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House of Representatives
State House, Boston 02133-1054

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House and Senate approve civics education bill

BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means), is supporting legislation to expand civics education in Massachusetts’ public schools.

Senate Bill 2631, An Act to promote and enhance civic engagement, passed the House of Representatives and Senate unanimously on July 25 by votes of 151-0 and 37-0, respectively. The bill, which is now under review by Governor Charlie Baker, represents a compromise between two earlier versions of the legislation previously approved by the two branches.

Under current state law, elementary and high school students are required to receive instruction in American history and civics, which includes learning about the Massachusetts and United States Constitutions, as well as proper flag display and etiquette. Senate Bill 2631 requires schools to add several new civics-related topics to the curriculum, including instruction on the function and composition of local, state and federal government, and the roles and responsibilities of a citizen in a democracy.

“Quality civic education is essential when it comes to securing progress in a democratic society,” said Representative Smola. “As important as it is to know our national history, students also have to understand how our government and institutions affect their lives today.”

Senate Bill 2631 also requires all public middle and high school students be given the opportunity to participate in a civics project, including individual, small group, and class projects. Students will be required to demonstrate an understanding of the connections between federal, state and local policies, including issues that may impact their community.

The bill also creates a Civics Project Trust Fund, which will be administered by the Commissioner of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Money from

this fund will be used to support professional development training, curriculum development, and a new Commonwealth Civics Challenge, which will be made available to all eighth grade students and developed by DESE in partnership with colleges, universities, museums, libraries, and other non-profit entities. The bill requires professional development training to be implemented for the 2020-2021 academic year, with the Commonwealth Civics Challenge to be implemented by the 2022-2023 academic year.

Under the bill, school committees are authorized to designate student outreach coordinators to work with student advisory committees and keep them informed of the local school committee's agenda. Senate Bill 2631 also requires the Secretary of State to work with the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to promote an annual high school voter challenge to assist students with registering or pre-registering to vote.

Governor Baker has until August 4 to sign the civic education bill into law. For additional information please contact Representative Smola at Todd.Smola@mahouse.gov or (617)722-2100.

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