

**Lucian Spataro Testimony - House Bill 1858 Joint Hearing
House Education and Veterans Affairs & Emergency
Preparedness Committees**

Good afternoon My name is Lucian Spataro and I serve as Chief Academic Officer for the Joe Foss Institute.

On behalf of the Joe Foss Institute, I want to thank Representatives Kortz and Boback as well as their 44 bipartisan cosponsors for introducing this important proposal.

The Joe Foss Institute is the enduring legacy of the late Joe Foss, a World War II Medal of Honor recipient who founded the Institute in 2001. JFI now serves nearly 2 million students through its Veterans Inspiring Patriotism program. We bring educational material and the flag to mount on the wall, the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and the Bill of Rights into the classroom for teachers and students to work with. It is an inspiring program that serves students, teachers, and Veterans in all 50 states.

Historically, one of the primary goals of public education, as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, was to instill in our youth the civic virtues that would sustain our fledgling republic.

Today, however, we are facing a crisis. As the emphasis has shifted to STEM, the importance of teaching basic civics has been left behind. Justice O'Connor has often termed this the quiet crisis in education, but we truly believe it is the quiet crisis in America.

While it may not be playing out every day on the front page, the sad fact is that we have a crisis in civics education that has become an epidemic on our watch over the past few decades. Because this epidemic has developed on our watch it is our responsibility to act urgently to address it.

We've all seen the embarrassing man-on-the-street interviews on late-night TV where Americans are unable to answer even basic questions about our nation. Numerous studies and surveys have shown that a vast majority of

American students and many adults lack the basic understanding of how our country was founded, how it is governed, and what it means to be a citizen.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 9 percent of 4th grade students can identify a picture of Abraham Lincoln and tell us two things he did that were important. The results don't improve as our children matriculate. Just seven percent of 8th graders could correctly identify the three branches of government and overall – only 24% of seniors in high schools scored proficient or above on the NAEP civics test.

The national achievement gap in reading and math is unsurprisingly also present in social studies and civics. Scores were even lower for low-income and minority students, with black students scoring on average, 24 to 30 points lower than their white counterparts.

This persistent civic achievement gap undermines all citizens but disproportionately affects civic engagement and empowerment for underrepresented communities, impacting everything from voter turnout to trust in our institutions. It comes as no surprise, when people do not understand the system by which they are governed, including how to affect change in that system, they are naturally frustrated and this often leads them to disengage from the political process.

Recognizing these problems, in 2014 JFI launched the Civics Initiative, which is based on a simple concept – that American high school students, as a condition for graduation, should be able to pass the very same test that all new immigrants must pass to become citizens. The Citizenship Test is 100 questions that cover basic facts of U.S. history and civics. Since launching the initiative, fourteen states have now enacted this exact or similar legislation and an additional 25 states will be considering

this legislation next year. By the end of 2017, we hope to have enacted this legislation in over half the country.

Our Initiative was specifically designed to provide schools, teachers, and students with maximum flexibility. By using a well-established test and study materials that are readily available online, this legislation can be implemented with no cost to states and districts. In fact, JFI is developing online lesson plans for each of the 100 questions as a resource for teachers and we now have an online test portal that teachers can access for free to help them administer the test.

This initiative is certainly not a punitive measure. Nearly 92% of new immigrants applying for citizenship pass this test on their first attempt, and I would hope our students could do as well or better. Those that don't pass the first time can try as many times as they need, the questions stay the same each time and our free test portal even helps them identify areas where they need to study further.

It is also not intended to be a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it establishes a baseline of knowledge, like learning your multiplication tables in math or the periodic table in science, to ensure our students know at least as much about the fundamentals of how our country operates as foreign-born citizens are required to know. It is not a panacea, or a silver bullet, but it is meant to be a strong first step toward ensuring and encouraging civic engagement in our youth.

In closing, as a professor myself I have a question for any educators in the audience. What is the one question that you know a student will always ask you without fail every time during a lecture, and I mean every time?

"Is this going to be on the test?"

If you answer YES, the students all lean forward, they take notes, and are engaged in the subject matter. On the other hand, if you say NO, the entire class leans back and you can see them relax, drift off, and disengage. So from a student's perspective, having Civics on a test that matters is important.

As this relates to America, the same is true, we want our students leaning forward and engaged, but every year that goes by more students are being left behind due to a lack of emphasis being placed on how our government works. Help us put Civics on a test that matters today, so our students graduate as actively engaged, informed, and responsible citizens.

Thank You.