

Virginia Commission on Civics Education
10/4/2016 Meeting Summary

The Virginia Commission on Civics Education held its second meeting of the 2016 interim on Tuesday, October 4, 2016 at James Madison's Montpelier in Orange, Virginia. A quorum was present and consisted of legislative members Delegate Rich Anderson (chairman), Senator Dave Marsden (vice-chairman), Senator Amanda Chase, and Delegate Brenda Pogge and nonlegislative citizen members Jim Dillard, Betsy Edwards, Jennifer Patja Howell, and Mike Wildasin. After member introductions, including the Commission's newest member, Betsy Edwards, Executive Director of the Virginia Press Association, the Commission took up the following agenda items:

(1) Citizens' Time:

Katherine Westmoreland of Inspire Virginia spoke to the Commission about her organization's work in the Commonwealth, which includes training high school students on voter registration, encouraging high school students to engage in local and state politics, and hosting an upcoming candidate forum in Virginia's 8th Congressional District race.

(2) Update on 2016 Virginia Civics Summit (Nov. 16th):

Governor McAuliffe will be out of the country on a trade mission and thus is not able to serve as the lunchtime speaker for the Summit. Chairman Anderson will inquire as to the availability of Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam and Mr. Dillard as to the availability of First Lady Dorothy McAuliffe.

Mr. Dillard reviewed the agenda with the Commission and went into detail about the background and experience of each speaker and about each topic on which they will speak. One change to the agenda as presented to the Commission is that Steve Farnsworth, instead of discussing the connection between lobbying and campaign contributions, will discuss how Virginia politics is changing and how it is not and is willing to take questions on lobbying and campaign contributions.

Several members made the Commission aware of potential conflicts on November 16th, including a Board of Education meeting, House Appropriations retreat, and Senate Finance retreat. Available members will generally exercise flexibility to attend at least a portion of the Summit in the Capitol building.

In terms of logistics, Ms. Howell offered to coordinate the invitation of exhibitors, as has been customary at past Summits. The Commission will coordinate with the Department of Education to circulate a Superintendent's memo with a link to the registration website established by the House Clerk's office.

Mr. Wildasin suggested that the 2017 Summit include both civics students and civics teachers. The suggestion was very well received by Commission members.

(3) Request to Superintendents for School Board Feedback on Civics Education Policies:

Mr. Dillard updated the Commission on efforts related to the presentation of controversial issues in the classroom and the role of political campaigns in the classroom. School board policies range from sufficient to nonexistent on these subjects. The Commission has drafted sample policies

and distributed them directly to a targeted group of division superintendents in the Commonwealth. The Commission also sent the sample policies to the State Board for possible distribution to a wider audience, including division superintendents and chairpersons of local school boards. There has been some pushback from the State Board and the effort recently died on a 4-4 vote. It is back on the agenda for the Board's November meeting and Mr. Dillard thinks that there will be sufficient votes for the question to pass.

Various Commission members voiced support for the sample policies. Vice-chairman Marsden supports classrooms being forums for the free exchange of ideas. Delegate Pogge expressed the view that students in public schools should be taught how to think and not what to think. Mr. Gibson voiced support for the effort to provide school divisions with some guard rails on the subject of controversial issues and political campaigns in the classroom. Mr. Wildasin echoed these sentiments and added that rural school divisions without sufficient staff support would particularly benefit from sample policies. Ms. Edwards noted the erosion of civil discourse in the classroom and Ms. Howell added that it is important for students to learn how to respectfully disagree with each other. Mr. Wildasin suggested handing out the sample policies to teachers at the Summit on November 16. Chairman Anderson is amenable to this idea.

(4) Discussion of Possible Student-centered Programs to be Sponsored by the Commission:

In response to an inquiry into the work of the Commission by House Education Committee Chairman Steve Landes, Mr. Dillard requested that Ms. Christonya Brown (not present at the meeting) compile a list of student-centered civics initiatives that the Commission could support or pursue in some way in the future. Commission members lent their support to the list of ideas from Ms. Brown and noted the obvious threshold issue of funding. Funding could be addressed with private grants, and the Commission will look into pursuing that option. The Commission will also ask Ms. Brown and her colleague Betsy Barton in the Department of Education to share with the Commission a list of existing programs and a compendium of websites and/or print resources on existing civics programs for students.

(5) New business:

Bill Wilson, in attendance representing James Madison University, reminded the Commission that its statutory sunset provision calls for the Commission to expire on July 1, 2017 and that in order to extend the sunset, the legislative members of the Commission would need to pursue legislation in the 2017 session of the General Assembly. Chairman Anderson and vice-chairman Marsden agreed to sponsor bills that would extend the sunset and change the name of the Commission to the "Commission on Civic Education" to more accurately reflect its mission.

*The next meeting of the Commission will occur on November 16 at the Capitol building for the Virginia Civics Summit.