

**Testimony from Richard Redmerski, former Project 18 Teacher
Hempfield Area School District
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Good Morning, my name is Richard Redmerski. I was a teacher for 34 years at Hempfield Area Senior High in Westmoreland County. While at Hempfield, I created the Project 18 course, which I taught for 30 years. After teaching, I became the Communications Director for Senator Allen Kukovich. I am presently employed as the Western Pennsylvania Region Coordinator for PennCORD, a movement that seeks to strengthen civic education throughout Pennsylvania. Regardless of which position I held, I experienced an enthusiasm and willingness of young people to be involved in the political process when given the opportunity and the tools to do so. Basically, that is why I have a fervent belief in House Bill 520 and the logic that lies behind that bill.

As a PennCORD employee, I congratulate Fox Chapel students as being the catalyst for giving new life to House Bill 520. The students and their teacher, Jen Klein, have done an admirable job of focusing on the issue of allowing 17 year olds to vote in primary election if they will be 18 before the next general election.

Today I am speaking as the former teacher of Project 18 and seek to provide you with my observations of senior high school students who were engaged in the political process. The Project 18 course that I talk about is based on the belief that students should have a solid knowledge base concerning state and local government. They should also understand the pragmatic nature of politics and learn how to operate within that system. And finally, students must be given opportunities to participate in the political process.

By the end of the Hempfield area course, students participate in more than 10 press conference experiences with local government and community leaders. They learn to interact both socially and politically with office seekers at a candidate's brunch they organize before local elections. Project 18 students are required to volunteer at least 10 hours of time to campaign work, must be involved in service learning initiatives, and participate in a three-day seminar in Harrisburg. During the Harrisburg seminar, they questioned many of the top leaders in the executive and legislative branch, as well as influential lobbyists and members of the media. Anyone can see that I take great pride in the Project 18 course that many leaders consider one of the leading civic courses in the state.

There are elements of the course beyond the curriculum that are relevant to the passage of HB 520. You'd be surprised to know that the course attracted students of all ability levels, as well as many students who said that they had little or no interest in politics. By the end of the course the students realized that we are all involved in a process called "politics" every day of our lives. What I learned was that when you give students the chance to be active participants in the political process, you increase the chance that they will become life long participants in that process. That is what I consider an added benefit of HB 520.

Now I offer you and the students a few realistic observations. First, I believe that members of the General Assembly will not only judge HB 520 on the its merits but will also question whether it will help them or their party in future elections. Once again I look back to my experiences with Project 18 to respond to that point. There was some fear that Project 18 would benefit one party over another; however, that

was never the case. There was never a pattern of advantage to one major party or the other.

My second observation is that even if you are sitting on this panel and support HB 520, you know that passage will not come easy. Therefore, I hope that Fox Chapel students and students throughout the Commonwealth, will take their initiative to the next level. I urge you to begin the lobbying process. As an example, Aimee Hugus, the present Project 18 teacher at Hempfield, is ready to engage her students in this process. I fully expect that her students will let their state senator and the three representatives in their region know whether they are for or against this bill. Even more important, they will ask their elected officials to take a position on the bill and will ask those lawmakers, "What are you willing to do to support, amend, or oppose the bill"? That is real politics. It is an example of pragmatic politics that goes beyond hoping that something happens. In the end, whether they are successful or not, young people will gain valuable experience in the art of politics by becoming fully engaged in the lobbying process. They will also gain some understanding about the complicated political process of lawmaking, which goes far beyond the neat and idealistic description that they often find in text books.

Young people, the ball is in your court as much as it is for the leaders who sit before you today. I hope that you learn to engage the media as you advocate for your cause. Furthermore, you should understand that you belong to a special interest group and that you have the power to form alliances with groups that you don't even belong to. It is also my hope that students across the state become a part of this lobbying process by actively advocating for or against this legislation.

Personally I see great benefits for civic education if HB 520 becomes law. If my experiences with Project 18 students are correct, I also see great benefits to our country. I know that students who become politically engaged at a young age tend to be more active and informed throughout their lives.

I'd like to end by putting a twist on the quote from the German-Prussian politician, Otto Von Bismark. He said, "Laws are like sausages. It's better not to see them being made." Perhaps, seeing the entire process of what goes into passing a law might be a little much, but I believe that being a part of that process can actually be exciting, rewarding, and yes, even fun for young people.