



Michigan senators propose bills to get students reading important American documents

Grand Rapids students learn about Constitution Day

Samiya Buxton, 10, looks at a pamphlet about the U.S. Constitution for Constitution Day at the Gerald R. Ford Academic Center in Grand Rapids Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2014. Attorneys from the Grand Rapids Bar Association volunteered their time to educate more than 1,400 Grand Rapids 5th grade students in 47 classrooms. (Cory Morse | MLive.com)

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LANSING — A fresh push is starting in the Michigan Senate to emphasize the reading of important documents from the beginning of the United States and the state of Michigan.

State Sens. Patrick Colbeck, R-Canton, and Mike Shirkey, R-Clarklake, testified in front of the Senate Education Committee Tuesday regarding their bills that would emphasize the teaching of the U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence and Michigan Constitution in schools.

When asked how his bill would be different than current curriculum, Colbeck said **Senate Bill 209**, which he sponsored, is meant to require the reading of the actual documents. He's concerned too many students are being taught interpretations of the documents instead of what they actually say.

He gave the example that many students are taught Americans are guaranteed a democracy by the Constitution, when in fact the document guarantees a republican form of government. Reading the documents would also give students context for debates in national news, such as limits on presidential power in executive orders.

"Nobody has that framework in mind for Article 2 Section 2, saying here are the explicit authorities to the president, versus what's in Article 1 Section 8 under the legislature," he said. "Nobody ever has that context and it turns into a sound bite war."

"My big push is to make sure we're actually reading the core documents," he added.

Colbeck's bill would encourage age- and grade-level appropriate education for all students in K-12 districts. It would also require the Michigan Department of Education to come up with standards for model curriculum and standards.

The curriculum and standards would then be tested on the social studies portion of the state assessment, currently the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress.

A similar bill introduced by Colbeck last year passed the Michigan Senate and made it through the House Education Committee. However, during the final hours of the legislative session, the bill was **completely changed as a part of the compromise that led to Proposal 1 being placed on the ballot.**

Instead of requiring the teaching of the founding documents, the bill required a study to be done on how much funding is appropriate for Michigan's schools. That bill passed the House of Representatives and the Senate and eventually became law, though it has since been defunded.

Shirkey's bill, **Senate Bill 211**, would prohibit school boards or school officials from censoring any religious references in the original texts of the U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence and Michigan Constitution.

Shirkey told the committee teachers may feel uncomfortable teaching about the religious beliefs of the writers of these documents. He said the religious context of the documents are important and teachers should not be afraid to talk about the religious beliefs of early American leaders in school.

"If there's some language that's politically challenging ... in the original documents, and so forth, (the bill) provides cover," he said.

Paul Stankewitz, policy advocate for the Michigan Catholic Conference, praised Shirkey's bill and said the teaching of how religion impacts civics is necessary to education.

"It is not the full story if we do not instruct our students in the role of religion in the founding of our country," he said.

Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Mike Warren, the founder of the Patriot Week movement, told the committee many Michigan students he encounters don't know basic facts about the documents.

He said the bills would be "lynch pins" in emphasizing education on the founding documents of the state and country. He acknowledged kids are taught about the founding documents, but need more frequent instruction.

"It's not that we don't teach it, it's that we forget," he said. "... It's strung out over the course of 13 years, it's not emphasized."

The bills both passed out of the committee — Colbeck's bill passed out unanimously and Shirkey's bill passed 4-1 on party lines, with State Sen. David Knezek, D-Dearborn Heights, voting no. The bills will now be considered by the full Senate.

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