



Testimony to be delivered by DeNora Getachew, Executive Director of Generation Citizen, New York City to New York City Council Education Committee Oversight Hearing re: DOE's Response to Incidents of Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in NYC Schools and Efforts to Improve School Climate

Good Morning Members of the City Council's Education Committee:

Generation Citizen ("GC") appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony at today's public hearing about the Department of Education's response to incidents of bullying, harassment, and discrimination in New York City schools and efforts to improve school climate.

GC is a seven-year-old national nonpartisan, nonprofit dedicated to bringing civics education back into the classroom through a new, engaging pedagogy: Action Civics. Action Civics is a "student-centered, project-based approach to civics education that develops the individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for 21st century democratic practice" (National Action Civics Collaborative). It differs from normative, knowledge-based civic education in the same way that taking any "hands-on," project-based, or experiential course differs from reading a textbook. Students learn about democratic structures and processes by directly engaging with them, as well as with each other, to address one or more issues they care about, which are impacting their community.

GC partners with teachers and schools to help them implement our standards-aligned Action Civics education program twice weekly over the course of a semester, often added to History, Social Studies, the state-mandated Participation in Government class, or similar in-school class time. We deploy two models to implement our Action Civics curriculum: college volunteer, or Democracy Coach model; and teacher led model. Our two models are unified by a shared Action Civics curriculum, our innovative approach to advocacy planning and support, and supplemental resources for students, teachers, and schools. Our goal is to ensure that every student in the United States gains the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in our 21st century democracy as active, lifelong citizens.

GC is focused on reinvigorating civics education in schools through our Action Civics model in order to address America's civic participation problem. Though this problem has been growing in impact over the last several decades, recent data shows that only 23% of eighth graders nationwide are proficient in civics. Worse, young people nationwide are receiving unequal civic learning opportunities: students in low-income schools, when compared with just average socioeconomic status (SES) schools, are half as likely to study how laws are made, and 30% less likely to report having experiences with debates or panel discussions in social studies classes.

In New York, the picture is even more bleak. New York ranked 41st out of 50 states in voter turnout during the 2016 election: just 57% of eligible voters cast ballots. Little more than half that percentage cast votes in the 2014 midterms, and in the September 2017 citywide primary election, approximately 15% of registered Democrats went to the polls.

Indicators of civic knowledge are just as poor. According to a 2011 poll by the Brennan Center for Justice:

- Just 20% of New Yorkers considered themselves "very familiar" with the U.S. Constitution.
- Only two-thirds knew that the President leads the federal government's executive branch.
- Three out of five were unaware that the legislative branch is responsible for passing laws.

While there are many reasons for the lack of overall civic participation, one root cause of the problem is that civic engagement is not seen as a high priority in our schools today, and too much of our efforts are focused on elections and the experience of voting. But that's just one action on one day. Generation Citizen takes the position that an effective action civics education and sustained participation is needed to re-engage young people in the local political system, and to collectively strengthen our democracy.

Don't talk about change. Lead it.

In our Action Civics course, students debate issues directly affecting them, like police community relations, domestic violence, or discrimination, and work as a class to decide on one focus issue to address during the semester. Through our student-led program, they develop strategic action plans to effect systemic change on the identified issue, implement the plan by engaging directly with influencers and decision-makers, and present their findings at Civics Day, a semester-end showcase. Students learn valuable academic and life skills, like public speaking, collaboration, critical thinking, and how to work through difference. They also gain firsthand experience engaging in an important lifelong habit, understanding how they can directly inform and influence change in their community through the democratic process.

Thanks to the Council's \$500,000 investment in GC's program through the *Civic Education in New York City Schools* Initiative, GC NYC has doubled our impact in Fiscal Year 2017, educating and empowering approximately 3,400 sixth through twelfth graders citywide. Last year, GC educated approximately 9,000 students through our work in New York City and 5 additional sites: Rhode Island, where we were founded on Brown University's campus; Massachusetts; the Bay Area, California; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Central Texas. We are incredibly thankful that the City Council renewed funding for GC in Fiscal Year 2018 to enable us to empower approximately 3,700 more students to find their voice and become civically engaged this year.

Our data shows that during our 2016-17 school year approximately 10 percent (or 13) of our 131 classrooms focused their action project on bullying and discrimination in their schools and/or community. While that is not dispositive, we do believe it highlights that students citywide are grappling with this very personal and high salience issue. Action Civics educates students about how to research, analyze, propose, debate, and advocate for their collectively determined solution(s), and in many cases throughout GC's history, students have fostered meaningful change as a result. Action Civics provides students with a vehicle to synthesize and propose concrete solutions to address the issues impacting their community. And, once they possess the civic knowledge and skills to address issues impacting their community, they can utilize these skills in the school, as well as in their broader community for the long-term.

I would be remiss if I did not note that GC's partners with the Urban Assembly Wildlife Conservation School, where the tragic incident occurred last month, which is at least in part the impetus for today's hearing. While our college volunteers and students were not in the impacted classroom, they were present in an adjacent classroom at the time. The 3 classes that we partner with at the school have been grappling with the impact that bullying can have on a school community in the wake of that event, including as they determine the focus of their classes' action project this semester. I can share more results on the final projects once our semester concludes.

In conclusion, if we continue to deemphasize civics education in our schools, it's no wonder that young people do not understand the importance of democratic participation. GC recently released a bold plan to reinvigorate civics education nationwide, using three strategies over the next three years: (i) strengthening our existing program; (ii) expanding our program portfolio to prove the efficacy of the model in rural communities; and (iii) advocating for Action Civics for all students statewide leveraging the state mandated Participation in Government one semester civics course.

We appreciate the Council's investment in GC to ensure that the next generation of New Yorkers develops the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for them to become active and engaged stewards of our democracy for the long-term. I will now ask Radeha Haque, alumni of GC's Action Civics program and Community Change Fellowship program, to share her perspective about how Action Civics can empower young people to become more civically engaged.

Thank you to the Committee for your consideration of this testimony.