

# **EDUCATE FOR CHANGE: LTE GUIDE**

## **MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD FOR COMPREHENSIVE CIVIC EDUCATION!**

Elected officials and school administrators need to hear from Texas students, teachers, and families that civic education and youth civic engagement needs to be strengthened, not suppressed. One of the best ways to get their attention is by getting your voice heard in a letter-to-the-editor.

### **WHY NOW?**

Texas recently passed HB 3979 to restrict certain civics best practices and limit conversations about race and diversity in Texas classrooms. Lawmakers then created additional restrictions under SB 3. Schools play a critical role in shaping how young people understand their roles in U.S. society, and civic education in particular teaches youth how to engage with their broader community, from voting to volunteering. Now, the State Board of Education has the opportunity to improve Texas civics as they revise the Texas Essential Knowledge and Standards (TEKS) for Social Studies over the next year. We need every voice from students to families, from educators to administrators, to let our leaders know that we should be strengthening our state's civics education.

### **TIPS + TRICKS**

Letters-to-the-Editor sections are among the most-read parts of a newspaper. You can use the talking points below, along with your personal story, to write your own letter supporting strengthened civics education in your community. Remember

to keep it shorter than 150 words, keep it straightforward and simple, and refrain from offensive language to ensure you effectively influence both readers and policymakers who value public opinion. Once you've written your letter, you can submit it through the web portal of your local newspaper.



# SAMPLE TALKING POINTS



## SHARE YOUR PERSONAL STORY!

*Your personal story is the most powerful advocacy tool to paint the full picture of civics education in Texas.*

- Are you a student who never learned about voter registration or voting in your school?
- Are you an educator who is worried about encouraging civic behavior under HB 3979 and SB 3?
- Are you a parent who wants to make sure your child is represented and engaged in the classroom?



## WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

*Define the problem with civic education in your school or district that you want to see solved.*

### Broad problems

- We need to reform civic education in order to raise a generation of informed and engaged Texans.
- A 2018 Texas civic health assessment reported dismal findings about our civic habits. Texas ranked 44th in voter

registration, 47th in voter turnout, and 50th in frequency of political discourse compared to other states.

### Outdated and whitewashed standards

- Outdated TEKS focus on memorizing facts instead of practicing skills. Understanding the history of democracy, the functions of government, and voting are all important, but civics involves so much more.
- Whitewashed TEKS fail to represent or engage the most racially diverse generation in our history. Young Texans deserve an education that tells a comprehensive, honest history and includes all our communities.

### Lost instructional time

- The pressure of standardized testing in other subjects leaves less time to focus on social studies and civic education.

### Lack of institutional support

- Bills passed by the legislature restrict student civic engagement by censoring classroom conversations and prohibiting credit for student-led advocacy.
- Texas law requires high schools to provide two voter registration opportunities to eligible students each year. Unfortunately, many high schools are unaware of this law or struggle to register students on top of other responsibilities.

# SAMPLE TALKING POINTS (CONTINUED)

## Inequitable access

- Texas students do not have equal access to civic education. For example, Texas has the largest number of rural students in the country, particularly those who are low-income. These areas are often called “civic deserts” because they lack opportunities to engage in civic life.



## WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR EDUCATION?

*Speak to the changes you want to see to support and strengthen civic education in your school or district.*

## Focus on depth over breadth

- The State Board of Education should change the standards and TEKS implementation so that teachers can focus more on depth, rather than breadth.

## Provide professional development

- State leaders and school administrators should provide more support and professional development opportunities for teachers as they teach “hard history.” Students have questions about their own experiences and the stories they see in the headlines, and teachers must be prepared to lead difficult conversations.

## Reflect students’ communities

- The State Board of Education should be more intentional about including important, diverse historical figures in the standards. Civics standards should be representative of and responsive to diverse populations.

## Pair knowledge with action

- State leaders and school administrators should provide support for educators and schools to create active learning opportunities that allow students to implement civic learning in meaningful, tangible ways in their communities.

## Connect locally

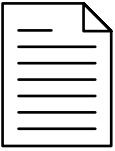
- Outside organizations should reach out directly to teachers and students in the district about opportunities to get engaged in the community.

## Create a supportive school climate

- Teachers and school leaders should create a supportive school climate in order to promote meaningful civic education. Educators should especially be modeling positive civic behaviors for their students. For example, they could hold mock classroom elections or create opportunities for student leadership.

## Listen to communities

- State leaders should involve teachers, students, and families in future discussions about policies that affect schools and civic education.



## **SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

As a [student/teacher/parent/etc.], I support comprehensive civic education for Texas students.

A 2018 Texas civic health assessment reported dismal findings about our civic habits. Texas ranked 44th in voter registration, 47th in voter turnout, and 50th in frequency of political discourse compared to other states. With HB 3979 and SB 3, the legislature is stifling youth engagement by censoring classroom conversations and prohibiting credit for student-led advocacy.

The State Board of Education must center the demands of students, families, and teachers to strengthen civic education as they begin rewriting the state social studies standards. State leaders should encourage students to practice civic skills in real, tangible ways in their communities.

Young Texans have spent the last year voting, volunteering, and doing their part to create a state that works for all of us. It's time for state leaders to support youth civic engagement instead of suppressing it.



## **QUESTIONS?**

Contact  
CDF-Texas' Youth  
Civic Education &  
Engagement  
Coordinator at  
[mstern@  
childrensdefense.  
org.](mailto:mstern@childrensdefense.org)