

Executive Summary of the Interim activity and work of the Commission on Civics Education 2016

Members

Legislative Members:

The Honorable Richard L. Anderson, Chairman
The Honorable David W. Marsden, Vice Chairman
The Honorable Amanda F. Chase
The Honorable L. Kaye Kory
The Honorable J. Chapman Petersen
The Honorable Brenda L. Pogge
The Honorable Luke E. Torian
The Honorable R. Lee Ware, Jr.

Citizen Members:

The Honorable James H. Dillard II
Mr. Thomas C. Coen
Ms. Betsy Edwards
Mr. Bob Gibson
Ms. Jennifer L. Patja Howell
Mr. G. Michael Wildasin

Ex Officio Member:

Ms. Christonya B. Brown

Staff:

Ryan B. Brimmer, Attorney, Division of Legislative Services
Scott Maddrea, Deputy Clerk, Virginia House of Delegates

BACKGROUND

The Commission on Civics Education is the legislative body charged with (i) educating students on the importance of citizen involvement in a constitutional republic, (ii) promoting the study of state and local government among the Commonwealth's citizenry, (iii) enhancing communication and collaboration among organizations in the Commonwealth that conduct civics education, (iv) developing and coordinating outreach programs in collaboration with schools to educate students on the importance of understanding that (a) a constitutional republic is a form of government dependent on reasoned debate and good faith negotiation; (b) individual involvement is a critical factor in community success; and (c) consideration of and respect for others is essential to deliberating, negotiating, and advocating positions on public concerns, (v) identifying civics education projects in the Commonwealth and providing technical assistance as may be needed to such programs, (vi) building a network of civics education professionals to share information and strengthen partnerships, (vii) developing, in consultation with entities represented on the Commission and others as determined by the Commission, a clearinghouse that shall be accessible on the Department of Education's website to include, among other things, (a) a database of civics education resources, lesson plans, and other programs of best practices in civics education; (b) a bulletin board to promote discussion and exchange of ideas relative to civics education; (c) an events calendar; and (d) links to civics education research, and (viii) making recommendations to the Board of Education regarding revisions to the Standards of Learning for civics and government. *See Virginia Code §§ 30-348 and 30-351.*

INTERIM ACTIVITY AND WORK OF THE COMMISSION

The Commission met twice during the 2016 interim and held its annual Civics Summit in November. There were two membership changes during the interim: Ms. Betsy Edwards, Executive Director of the Virginia Press Association, replaced Ms. Ginger Stanley as a nonlegislative citizen member of the Commission and Senator Chase replaced Senator Black as a legislative member of the Commission.

July 2016 meeting

The Commission held its first meeting of the 2016 interim on Monday, July 11, 2016 at 10:00am in House Room C of the General Assembly Building in Richmond. Members present included Chairman Anderson, Mr. Dillard, Mr. Coen, Mr. Gibson, Ms. Howell, and Ms. Brown. Items for discussion included:

- Commission financial update: \$4475 in the fund of the account and Delegate Anderson continues to seek private donations.
- Commission website: Ms. Brown and her colleague at the Department of Education, Betsy Barton, committed to taking over maintenance of the outdated Commission website.
 - The website has since been migrated to the [Department of Education website](#).
- Update on outcome of HJ 86 (2016) sponsored by the Commission: tabled in Rules.

- Update on HB 36 (D. Bell) (2016): amended by the Governor to address concerns of the Commission and signed into law.
- Update on HB 895 (Greason) (2016): Profile of a Virginia Graduate. Commission discussed the need to weigh in on the civics portion of the Profile before public hearings begin.
- Professional development for civics teachers: Ms. Brown notified the Commission of upcoming train the trainer workshops and 8 regional institutes for K-12 civics teachers in the fall.
- National mock election programs: Commission members expressed support for such programs and discussed how the Commission could engage in disseminating information about local participation.
- Teaching controversial topics in the classroom: Several Commission members expressed concern about recent legislative and regulatory focus (General Assembly and Board of Education) on setting the parameters for defining the scope of the teaching of controversial material.
- Annual Civics Summit hosted by the Commission: Members brainstormed potential topics and content for the upcoming Summit in November.

October 2016 meeting

The Commission held its second meeting of the 2016 interim on Tuesday October 4, 2016 at 10:00am in the Grand Salon of the Visitors Center at James Madison's Montpelier estate. A quorum was present and consisted of Chairman Anderson, Vice Chairman Marsden, Senator Chase, Delegate Pogge, Mr. Dillard, Ms. Edwards, Mr. Gibson, Ms. Howell, and Mr. Wildasin. The Commission took up the following agenda items:

- 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.

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

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.

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.

- 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.

- 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.

- 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.

Annual Civic Summit

The Virginia Commission on Civics Education sponsored its annual Civics Summit on Wednesday, November 16, 2016 in House Room 3 of the State Capitol. Elementary, middle, and high school government teachers from school across the Commonwealth as well as several members of the Commission and other interested individuals attended the Summit. The theme of the Summit was campaign contributions and lobbying. The Summit featured the following presentations:

- Dr. Nancy Gansneder, Director of the Academy for Civic Renewal in the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, presented on ways in which teachers can promote civic engagement.
- Dr. Robert Holsworth, Managing Principal of DecideSmart, and Dr. Quentin Kidd, Director of Christopher Newport University's Wason Center for Public Policy, provided an analysis of the recent Presidential and Congressional elections.
- David Poole, Director of the Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP) rounded out the morning session with a presentation on web resources available to teachers.
- A break for lunch also provided an opportunity for Summit participants to engage with various exhibitors at booths set up in Senate Room 3 at the Capitol.
- After lunch, Mr. David Bailey, President of David Bailey and Associates and Virginia Capitol Connections, presented on the art, science, and challenge of lobbying.
- Bill Axselle, Principal at Williams Mullen, then presented on the campaign process and campaign contributions.
- Dr. Stephen Farnsworth, Director of University of Mary Washington's Center for Leadership and Media Studies, capped off the Summit with a presentation on the changing landscape of Virginia politics.

2017 REGULAR SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The Commission is pleased to report that [HB 1718](#) (Chairman Anderson) and [SB 840](#) (Vice Chairman Mardsen) passed the General Assembly by nearly unanimous votes of both chambers. These identical bills extend the sunset of the Commission by two years and update its name to the Commission on Civic Education to more accurately reflect its focus and mission.