



**FOX CHAPEL AREA
SCHOOL DISTRICT**
COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

**Oral Testimony of
Jennifer L. Klein
Before the
State Government Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives**

**Legislative Hearing on H.B. 520,
"An Act Amending Title 25 (Elections) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes"
March 14, 2008**

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to speak with you today in this most appropriate setting for today's hearing. When the Constitution was written, many in this room would have been left out of the voting electorate. Any of us who are women, minorities, or aged 18-21 would have been denied the right to be active, voting citizens. Yet, the Constitution, which did not originally establish universal voting rights, did establish the ability to change and update the original text: an action we have taken twenty-seven times. Besides allowing the amending of the constitution, that great document also gave powers to the states to make decisions that were best for the people of their state.

So far, nine states -- Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia -- have allowed 17-year-olds to vote in primaries if they will be 18 for the general election.

So, I ask the committee, are Pennsylvania's 17 year olds less qualified to vote than those in Ohio?

Clearly, not. We are a state that takes great pride in our educational system. Pennsylvania is consistently rated as having high educational standards. I would venture to say that Pennsylvania's 17 year olds are just as intelligent and just as responsible as their peers in those nine states.

Having been a public school teacher for the last fifteen years, I can honestly say these students deserve to be active voting members of our society.

This school year alone, I have had the privilege of working with ninety 17-18 year olds. All ninety of these students are worthy and deserving of being enfranchised. Unlike the media stereotype, 17 year olds are not apathetic and consumed with video games. They watch debates, follow political news, even take the time to research and compare sources of information. Many have actively lobbied for causes, many have attended local civic meetings and at least seven of the students here today are volunteering their time to work on a campaign. High school students today take multiple college level courses, are active with extra curricular activities and work part time jobs. These students, plus students like them across Pennsylvania, are seeking the same rights as their peers in Ohio and Maryland.

Let us not for one minute compare their quest here today with radical youth who seek to lower the drinking age or legalize drugs. What these students seek is the chance to actively pursue liberty and the opportunity to carry out their civic duty. Let us not stand in their way.

Despite what many assume to be the law, the United States Constitution does not deny 17 year olds the right to vote. The 26th Amendment to the United States Constitution only states that the right of citizens who are eighteen years of age or older to vote shall not be denied by the United States or by any State on account of age.

Since the Constitution does not forbid this change and since we know our youth to be just as deserving as those in neighboring states, I fully support House Bill 520. But, allow me give you yet another reason to support this bill.

Voting is a habit. As the saying goes, good habits start young. As a civic educator, creating lifelong active voters is a goal I take very seriously. My students register to vote, we study the candidates for public office, and we talk about the voting machines they will be using. While some students can take these lessons directly to the polls, others have to wait until the general election to cast their first vote. Understandably, even with the passing of House Bill 520, some students will still not make the cut-off to participate in the primary, but many more will. Statistics show that once someone votes, the likelihood that he or she will vote in the next election is much greater. I believe we should start this process and habit as soon as we can for the feeling of fulfilling ones civic duty will help solidify a lifelong habit.

Before I conclude, I want to personally tell you how proud I am of my students and of the students across Pennsylvania who have joined together and have taken part in the political process. The lesson they are learning today goes beyond any textbook knowledge. The lesson today, right in this room, is that a few dedicated people can make a difference, that through hard work and dedication anything is possible. Over the last 250 years the great city of Philadelphia has seen many such dedicated groups of people looking to institute positive changes in their government. Let us uphold their legacy and continue to change government when it is needed. My most sincere thanks to the State Government Committee for inviting us here today and to the dedicated and passionate students of Fox Chapel Area High School for their commitment to the political process.

Thank you.