



January 27, 2025

Re: SB 8 | Education - Maryland Civic Excellence Program - Established

Dear Chair Feldman and the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

The Washington County Association of Student Councils (WCASC) is a coalition of high school and middle school student councils dedicated to amplifying the voices of thousands of students within Washington County Public Schools. WCASC strives to create connections among those within the community, providing students access to avenues in which they can become more civically involved at the local level. The mission of WCASC is to elevate the collective student voice by building communities of student leaders, giving students agency to speak their truth, and inspiring students to take action.

WCASC is in support of **SB 8 – Maryland Civic Excellence Program** – and urges the Ways and Means Committee to give a favorable report on this bill.

SB 8 addresses the concern of political education and civic literacy by establishing programs for high school students to foster civic engagement in school. A study by the U.S Chamber of Commerce Foundation revealed that over 70% of Americans fail a basic civic literacy quiz, struggling with fundamental topics such as the three branches of government¹. This demonstrates the urgent need for civic education. **SB 8** provides students with a strong foundation in civic knowledge from an early age, establishing the Maryland Civic Excellence Program to incentivize students to foster crucial civic readiness by awarding them with a “Seal of Civic Excellence”. This seal, displayed on their transcript and diploma, serves to encourage civic participation and education. The skills students develop while working towards this recognition can prepare them to make informed decisions as voters and deepen their understanding of the laws and policies that shape their communities and futures. This program has the potential to foster a generation of civically engaged citizens.

SB 8 hopes to establish recognition programs for schools of civic excellence, mirroring established programs in Maryland regarding safety, environment, and language excellence. Across the country, students with schools that have recognition for bi-literate students in the form of a Seal of Biliteracy have proven to enroll and excel in a 4-year college at higher rates². This same reality can be true for students in Maryland with the Seal of Civic Excellence with the passing of **SB 8**, leading to schools that promote this success for Maryland youth. **SB 8** will support schools in uplifting civic engagement opportunities for students, and establish a Center of Civic Excellence to be used as a resource for promoting civic education across Maryland. The promotion of a Seal of Civic Excellence ensures that students will receive instruction in civics and government, in order to provide the necessary skills needed as informed citizens.

¹ Staff, U.S. Chamber. “New Study Finds Alarming Lack of Civic Literacy among Americans.” *U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation*, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 25 June 2024,

www.uschamberfoundation.org/civics/new-study-finds-alarming-lack-of-civic-literacy-among-americans. Accessed 21 Jan. 2025.

² Najarro, Ileana. “Which Students Are Earning the Seal of Biliteracy, in Charts.” *Education Week*, Education Week, 18 Dec. 2024, www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-students-are-earning-the-seal-of-biliteracy-in-charts/2024/12. Accessed 26 Jan. 2025.

SB 8 aligns with WCASC's Platform to empower students as active, informed citizens. As an organization, the Washington County Association of Student Councils strongly supports:

1. "School-based programs and related activities that encourage civic participation," (WCASC Legislative Platform, Plank II; B, 4), and
2. "The individual ability of students should be recognized, developed, and utilized in order to nurture effective leaders," (WCASC Legislative Platform, Plank I; A, 1).

SB 8's establishment of the Maryland Civic Excellence Program is a critical step toward encouraging and recognizing civic engagement across Maryland schools and students. Maryland must grow citizens and community leaders in the classroom, engaging all students in political education and civic engagement. For these reasons, WCASC strongly supports **SB 8** and respectfully requests a favorable report from the committee. We thank you for considering this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barna Begzad".

Barna Begzad
President, Washington County Association of Student Councils