



State of Rhode Island

**Department of State | Office of the Secretary of State**

**Gregg M. Amore, Secretary of State**

## **I. Cover Page**

### **State Office:**

Rhode Island Department of State  
Rhode Island Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore

### **Project Lead:**

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### **Project Title:**

Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program

### **Project Description:**

The Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program (RICLP) is an immersive, year-long nonpartisan program designed to connect high school students to their government and build skills and habits that foster lifelong civic engagement. Each school year, teachers or school administrators nominate up to three civically-engaged high school students to serve as Civic Liaisons to the RI Department of State. Students attend monthly sessions at the Rhode Island State House led by RI Department of State staff, elected officials, and community and government leaders focused on a variety of topics, including civility, community advocacy, voting and elections, and politics and the media. The Program culminates in a three-day Civic Leadership Summit held in downtown Providence.

### **General Subject Area:**

Civic Education and Engagement

State House, Room 218, Providence, RI 02903

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## II. Executive Summary

### 1. History

A United States history and civics teacher for more than 27 years, Rhode Island Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore has always felt that an informed and engaged citizenry is critical to the well-being of all Rhode Islanders. While serving as a Rhode Island State Representative, now-Secretary of State Amore recognized the alarming trends relating to civics and U.S. history education. According to the Rhode Island Civic Health Index, “Only 15% of 8th graders scored proficient or above in history on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress, a lower percentage than five years earlier. Some educators attribute this phenomenon to a focus on standardized test preparation in math and reading at the expense of learning subject-area content.”

In January 2021, Representatives Amore (D) and Brian Newberry (R) led a bi-partisan coalition of Rhode Island legislators to pass the Civic Literacy Act. The Act requires all students to complete “no less than one” standards-aligned student-led civics project in either middle or high school and requires civics to be a half-credit course in both 8<sup>th</sup> grade and in high school. The law requires public schools to provide access to and support for civic education, but there remained a gap in experiential learning opportunities. With that in mind, Secretary Amore campaigned for Secretary of State on a platform that emphasized civic education and civic engagement in the next generation.

Two years after the passage of the Civic Literacy Act, Amore was elected the thirtieth Rhode Island Secretary of State. His background as a history and government teacher, as well as his experience as a legislator, helped him to identify opportunities to teach students about civics and government in a new and engaging way. As a high school student, Secretary Amore – and many other current State leaders – attended *Project Insite*, a program that connected Rhode Island students with State government learning opportunities. *Project Insite* had a profound impact on Secretary Amore, helping to shape his career path and his vision of civic engagement, but the program was phased out in 1985 due to the high-cost burden on participating families. After taking office, Secretary Amore charged the newly-created Civic Education & Engagement Division with developing a modern program that would connect Rhode Island high schoolers to the RI Department of State and their State government. With that vision in mind, the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program (RICLP) and its culminating Civic Leadership Summit came to fruition.

### 2. Significance

Beginning in January 2023, the Civic Education & Engagement Division was tasked with securing two or three students from each Rhode Island high school, including public, private, and charter schools, to serve as liaisons to the RI Department of State, with the ultimate goal of connecting Rhode Island students to their government. To identify civically-engaged high school students, Civic Education & Engagement Division staff visited dozens of schools and met with teachers and administrators for their recommendations. With participants identified, the Civic Education & Engagement Division set to work on bringing Secretary Amore’s vision for a student leadership program to life. In June 2023, the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program (RICLP) kicked off with an orientation for the first cohort of Student Liaisons. The cohort consisted of students from diverse backgrounds – of different races, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses – and represented high schools from the urban areas of Providence to the rural towns of Rhode Island.

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Starting in September 2023, each month, Student Liaisons visited the Rhode Island State House or another government facility to participate in that month's RICLP session. RICLP monthly sessions included panel discussions, workshops, small group exercises, field trips, team building activities, and more. Students discussed policy issues and other topics relevant to the inner workings of government. For example, monthly session topics include how elections are administered, "courageous conversations" with a focus on civility, how to access local government, and the intersection of politics and the media with local journalists. This year, students will visit the Edward M. Kennedy Institute and participate in debating a bill on a replica of the U.S. Senate floor. The meetings – and the entire program – are nonpartisan and designed to encourage participants to think critically, with the goal of allowing Student Liaisons to hear from all sides and draw their own conclusions.

The monthly meetings run from September through March and the Program culminates in a two-night, three-day Civic Leadership Summit in April held at a hotel in the capital city of Providence and other State and federal government buildings. Students have the opportunity to stay overnight in Providence, eat meals with their fellow students, and travel to government facilities for experiential learning opportunities. Of course, housing, feeding, and transporting the students comes at a cost – but unlike the *Project Insite* experience of his youth, Secretary Amore was determined to ensure that cost was not a barrier to participation for any interested Student Liaison. Through generous corporate and philanthropic partnerships, Student Liaisons can participate in the Civic Leadership Summit at no cost to them or their family.

The Civic Leadership Summit emphasizes the inner workings of Rhode Island government, and is structured around the three branches, with one day designated to each branch. Each day offered a variety of classroom-style lessons, observations, panels, and meals with government leaders, in addition to downtime activities such as a comedy show, a trip to the movies, trivia, and other fun activities. Lesson content was created and delivered by the five local social studies teachers who were selected by the Civic Education & Engagement Division to serve as cohort leaders and chaperones. Students received a workbook in a three-ring binder with agendas, activity sheets, copies of lesson materials, biographies of speakers, and other reference materials to guide each of the three days. A brief summary of each day of the Civic Leadership Summit is provided below.

#### **Day 1 - Executive Branch**

The morning lesson and workshops focused on the powers and duties of the RI Executive Branch and Rhode Island's various State agencies. Students heard from each of the State's five General Officers: the Governor, the Lt. Governor, the Secretary of State, the General Treasurer, and the Attorney General, and had the opportunity to ask questions during an individual Q&A session. During dinner, students participated in a panel with local journalists who talked about the intersection of politics and the media.

#### **Day 2 - Judicial Branch**

After a lesson and a workshop on the Rhode Island Judiciary, the Student Liaisons were transported to the Rhode Island District Court, where they met many of the individuals that make the court run. In addition, they watched live courtroom proceedings and engaged in Q&A sessions with judges and magistrates from the Traffic, Family, and Workers' Compensation Courts. Later, students visited Superior Court as well as the Supreme Court, where they had the opportunity to sit in the Justices' seats and even try on a robe. They were allowed into the chambers of the Supreme Court and mingled with Chief Justice Paul Suttell. Upon returning to

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the hotel, Rhode Island judges joined the Liaisons for dinner and students had the opportunity to converse with them over their meal.

### **Day 3 - Legislative Branch**

After the daily lesson and a workshop on the RI Legislative Branch, the Liaisons prepared for a mock legislative session on the floor of the House of Representatives in the Rhode Island State House. Prior to the start of the debate, all Liaisons were randomly assigned a particular role to play – even if it may be contrary to their personal beliefs. For instance, a Liaison may be assigned to role play a Representative who is extremely conservative and represents a very conservative constituency, while another may be asked to assume a liberal role. This was intended to encourage the Liaisons to use their debate skills, while also being open to seeing the other side of an issue.

The session began with a presentation by the real sponsor of a controversial bill proposed in Rhode Island last year, as well as his counterpart, who was opposed to the legislation. Immediately following, lobbyists from both sides of the issue spoke about the role they play in the process and gave mock testimony as if they were participating in a bill hearing. In final preparation for the debate, students were separated into two groups: liberal and conservative. Each group caucused and formulated a strong argument to be used during the debate. In the House Chamber, the Liaisons debated the bill, with members of the RI Department of State staff assuming the roles of Speaker and Parliamentarian at the rostrum. In all, the debate lasted roughly 45 minutes, with strong back-and-forth and, as designed, with no decisive winner. Immediately following the debate, Liaisons dropped their assumed roles and voted their conscience on the bill using the vote buttons and the House of Representatives' vote board.

Lunch once again provided the Liaisons the opportunity to converse directly with government leaders. This time, early-career legislators and legislators who had recently run for office for the first time, many of whom represented the communities of the participants, were invited to discuss how to run for office and the roles they play in shaping legislation.

One of the requirements of being a Student Liaison is to commit to completing a Civic Action Project. The project may be done individually, with a partner (typically another Student Liaison from their school), or in a group of students from multiple schools. In the past, projects included participating in the legislative process by testifying at a hearing on a bill that affected their school or community, developing an advocacy club, and conducting a poll worker, voter registration, coat, or food drive at their school. The Civic Action Project topic and strategy is entirely up to the Student Liaison, but the Civic Education & Engagement Division is available to help students facilitate their efforts. Each participating school also has a "Teacher Liaison," whose role is to help their students navigate the process of implementing their project within their school.

Once Student Liaisons have completed the monthly meetings and their Civic Action Project, they receive a Certificate of Civic Excellence from Secretary Amore at the final Program meeting in May.

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### **3. Impacts/Results**

In the inaugural year of the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program, a total of 79 liaisons from 40 high schools took part in the Program. Currently, in year two, there are 113 Student Liaisons from 50 Rhode Island high schools enrolled in the Program, an approximate 43% growth in participation.

The long-term goal of the program is to remain in contact with Liaisons through the years so that the RI Department of State may continue to help them as civically-engaged leaders. While many alumni are still in high school, others are attending college, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, Princeton University, the United States Naval Academy, Dartmouth College, Barnard College, Providence College, the University of Rhode Island, and Rhode Island College, among others. The RI Department of State is set to hold the first Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program Alumni Event at the Rhode Island Food Bank in January 2025. The interest of alumni to return to take part in this community service opportunity and reconnect with other Liaisons and staff is a clear sign of the impact of the Program on individual participants.

In addition, Liaisons have shown interest in remaining involved with the RI Department of State. Former participants have returned to monthly meetings to appear on speaking panels, while others have applied for internships in the office. One alumna informed staff that she changed her major from engineering to political science due to her experience in the Program. And, alumni have joined the Rhode Island State House tour program as tour guides.

Over the past year, the RI Department of State has received numerous requests from government officials from other states to learn more about our program. Civic Education & Engagement Division staff have had either meetings or phone calls with representatives from Vermont, Tennessee, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maine, New Hampshire, Kentucky, Minnesota, Washington, Florida, California, and New York. Through communications with staff counterparts from these states, the RI Department of State believes this program is the only one of its kind in the country.

The first year of the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program was a significant achievement for the RI Department of State, and through the experience of planning and implementing the programming, the Civic Education & Engagement Division made improvements for future iterations of the Program. In addition to his work to create the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program, Secretary Amore remains committed to promoting civic engagement in the classroom. Since March 2023, he has given 75 lessons on the importance of voting in more than 60 high schools. Secretary Amore's commitment to civic education and engagement in all aspects of his role as Secretary of State continues to strengthen the interest of students, parents, and teachers to participate in initiatives like the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program. We look forward to continuing to build on our successes in future years.

### **III. Supporting Materials**

**Please see attached.**

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# Supporting Materials: Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program Website

For more information about the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program, including a complete list of sponsors, a program overview video, and student and teacher testimonials, please visit <https://www.ricivicleadership.org/>.



**THE RI DEPARTMENT OF STATE IS IMMENSELY THANKFUL  
FOR ITS 2023-2024 PROGRAM SPONSORS**



# RI CIVIC LEADERSHIP SUMMIT



**Gregg M. Amore**  
*Secretary of State*

2024

# Summit Binder Overview

## Welcome to the RI Civic Leadership Summit!

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You and your peers will embark on a three-day-long experiential learning program that will provide you with the opportunity to collaborate with others, participate in professionally guided workshops, and encourage you to think critically about issues and evaluate potential solutions. The RI Department of State team has created this program binder, which we hope will be useful to you during the three days of the Summit and beyond.

On the left side of your binder, in the folder pocket, you will find all logistical information that you need over the course of the three days of the Summit. This includes:

- Nametag – this should be worn on your person all day, every day
- Listing of student and teacher cohorts
- Important emergency contact information
- Emergency evacuation instructions and other safety information for the Marriott Hotel, the Rhode Island State House, and the Garrahy Judicial Complex

The middle of your binder is the “workbook” portion. This is where you will find the bulk of the information and materials that we will work through together, including PowerPoint lessons for each day, activities, and worksheets, as well as biographies for all presenters, speakers, and staff.

There are four sections:

- Tab 1: Day 1 – Executive Branch
- Tab 2: Day 2 – Judicial Branch
- Tab 3: Day 3 – Legislative Branch
- Tab 4: Supplemental Information

We have also provided a notebook for you to write down any notes, reminders, observations, etc. Please use this as you see fit!

On the right side of your binder, in the folder, you will find any information that is specific to you individually. This includes your “role” for the Legislative Simulation on Friday. Your role is randomly assigned to you but is unique – no two participants have the exact same role.

**Reminder: Please bring your binder, nametag, and writing utensils with you each and every day. You may use your backpack to transport all the materials that you might need.**



# Code of Conduct

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As a participant of the RI Department of State Civic Leadership Summit, you have the responsibility to be respectful, considerate, and supportive of other students and chaperones participating in the Summit.

We expect you to do your best and be the best version of yourselves when interacting with any Summit participant, RI Department of State staff, teachers, government officials, and community members.

We expect students to take careful stewardship of the Providence Marriott, Rhode Island State House, Garrahy Judicial Complex, and all other Summit spaces and places.

We understand that people make mistakes and almost never “mean it” when negative behavior happens, or comments are made.

## **We consider the following behaviors intolerable:**

- Being purposely distracting during meetings, workshops, and activities
- Cell phone use during any workshops or presentations (permitted only during free time and breaks)
- Creating an environment where others feel uncomfortable or unable to fully participate in meetings, workshops, and activities
- Actions that endanger the health and safety of others
- Harassment or bullying
- Vaping, consuming alcohol, or the use of non-prescription drugs of any kind
- Leaving any Summit location without a chaperone or the permission of a supervising adult
- Being in any hotel room other than the one that you are assigned after nightly curfew

Please note: The use of the hotel gym is permitted; however, the indoor/outdoor pool is off limits.

**Failure to adhere to the Code of Conduct may result in expulsion from the Civic Leadership Summit and/or the Student Civic Liaison Program.**

# AGENDA

Day 1

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**Wednesday, April 17, 2024**

**10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.**

Check in at the Providence Marriott

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**11:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.**

Lunch

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**12:30 p.m.**

Shuttle to the State House

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**12:45 p.m. - 1:15 p.m.**

Welcome from Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore

Introduced By: Grace Aleksiewicz

Location: House Chamber

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**1:15 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.**

Lesson and Activities: The RI State Executive Branch

Teachers: Jen Haskell, Caleigh Rockwal

Location: House Lounge and Breakout Rooms

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**2:45 p.m. – 3:15 p.m.**

Kahoot Trivia

Student Trivia Hosts: Angelli Peralta, Logan Brennan

Location: House Lounge

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**3:15 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.**

Break

# AGENDA

## Day 1

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**3:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.**

Q&A with RI General Officers

Moderator: Suzy Alba

Location: House Lounge

Lt. Governor Sabina Matos

Introduced By: Eryka Mercado

Attorney General Peter Neronha

Introduced By: Kai Roberts-Speaker

Gonzalo Cuervo, RI General Treasurer Chief of Staff

Introduced By: Josie Johnson

Governor Daniel McKee

Introduced By: Jack Mayer

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**5:30 p.m.**

Shuttle back to Providence Marriott

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**6:00 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.**

Dinner & RI Media Panel

Moderator: Faith Chybowski

Location: Marriott Main Room

Media Panelists Introduced By:

Alondra Santos-Godinez

Joseph Fogarty

Rexella Bishop

Vic Bullard

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**7:30 p.m. – 8:15 p.m.**

Debrief and Reflection; Preview Day 2

# AGENDA

## Day 1

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**8:15 p.m. – 8:45 p.m.**  
Break

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**8:45 p.m. – 10:15 p.m.**  
Welcome Performance  
Peter Gross, Mentalist & Magician

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**10:15 p.m.**  
Curfew and Quiet Hours

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**11:00 p.m.**  
Lights Out

# AGENDA

Day 2

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**Thursday, April 18, 2024**

**7:45 a.m. – 8:15 a.m.**

Breakfast

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**8:15 a.m. – 9:15 a.m.**

Lesson: Judiciary Branch

Teachers: Erin Stevenson, Chris Souza

Location: Marriott Main Room

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**9:15 a.m.**

Shuttle to Garrahy Judicial Complex

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**9:45 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.**

Welcome from RI District Court

Location: Garrahy Judicial Complex

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**10:00 a.m. – 11:50 a.m.**

Courtroom Proceedings and Observations

Location: Garrahy Judicial Complex

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**11:50 a.m.**

Travel to Licht Judicial Complex

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**12:15 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.**

Lunch

Location: Licht Judicial Complex

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**1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.**

Discussion, Activity, and Q&A with RI District Court

Location: Licht Judicial Complex

# AGENDA

## Day 2

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**3:00 p.m.**

Shuttle back to Providence Marriott

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**3:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.**

Voting Rights Lesson with Secretary Amore

Location: Marriott Main Room

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**4:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.**

Break

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**5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.**

Dinner and Discussion with Judges from the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts

Moderator: Eileen Sweeney

Table Leaders: Rexella Bishop, Chloe Feit, Henry Pardo, Marvin St.

Julius, Kelsey Welby

Location: Marriott Main Room

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**7:00 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.**

Debrief and Preview of Day 3

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**7:30 p.m.**

Shuttle to Providence Place Mall

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**8:00 p.m. – 10:15 p.m.**

Movie at IMAX Theatre

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**10:15 p.m.**

Shuttle to Providence Marriott

# AGENDA

Day 2

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**10:30 p.m.**  
Curfew and Quiet Hours

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**11:00 p.m.**  
Lights Out

# AGENDA

Day 3

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**Friday, April 19, 2024**

**7:45 a.m. – 8:15 a.m.**

**Breakfast**

**Location: Marriott Main Room**

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**8:15 a.m. – 9:15 a.m.**

**Lesson: Legislative Branch**

**Teachers: John Donegan, Natalie O'Brien**

**Location: Marriott Main Room**

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**9:15 a.m.**

**Shuttle to State House**

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**9:30 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.**

**Session Prep at the State House**

**Location: House Lounge**

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**10:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.**

**Mock Legislative Session**

**Location: House Chamber and Breakout Rooms**

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**12:15 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.**

**Lunch with State Legislators**

**Table Leaders: Jack Cadman, Joe Fogarty, Alexandra Howlett, Sophia Nardolillo, Kat Procopio**

**Location: Bell Room**



# AGENDA

## Day 3

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**1:15 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.**

Q&A with House and Senate Leadership

Moderator: Rob Rock

Location: House Lounge

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**2:30 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.**

Program Closing with Secretary Amore

Location: House Lounge

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**2:45 p.m.**

Shuttle to Providence Marriott

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**3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.**

Summit Closing

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**4:00 p.m.**

Check Out and Goodbye

## **Supporting Materials: Media Coverage**

**[All listed articles are included as PDFs in the following pages.]**

### **These people still believe in democracy (little d) and are working to keep it. | USA Today**

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2024/07/03/people-working-preserving-democracy/74138235007/>

### **Why Secretary of State Amore and his pocket Constitution are touring RI classrooms | The Providence Journal**

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/education/2023/05/02/ri-secretary-of-state-wants-better-civics-education-in-ri-schools/70146001007/>

### **Fostering a lifelong passion for public service and civic action | Rhode Island Foundation**

<https://rifoundation.org/stories/fostering-a-lifelong-passion-for-public-service-and-civic-action>

### **Election officials are looking for younger poll workers at high schools, colleges. Will it work? | USA Today**

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/12/03/2024-election-younger-poll-workers-being-recruited-by-officials/71594808007/>

### **Students across Rhode Island join Civic Leadership Program | What's Up Newp**

[https://whatsupnewp.com/2024/09/students-across-rhode-island-join-civic-leadership-program/#google\\_vignette](https://whatsupnewp.com/2024/09/students-across-rhode-island-join-civic-leadership-program/#google_vignette)

### **Getting Out the Vote: Students, Community Work With Secretary Of State To Spread Word on Voting | Middletown Today**



POLITICS

Democracy

Add Topic

# These people still believe in democracy (little d) and are working to keep it.

*On this July 4th holiday, America's system of democracy is under threat. These people are working to keep it alive and well.*

**Deborah Barfield Berry, Terry Collins, Sudiksha Kochi and Karen Weintraub** USA TODAY

Published 5:04 a.m. ET July 3, 2024 | Updated 9:51 a.m. ET July 3, 2024

WASHINGTON – For Joseph Atou, democracy is sharing with hundreds of visitors the history of America’s foundation.

For Gregg Amore, it’s teaching the younger generation the importance of civic engagement.

And for John Suttles and Tina Barton, democracy means ensuring elections work.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, democracy is government by the people. On the ground that can look different to different people, but for some, what they call democracy is at the heart of what they do and what they hope to protect.

“Democracy is that lever, that tool, that gift that allows us to move toward a more perfect union,” said Sam Daley-Harris, author of “Reclaiming Our Democracy. Every Citizen’s Guide to Transformational Advocacy.” “That assumes that it wasn't perfect in 1776 for sure. And here we are now, it ain't perfect now. Our lever, our tool, our mechanism, our gift is democracy.”

In some spaces, the word "democracy" has spurred intense debate among candidates, activists and scholars.

It has topped some polls as an important election issue. In January, 49% of Democrats and 29% of independents cited the future of democracy as the top issue facing America, according to an exclusive USA TODAY/Boston Globe/Suffolk University poll in New Hampshire. A Washington Post poll released last week found that the majority of voters of all political beliefs consider "threats to democracy in the U.S." important. And that's true of more than

70% of voters who say they strongly support either President Joe Biden or former President Donald Trump.

Ahead of the nation's July 4 celebrations, USA TODAY talked to a range of people dedicated to democracy, including a former election official, a veteran of the civil rights moment and a tour guide at the U.S. Capitol, about what democracy means to them and how they're doing their part to move it forward.

As the stories of these citizens show, sustaining democracy takes work. And support for these efforts remains crucial, Daley-Harris said.

"It's the political will of the people that makes and sustains the political will of governments," he said. "Make sure there's a next step that people can take to take the enthusiasm onward rather than have it fizzle."

## Welcome to the United States

### Joseph Atou

Joseph Atou, dressed in a bright red jacket, handed each of the 40 tourists a headset at the U.S. Capitol Visitors Center.

"Over here," he directed. "Move forward, please."

Atou is one of dozens of guides leading tours of the U.S. Capitol, offering visitors a chance to see and hear how democracy here works. During the peak from March through August, about 10,000 people a day visit the center.

Atou believes he's helping educate Americans and foreigners about the nation, its checks and balances, its history and its evolution.

"A lot of the time people see the government as far away," Atou explained between tours on a recent afternoon. "They don't really understand a lot of how it really works."

But after the nearly hourlong tour, Atou is excited when visitors tell him, "Oh, I didn't know that is how it is."

At the start of that day's tour, Atou asked foreign visitors where they were from. "France," "Austria," "Indonesia" and "South Korea," they yelled out.

"Welcome to the United States of America," he responded.

Atou then guided them through the Capitol, pointing to paintings like the presentation of a draft of the Declaration of Independence, busts of icons like Martin Luther King Jr., and statues of presidents like Thomas Jefferson.

The group circled the Grand Rotunda at the heart of the Capitol, where Atou pointed way up to the dome and shared that dignitaries like Sen. John McCain had lain in state there. Visitors peppered Atou with questions. He rattled off answers.

Atou especially enjoyed explaining how each state selects statues to represent them in the National Statuary Hall, only steps from the Rotunda. He urged visitors, while on Capitol Hill, to reach out to their congressional representative.

“It’s a way for me to tell them to get involved,” Atou said.

At the end of the tour, visitors applauded.

Theresa Raffeiner from Austria said she appreciated the lesson and Atou’s humor. “It wasn’t so serious,” she said. “I don’t want to feel like I was on a field trip.”

Atou, 50, an independent who lives in Rockville, Maryland, has been a tour guide for 11 years.

He was born in Cameroon in central Africa and later lived in France. He combined passions of his grandfather, an artist, and his father, a high school history teacher, to study art history in Paris. He later did research in Germany for his masters in art history.

Because of his background, Atou said, it’s easy to incorporate history with art during his tours.

He also uses his experiences in other countries to relate to foreign visitors. At stops on his tour, he explained in French to tourists why histories of the countries were connected. He also speaks German and Greek.

Atou said he learned a lot about American history while living in other countries.

“But you have to come here to actually understand that,” he said. “When they talk about slavery, for example, they will tell you that there were horrible things, but they will never tell you about Emmett Till. They will never tell you about Dred Scott. They will just portray that as evil. They were mean people. They enslaved people.”

“Working here really helped me to understand the position of African Americans.”

All those experiences help drive Atou's passion for his work. He also helped design the Heroes of Civil Rights tour at the Capitol.

"It's fun," he said. "I try to teach, but the American system is a little bit complex."

## **Preserving fair and safe elections**

### **Tina Barton**

Tina Barton has traveled to more than 30 states in the past two years. In each place, she has met with local, county and state officials, those who conduct hazmat details, and people who work in Homeland Security or for the FBI.

It's all in the name of preserving fair and safe elections, which she considers a crucial part of the democratic process.

Barton helps municipalities create plans for Election Day.

She spent 32 years working in government across Oakland County, Michigan, half as an elections clerk.

This type of preparation is Barton's passion. And after facing death threats, it has become personal.

"The goal is to have an operations plan in place with anybody who has some sort of stake in the voting process in case there is an event that could range from intimidation, de-escalation to threats to lives," said Barton, vice chair of the nonprofit Committee for Safe and Secure Elections.

"We walk through several scenarios to try to make their communities safer," added Barton, also a senior expert for The Elections Group. "The demand has been so great. They come away with their eyes more wide open. We want them to prepare their plans. To implement them. To test them."

A married mother of two adult children, Barton said election workers have faced increased scrutiny since 2016, but it intensified in 2020. A Republican, Barton doesn't believe doubting election workers is a partisan issue, either. "We're living in pretty divisive times right now," she said.

She cites a recent poll by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, a liberal or progressive nonprofit law and public policy institute, that found nearly 40% of local election officials had been threatened, harassed or abused on the job. “That’s a 10% increase,” Barton said. “A huge number.”

The poll also showed that more than 90% of municipalities have increased their election security since 2020. “Another huge number,” Barton said.

Andrew Nickels, of Carmel, Indiana, has been convicted of threatening Barton’s life and her family. After the 2020 election, he left a menacing voicemail and accused her of fraud when Trump and then-Republican National Committee chair Ronna McDaniel alleged voter irregularities in Oakland County, where Barton was in charge.

Barton denounced the accusations and state officials said McDaniel’s claims had no merit.

“It was hurtful, shocking, stunning, all the things I never expected,” Barton said. “You can either let it defeat you or define you. I clearly let it define me and I’m absolutely stronger. I’m using my experiences and skills to help others not go through what I did.”

Barton said she plans to give a victim impact statement when Nickels is sentenced next month.

“His threat did not cause me to back down. In fact, it made me stronger,” Barton said. “It makes election officials stronger. They work incredibly hard to make sure voters can have a free, safe and accurate election.”

## **On a bridge and at a crossroads**

### **John Suttles**

When John Suttles takes Highway 80 into Selma, Alabama, he’s struck by how much the city still looks like six decades ago when he and others marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge to demand voting rights for its Black citizens.

There’s still a gas station, a sign welcoming visitors and the bridge.

The 76-year-old veteran of the Civil Rights Movement makes the pilgrimage nearly each year in part to share with young people the importance of voting.

“You have to vote because that's the way democracy works,” he said. “If you don't vote, you don't have a democracy and that is where we are now at this crossroads in the United States.”

For Suttles, a working democracy means his efforts 60 years ago are paying off with more people of color registering to vote and casting ballots. To continue that effort, Suttles champions the importance of voting at events, including a Juneteenth panel in his hometown of Johns Creek, Georgia. Earlier this year, he joined a virtual panel hosted by the federal Election Assistance Commission.

“I am constantly looking for opportunities to talk about it with anybody that wants to listen,” said Suttles, a retired Minnesota transit worker. “There’s a lot of naysayers about the vote. But that just doesn't make sense to me.”

Since he was a teenager, Suttles said, he has been working on “this thing called voting and democracy and human rights.”

Suttles, who lived outside Selma, joined peaceful protesters crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965. Like others, he was beaten by police on that “Bloody Sunday.”

Suttles donated the bloodstained Army jacket he wore that day, loaned to him by his uncle, to a National Park Service interpretive center in Selma.

He and his wife, Kay, often join the annual bipartisan pilgrimage to Selma when civil rights veterans, U.S. presidents, members of Congress and others gather to commemorate the march. Georgia Rep. John Lewis, the late civil rights icon, used to lead the trip.

Suttles, a Democrat, appreciates the chance to talk to young people who often ask about his experience on “Bloody Sunday.”

“They're always fascinated that a young person like myself back in them days would have enough to get up knowing that there's a 99% chance that you're going to get beat up and (yet) you go fight for somebody else's civil rights and voters' rights and human rights,” he said.

Suttles said he would have it no other way.

“I bought into it in the '60s,” he said. “It’s sort of like a religion. It’s part of me now. I have to be involved in some capacity that can make a difference.”



## Standing up for women

### Poojitha Tanjore

In March, a group of female politicians, activists and other prominent community leaders came together at a local high school in Virginia to discuss the importance of women raising their voices and fighting for change.

Among the group was 22-year-old Indian American Pooja Tanjore, a master's student at Columbia University in New York and a diplomatic fellow with USAID, which administers foreign aid and development assistance.

"I borrowed my mother's blazer. ... I didn't feel like I knew all the etiquette to be in this space," she joked to an almost equally youthful audience of high schoolers, according to the Loudoun-Times Mirror. "I'm going to have to buy my own blazers."

Tanjore, a Cincinnati native, told USA TODAY that women have "really always been at the core of what's important to me about democracy."

Everyone has the right to speak and have a voice, she said.

"And I think women have historically been neglected in that space, and so it's very important that they have the right to speak and feel empowered."

The fight for women's rights and representation is something Tanjore has been involved in since her teens – starting at the grassroots level.

At age 16, she founded a Virginia chapter of the national nonprofit Rise to Run, aimed at encouraging high school and college women to run for office.

Working on former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, Tanjore said, helped her form a strong network to launch the chapter. The group helped bring together young women from different backgrounds and connect them with mentors.

Though the chapter is now defunct, she has continued serving in other ways, such as campaigning for female lawmakers and speaking at summits aimed at empowering women. Last year, she worked as a legislative fellow in Democratic Virginia Rep. Jennifer Wexton's office.

"I grew up with people knocking doors (and) I worked on a bunch of political campaigns, and you just see all this energy of people who really care about local politics, like the causes in

their local communities, because people know that change is made locally," she said.

"So even just on that grassroots level, it's so inspiring, and it just continues to reinforce how important democracy is."

Her great-grandmother, forced to marry as a child, was her biggest source of inspiration to get involved in this work, she said. The older woman, who died two years ago, had children while still a teenager herself and was widowed just a few years later.

"Seeing what that did to her really inspired me to work toward women's rights."

## **Keeping democracy is everyone's job**

### **Gregg Amore**

It's tough to keep teenagers from their phones these days. Gregg Amore managed to keep a hotel ballroom-full laughing, raising their hands and nodding along this spring as he talked about the importance of maintaining American democracy.

Power, he reminded his audience of high schoolers at the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Summit, is something you want to hold onto once you have. He doesn't want to give up his own job as Rhode Island's secretary of state, he noted.

His 30 years of teaching high school students have helped him hone his message. Some of the students had even heard him give this talk before. But they didn't seem to mind. A few of the anecdotes were fresh and his questions kept them awake, several said.

A lifelong Rhode Islander with the accent to prove it, he doesn't talk down to the high schoolers, many of whom will be voting in their first election in November. He has nailed a tone that says "I respect your intelligence, but I also have information you'll want to know."

Amore, 57, a former hockey and baseball coach, mentioned the charge that the 2020 election was stolen. Instead of dismissing it out of hand, as many fellow Democrats do, he explained that in 2020, three Rhode Islanders voted in both Florida and Rhode Island. All three were caught and prosecuted.

"Is there voter fraud? Yes. Is there widespread fraud? No," he said, explaining the auditing process his state and others use to ensure that the vast majority of votes are counted accurately.

"We don't have a voter fraud problem in this country," Amore told the students. "We have a voter suppression problem in this country."

Ancestors of many of the people who have trouble accessing the polls today were prevented from voting by intimidation tactics or so-called literacy tests that asked impossible questions, like "How many bubbles does this bar of soap create?" he said, holding up a bar to emphasize the absurdity.

"If Americans don't pay attention, if we don't push back, you will see proposals for some sort of literacy test for future voters."

He closed his talk by citing Benjamin Franklin, who, at age 81, ran into a friend as he was walking out of the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

"What do we have?" she asked him about their newly established form of government. "A republic or a monarchy?"

"Madam, we have a republic – if you keep it," Franklin supposedly replied.

"That's your job," Amore charged the young people listening to his vision of democracy. "To keep it."

# The Providence Journal

## EDUCATION

# Why Secretary of State Amore and his pocket Constitution are touring RI classrooms

*The secretary of state has an ambitious plan: Get into schools, improve civics education, and get kids registered to vote.*



**Amy Russo**

The Providence Journal

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PROVIDENCE – One morning late last week, Secretary of State Gregg Amore wasn't in his office. He was in the classroom.

Reprising his role as a civics teacher, Amore stood before several rows of Classical High School students at desks and rattled off a series of numbers: 15, 19, 24, 26. He asked, "What are those?"

A few brows furrowed. A couple curious glances were exchanged.

Amore answered his own question: constitutional amendments that secured and strengthened voting rights for women and minorities. He then whipped out a pocket-sized version of the document, something he stashes in a convenient spot, as one would keep a pen handy.

Amore has made about 10 such presentations at various schools since March and is booked through the rest of the year. It's not necessarily a new gig for a guy who taught civics at East Providence High School for nearly three decades before becoming secretary of state. Yet still, he's on a mission: Get kids a better civics education, get them registered to vote and get them to see that voter suppression isn't a thing of the past.

## Report finds deficiencies in civics education in RI

For this job, Amore is a natural. During his time as a state representative, he helped to pass the Civic Literacy Act in 2021, which pushes public schools to improve their civics curriculums. A 2022 report from Tufts' Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement found that civics education in Rhode Island's public schools was in less than stellar shape.

Nearly a quarter of teachers and administrators said civics wasn't a big priority, and fewer than half of teachers said their districts had standalone civics classes.

**More:** What's next for Secretary of State-elect Amore? He wants same-day voter registration

"When it came to specific support that districts may or may not be providing, teachers reported a lack of time, training and resources for teaching civics," the report read. "More than half (55%) of teachers said they don't have access to civics-related professional development opportunities, and 36% of administrators also said there was not access to civics professional development in their district."

Amore sees fixation on state exams as one of the obstacles to a serious civics education.

"Every time I have conversations with folks about the role of government, even the Department of State, I'm disappointed," he said. "So my guess is that the civics gap we have is not relegated to our students, and there's a lot of reasons for that. One is that ... there's been a real move toward standardized testing. And so in the elementary schools where social studies used to be a kind of standalone piece of the curriculum, I think it got placed on the back burner because there was so, so much focus on math and ELA scores."

**'Democracy in peril':** Agreement seeks to bolster civics education in RI public schools

## Amore worries discussions may be muted 'out of fear'

In that Classical High School classroom, Amore doesn't just focus on the past – he asks students about the present. Where had they seen voter suppression in the news? In the South, in the form of poll watchers and restricted access to drop boxes that make it easier for voters to cast their ballots.

Yet the honest teaching of history and disenfranchisement has become a political lightning rod, even in Rhode Island, where bills to limit how history is taught – and whose history is

heard – have been filed in the State House, despite having a slim chance at passage.

**More:** RI lawmakers hear impassioned debate on bill to limit teaching of racism, gender identity

"I'm actually worried about our teachers because ... they should be able to freely discuss ideas without pushing ideas, and spark critical thinking," Amore said. "And I think a lot of the conversation around restrictions as to what can and can't be taught mutes that discussion out of fear, and then in turn doesn't allow our students to critically think."

## **A reboot for Project Insight? Amore wants to revive it.**

This isn't all Amore has on his plate. He envisions rebooting Project Insight, which launched in the 1970s. The program is a Rhode Island version of Project Close Up, which puts students in the nation's capitol for a short stay so they can meet lawmakers, immerse themselves in government and learn how to become engaged citizens. The local version would do all of that at the State House.

Amore also wants to encourage schools to expand one-day voter registration programs to 180-day initiatives that would allow kids to learn how to sign up year 'round. At each school he visits, Amore recruits students who can be involved in those efforts and others, asking them to be liaisons for his office.

Nearing the end of an interview that stretched 40 minutes, Amore ticked off an ambitious to-do list that includes a new history museum for Rhode Island. He joked that he never leaves the office.

That is, unless he goes back to school.

"I think I'm an optimist because I spent my entire career with high school kids," he said. "Maybe after four years here with all these adults, I'll lose my optimism. But I'm still in classrooms, so I do think we have the capacity to right the ship and come back to the middle."

# Rhode Island Foundation



## Civic Leadership

# Fostering a lifelong passion for public service and civic action

By Arianne Corrente | May 31, 2024

**M**ore than 85 students from 41 high schools throughout Rhode Island participated in **Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore's** Student Civic Liaison Program.

Since June 2023, the program has introduced local students to government and community leaders through monthly workshops. These workshops also serve to facilitate collaboration around civic action projects in the participants' own communities.

“I’ve spent my first year as Secretary of State visiting local classrooms to talk about civic engagement and meeting with students at the State House, so I know that Rhode Island is home to engaged students who are seeking opportunities to become more involved with their state and local governments, and democracy as a whole,” said Secretary of State Amore.

In one recent month, program participants took over a General Assembly chambers lounge at the State House to have a passionate discussion about equity—raising issues such as the lack of teachers of color, redlining and the special treatment honors and advanced placement (AP) students receive in comparison to multilingual learners (MLL).

“Civic engagement is my love language because that is the way to transform communities,” said Jessica Vega, senior policy analyst for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “We are losing that opportunity if we are not tapping into these young minds.” She and the leaders collectively agreed that the real experts that night were the students. These young civic leaders were commended to speak out more, and to keep taking full advantage of the services and advocacy available through Secretary of State Amore and the Program.

The inaugural program culminated last month with the first-ever Rhode Island Civic Leadership Summit, initially funded by the Rhode Island Foundation. The three-day Summit offered students the opportunity to collaborate more with their peers, participate in professionally guided workshops, and encouraged them to think critically about issues and evaluate potential solutions.



Using an educational software program that allows for real-time feedback, two teachers quizzed the students about state government, prompting them to name the executive officers in Rhode Island, as well as their job descriptions and necessary qualifications. A few hours later, they would have the opportunity to talk in person with the Governor, Lt. Governor, Secretary of State, and the Attorney General, as well as a representative from the General Treasurer's office, to quiz them about the *actual* backgrounds that led them to elective office.

Day two started at Garrahy Judicial Complex, where they were invited by Judge Melissa DuBose to observe courtroom proceedings in District Court. Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul Suttell welcomed them to the Licht Judicial Complex. He led a conversation on the importance of the Constitution in our democracy and RI's legal system. Students then connected with the Judiciary Employment Education Program (JEEP) to hear about potential career choices as well as requisite skills and qualifications for employment within the state's judiciary branch. They visited the State Law Library, and shared a meal with RI's Committee on Racial & Ethnic Fairness in the Courts.

Back at the State House with the legislative branch: A panel discussion involving the bipartisan leaders of the RI General Assembly—House and Senate— provided an opportunity for students to ask questions about how the General Assembly functions and the unique leadership roles. House Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi commented that “the impressive group of young leaders asked thoughtful questions—we had a great conversation.”



Finally, students got a feel for government in action by participating in a mock legislative session regarding a proposed Assault Weapons Ban. Students—assigned roles as Independents, Republicans, and Democrats—heard firsthand testimony before debating the legislation on the House floor.

“Community foundations begin with community,” said David N. Cicilline, the Foundation’s president and CEO. “Supporting civic education will deepen community engagement and build the connections that are crucial to our work improving education, health care, and economic opportunity for all.” The Foundation, through its establishment of a new philanthropic fund to benefit the Department of State’s non-partisan programming, together with other supporters, made it possible for all the students to attend the Summit for free.

"The goal of the RI Civic Leadership Summit is to foster a lifelong passion for public service and civic action, whether that be in government, the non-profit community, or corporate stewardship," says Secretary of State Amore. "I am confident that the Civic Leadership Program and its Summit will be impactful, meaningful, and change-making for these emerging leaders in our state."

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# Election officials are looking for younger poll workers at high schools, colleges. Will it work?

**[Deborah Barfield Berry](#)**

USA TODAY

Published 5:01 a.m. ET Dec. 3, 2023 | Updated 5:11 p.m. ET Dec. 8, 2023

WASHINGTON -- Kaylie Martinez-Ochoa arrived at an elementary school at 5 a.m. on Election Day barely awake for duty as a poll worker in northern Virginia. The 22-year-old recent college graduate spent hours at the polling site earlier this month helping check in hundreds of voters.

Despite the exhausting day, Martinez-Ochoa plans to do it again in 2024 and hopes more young people will join the pool of much-needed poll workers.

“There just needs to be more awareness,” Martinez-Ochoa said of her peers. “You have to get them to vote first and get interested in that process.”

Desperate for more young poll workers like Martinez-Ochoa for next year’s elections, officials across the country are ramping up recruitment efforts. They’re teaching civics lessons in high schools, working with universities to offer credit and launching social media campaigns to entice young people to join a workforce where the average age is over 60.

Election officials acknowledged the challenges of convincing young people to sign up after a global pandemic and recent threats against election workers have scared off many poll workers. But they said recruiting younger poll workers can help protect democracy. Issues such as abortion rights, student loans and climate change may spur more interest from young people, experts said.

“We can build a bench with young people that will take care... of our poll worker population, but also our future leader population for years to come if we nurture this the correct way,”

said Rhode Island Secretary of State Gregg Amore.

## **Election officials tap high schools for poll workers**

In Rhode Island, Amore visits high school classrooms across the state to teach a 35-minute civics lesson, including the history of voting rights and voter suppression efforts.

“They have grown up in a period of political vitriol,” he said of students. “They have seen nothing but ad hominem attacks back and forth. They've witnessed their own families being split apart by vehement arguments in regard to politics. So we thought we would talk about the voting rights process and we do it in a civil manner and talk to them about how to engage both civically and civilly on the issues of the day.”

As part of the nearly year-old initiative, the office also created a Student Civic Liaison program, where selected students participate in projects like voter registration drives. Many become poll workers.

“One of the benefits, though, is we get to talk to them about civic duty being connected to working on Election Day,” Amore said. “Election workers are aging out or they're being eliminated out of the process. We're encouraging our young people to become part of that process.”

Election and education officials in Rhode Island are also working to offer credit to college students.

Across the country in San Mateo County, California, 125 to 150 high school students are assigned to work across 45 voting centers. They are part of the county election office's Student Democracy Program, which won a best practices award last year from the federal Election Assistance Commission.

For more than 20 years, the program has partnered with 20 high schools and worked with 5,000 students known as student democracy ambassadors. Students attend training sessions and, on Election Day, help at the polls.

The goal is to educate and engage students so they will become active citizens and lifelong voters, said Mark Church, chief elections officer for San Mateo County.

For many students, he said, it's their first exposure to how the election process works.

“This is an experience that the student will carry for a lifetime,” he said.

Election officials in Wyandotte County, Kansas, also turned to young poll workers to help with recent elections as part of their program with local high schools. Students young as 16 are paid or earn community service hours.

Officials hope to expand the program, which also won an award last year from the EAC.

“It’s really exciting to get them to be part of the process,” Marni Arezalo, program coordinator for operation services, said of young poll workers. “If we can get them in the polling places when they’re young then hopefully they’ll continue to be there.”

## **'Willing to answer the call'**

For some young people, learning about civic engagement is a first step.

Oluwademilade “Demi” Egunjobi, a 17-year-old senior at Classical High School in Providence, Rhode Island, is part of a program that aims to increase civic engagement among young people.

She said it’s important for young people to try and address pressing issues like access to health care, affordable housing and quality education.

“To make change through policy you have to advocate...You have to know your rights. You have to know what's going on,” Egunjobi said. “This is the starting ground for that – like understanding the history of it and understanding how the government works.”

Egunjobi plans to host a civics conference at Brown University next spring. She’s also considering becoming a poll worker. She said it could help young people better understand the election process.

“We're the next and the current generation of leaders,” she said. “If we're stepping into leadership positions with that knowledge, we're already in a better place.”

Martinez-Ochoa, the poll worker from Virginia, started at 17 years old as an election page handing out “I Voted” stickers. She got extra credit for her high school Advanced Placement government class. She later signed up in 2020 to become a poll worker.

“I was willing to answer the call,” said Martinez-Ochoa, who graduated from William & Mary University last May.

Edward Burroughs, a member of the Prince George's County Council in Maryland, said he visits high schools to talk with student governments and sports teams about civic engagement and issues they want resolved.

“If you're able to meet students where they are and talk about issues that they care about first and foremost, it's much easier to engage them to be civically involved,” Burroughs said. “But there has to be a connection about how their involvement will make a difference for themselves, their families, for their school, for their clubs.”

## **Young people stepped up during pandemic**

Nearly 1 million poll workers are needed nationally for the general election, according to the Election Assistance Commission. In 2022, about 14% of poll workers were between 18 years old and 40 years old, the EAC found. Most were 60 years old and older.

Earlier this month, the EAC opened the application process for nearly \$1 million in competitive grants to help colleges, nonprofit organizations and election offices recruit more poll workers and provide civic education.

In 2020, many young people served as poll workers because older workers were particularly at risk during the pandemic, said David Becker, executive director of The Center for Election Innovation & Research. He said the demand is likely to increase next year with the presidential election and thousands of local elections.

Election experts said it's important that the pool of poll workers is diverse.

Traditionally, poll workers have been older and white and not always reflective of the communities they serve, said Bob Brandon, president of the nonpartisan Fair Elections Center. The center's Campus Vote Project partners with colleges to educate students about voting and civic engagement and encourage them to become poll workers.

Younger people tend to be more tech savvy and more likely to be bilingual, depending on the area, Brandon said.

“Having somebody that is from your community is both more comforting to the voter, but also probably means that poll worker might go that extra mile to make sure they've done whatever they could to help,” he said.

Martinez-Ochoa said it matters that she can help Spanish-speaking voters at the polls. She said many in the area of her polling site don't speak fluent English or aren't as comfortable, much like her parents were when they immigrated from Central America years ago.

"Every single election there has been at least a few people that I help," she said.

## **Is it safe to be a poll worker?**

Efforts to recruit poll workers have been harder because of the pandemic and threats against election workers, officials said.

Zach Mohr, a professor at the University of Kansas, said his research showed recent years have put a strain on recruiting poll workers.

"While it used to be a patriotic thing to do, now people's families are asking them if it is safe to be a poll worker," Mohr said. "It is safe, but there is that issue of perception. So, that perception is likely making it more difficult in some places."

Becker said a poll worker is almost always a safe job in most communities, but recent threats may turn some away.

"I am concerned that the harassment of election officials down to the poll worker level is going to be a disincentive for people to volunteer," Becker said.

But Brandon said threats may have spurred some young people to become poll workers because they refused to be intimidated.

"There was a lot of interest in 2020 for stepping up and helping people vote, particularly given the context of all the craziness about elections," he said.

## **Election officials push to boost pay**

One challenge to recruiting poll workers is the long day at the polls, officials said. High school ambassadors in San Mateo County work from 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Martinez-Ochoa said long hours for low pay can also turn off young people who can make more money elsewhere.

"A lot of people my age are like, 'Oh, I don't want to work for 16 hours for minimal pay,'" she said.



Many poll workers get a stipend for attending trainings and working at the polling sites. Students in San Mateo County get a \$280 stipend.

In Pennsylvania, Lt. Gov. Austin Davis said officials are pushing to increase pay, which he said hasn't been raised in years.

"Election Day is a long day," he said. "There's very real responsibility so we need to make sure that we're appropriately paying the people who are stepping up to do this civic service and this duty."

Martinez-Ochoa said she's excited to help at the polls again next year.

"When you think about it, conceptually, it doesn't sound very fun. But my experience has always been really good," she said. "Because I'm the youngest I feel like a lot of people are interested in hearing what I have to say at the polling places. I always get the question, 'Oh, is this your first time doing this? And I'm like, 'No I've been in the game for a little bit. And they're like, 'Oh my gosh!'"

*Contributing: Terry Collins, USA TODAY*

## Students across Rhode Island join Civic Leadership Program

*100 students from 44 high schools will learn about government and civic engagement*



by **Ryan Belmore**  
September 17, 2024



Photo by Mohan Nannapaneni on Pexels.com

The Rhode Island Department of State has announced that nearly 100 students from 44 high schools across the state have joined the Civic Leadership Program, a new program that aims to empower students to become active citizens.

The program is a collaboration between the RI Department of State, elected officials, and community and government leaders, and will feature a series of monthly sessions held at the Rhode Island State House as well as a two-night, three-day summit in Providence for a Civic Leadership Summit. The program is free for all participating students.

“As a former teacher, I know how much energy, hope, and enthusiasm our state’s students have for the future,” said Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore. “This program gives students an opportunity to learn about how our government works and how they can become civically engaged, enabling them to channel that hope and enthusiasm into efforts that strengthen their communities. I am excited to welcome our next cohort of students and look forward to the year ahead.”



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This is the second year that the program has been offered, with this new cohort featuring 20 more students than the first year. Students from the following schools have been selected to participate in the program this year: Bishop Hendricken High School, Blackstone Academy Charter School, Burrillville High School, Central Falls High School, Central High School, Chariho Regional High School, Coventry High School, Cranston High School East, Cranston High School West, East Providence High School, E-Cubed Academy, Exeter-West Greenwich Senior High School, Hope High School, Johnston Senior High School, La Salle Academy, Lincoln High School, Middletown High School, Mount Saint Charles Academy, Mt. Hope High School, Narragansett High School, North Kingstown High School, North Providence High School, North Smithfield High School, Paul Cuffee School, Pilgrim High School, Ponaganset High School, Portsmouth High School, Providence Country Day School, Scituate High School, Smithfield High School, South Kingstown High School, St. George's School, St. Mary Academy, Bay View, Saint Raphael Academy, The Greene School, The Met – East Bay, The Met – Providence, The Wheeler School – Tiverton High School, Toll Gate High School, William E. Tolman Senior High School, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts, West Warwick High School, and Westerly High School.

*Generative artificial intelligence (AI) assisted a What'sUpNewp journalist with the reporting included in this story.*



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## Getting Out The Vote

Students, Community Work With Secretary Of State To Spread Word On Voting

A group of Middletown High students are looking to get out the vote for the 2024 elections.

Recently, Senior Class President Kelsey Welby and sophomore Chloe Tysor led a voter drive during lunch periods in the cafeteria of the Valley Road school. There, they stressed that every voice matters during Student Council elections, Town Council races or everyday life.

Part of an effort by the office of Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore to connect students more with their government, Kelsey and Chloe said they've learned a lot so far, which was just the beginning.

"I know there are a lot of kids who have issues they believe in, whatever they may be," the 16-year-old Chloe said. "There are some who aren't, just like you could say for adults, but for the most part they're working for the best interest of the school and the students."

"With voting, sometimes it's hard to motivate young people to get interested, but that was one of the goals with this — to provide education," the 17-year-old Kelsey added. "Yes, you can register, you can vote at this age and you can make a difference."

Through the Secretary of State "Civic Liaison Program," high school students from across Rhode Island — including Kelsey and Chloe — meet in person at the statehouse as



well as online through Zoom to talk about civic education and engagement.

As part of that work, each student has to complete a civic action project, which can include everything from creating a club or running a civic related event to a voting drive like the one Kelsey and Chloe organized.

Leading up to the event, they placed QR scanning codes on lunch tables that connected directly to the Secretary of State's website to register to vote. That way, students could use their smartphones to get signed up in minutes. They also set up a table to answer questions and provide the correct information.

"I know all the students paid attention," Kelsey said. "I was on the microphone at every lunch and people listened and were

respectful. It felt good to know we were helping.”

On hand to assist with the voter drive, Board of Canvassers Chairperson Lucie-Anne Dionne-Thomas couldn't help but come away extremely impressed. Whether it was the passion from the students to the organization of the drive to the accessibility to voting, Dionne-Thomas felt hope.

“Government and community involvement is so important and I'm just so heartened to see students wanting to make a difference,” Dionne-Thomas said. “It's not that common, so anything that (students) can share with their peers to get more involved is important. It's much more meaningful when it comes from people who are their own age. It sinks in more and registers.”

Principal Donna Sweet said more than ever before, civics and the importance of getting involved in the wider world outside Middletown High was emphasized in the classroom and out.

And contrary to what some might think, Sweet said much of the MHS student body is more aware and active with current events. To spur involvement in civics, she said the school holds polls on any number of issues — including regionalizing with Newport schools — to an active Student Council, community service requirements and more.

“I refer to Middletown as a community of helpers,” Sweet said. “Aquidneck Island itself is like that. If something needs to be done, they do it and get it done. I feel the same way about the student body. Things here are pretty easygoing.”

“There is a strong student government, not only at each grade level, but overall, and



we stress the importance of government here with a very strong social studies department, so students have a good idea of how things work. And that doesn't even include the strong (Parent Teacher Group) and booster clubs and

actively involved parents and strong organization.”

Middletown High Social Studies teacher Jennifer Haskell said she was continually impressed by Kelsey and Chloe and their work. Haskell serves as the school's teacher liaison to the Secretary of State's group.

Haskell was also happy to see an increase in civics related offerings at MHS from the work by Kelsey and Chloe to the addition of a student representative to the School Committee and other efforts.

“Those girls are just the best,” Haskell said. “They need very little from me as they are so self-motivated... Government and politics students set a great example for students finding an issue they are passionate about and working for change.”

Asked if there was one issue or concern that ran through the student body, Kelsey and Chloe said that depended on a number of factors. But importantly, students and staff seemed more focused on finding solutions that just citing problems.

“We have the ability to make change here, which is good,” Kelsey said. “We have a student government that works towards what the student body wants to achieve. I think people might complain and rally around an issue, but if it's something that can be fixed, we try to fix it.”

A big part of that discussion, Kelsey and Chloe said, was how one vote can truly make a difference.

"We hear a lot in classes, particularly our social studies classes, about how voting matters and one vote can change everything," Kelsey said. "When you hear that message from your teachers and getting involved in things like the voter registration drive, I think people realize it is about a lot more."

"Even though I can't vote yet, I feel like there are still so many ways for us to get involved and be heard," Chloe said. "Not necessarily influence what's happening, but make sure they're aware of us and what we're thinking and why."

"One thing that's great about Middletown is our smaller size allows us to hear and use the student voice," Kelsey said. "We use a lot of voting and Google Form techniques to make sure everyone is heard."

"We did the student poll last year about merging with Rogers (High School in

Newport)," Chloe said. "Our student body ended up approving it and Rogers didn't. That was a really interesting process to be a part of and it was just like what happened in the official vote."

Both students said they were appreciative for the support and belief from the Town Council and School Committee, something they said doesn't happen in every community.

"When we go to the (Town Council and School Committee) meetings, they see us, but more importantly, they hear us," Kelsey said. "I know for a fact it isn't like that in other places. It's something that's not that common and we as students appreciate it and it's an influential thing."

"It's interesting, watching (my peers) in Middletown get their voice," Chloe said. "I grew up here and have gone to school with a lot of these same people since kindergarten and to watch people start taking action and get involved, it's pretty cool if you ask me."