3 (B) The Special Fund shall consist of:

4 (i) revenue from appropriations or other money authorized by the  
5 General Assembly and specifically designated to be credited to the Fund;

6 (ii) interest earned on such revenues; and

7 (iii) funds from public and private sources, such as gifts, grants,  
8 and donations, to further civics and history education and professional  
9 development.

10 (C) Amounts credited to the Civics Education Special Fund shall not  
11 be subject to further appropriation, and any money remaining in the Fund at  
12 the end of a fiscal year shall not revert to the General Fund.

13 (D) Amounts received from private sources shall be approved by the  
14 advisory council and subject to review before being deposited in the Civics  
15 Education Special Fund to ensure that pledged funds are not accompanied by  
16 conditions, explicit or implicit, on the implementation of civic programming  
17 that may be detrimental to the neutral and rigorous teaching of civics or unduly  
18 influence the direction of civic education policy. The review shall be made  
19 publicly available.

20 (3) Report. Notwithstanding 2 V.S.A. § 20(d), annually on or before  
21 November 15, the advisory council shall report to the General Assembly

1 regarding the Civics Education Special Fund's activity. The report shall  
2 include:

3 (A) the source and amount of funds received;

4 (B) the amounts distributed and the purpose of expenditures,  
5 including funds expended to assist school districts in meeting the requirements  
6 of the Civics Strengthens Democracy Act;

7 (C) any grants provided to institutions of higher education and other  
8 stakeholder organizations; and

9 (D) anticipated revenue and expenditure projections for the next year.

10 Sec. 4. IMPLEMENTATION

11 The Agency shall begin implementing the provisions of 16 V.S.A. § 914  
12 during the 2027–2028 school year and shall fully implement the provisions of  
13 this act beginning in the 2028–2029 school year.

14 Sec. 5. EFFECTIVE DATE

15 This act shall take effect on July 1, 2026.