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For immediate release - Commentary

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Celebrate Civic Learning Week, March 11-15

With Town Meeting Day and the Presidential Primary only a few days behind us, civic life is front and center in the minds of many Vermonters right now. I'm excited to keep that momentum going as my office promotes Civic Learning Week, a nationwide effort to highlight the importance of civic education in the U.S. This is a week to recognize and focus on the importance of engaging young people in civic life.

"Civics" is about much more than the three branches of government, checks and balances, and one person one vote; it's about individuals working together to solve problems that can't be solved on one's own. Being able to affect change, solve problems, and make life better for everyone is empowering and builds the fabric of our civic life. We need to encourage young people in particular to add their votes, their ideas, and their participation to Vermont's civic life. After all, they have big ideas and solutions that some of us in the older generations need to learn from. We want young people to get engaged because we know that the earlier anyone is civically engaged, the more likely they are to stay engaged through adulthood.

The growing threats of hyper-partisanship and dis- and misinformation that we've seen in our national discourse impact not only our elections but all facets of civic life, spreading apathy and distrust amongst neighbors and communities. Young Vermonters tell me they're frustrated that leaders aren't focused on the things they are worried about: the high cost of college, livable wages, affordable housing, climate change, and gun violence in schools. All citizens need to understand how democracy works for them and participate with each other and their elected representatives in that work.

As part of a multi-year research initiative to measure the civic preparedness of young Americans, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars recently [conducted a poll](#) of 18-24-year-olds nationwide. 40% could only answer one out of four civics comprehension questions; 57% said they were "dissatisfied with American democracy." At the same time, however, they showed lower degrees of partisan polarization than older Americans and collectively prioritized democratic values.

What this means is that it is crucial to support civic learning and engagement efforts for all Vermonters, but especially our youth. This week, I am highlighting some of the important work my Office is doing on this front, much of it led by our Education and Civic Engagement Coordinator (ECE) Robyn Palmer. I'd like to recognize the work of our Teacher Advisory Group, which is creating engaging lessons and materials by and for Vermont educators, because high-quality civics education in our K-12 schools is a top priority. I am also excited about the Vermont Campus Voting Challenge, which is raising civic awareness and engagement among

our post-secondary students. Our Office is spearheading Vermont's first-ever statewide Civic Health Index, a project that has brought a diverse group of community organizations across the state together to discern and bridge the gaps that keep Vermonters from living their civic life to the fullest.

Let's take this national Civic Learning Week as an opportunity to focus on the important role of civic education in sustaining and strengthening our constitutional democracy. There is a lot to celebrate! Seeing community leaders from all around Vermont discussing how to remove barriers to civic engagement in our Civic Health Index gives me hope. Watching [Woodbury Elementary students hold their own town meeting](#) is an utter delight. I am so energized when I visit the 8th-grade Legislative pages that rotate through the Vermont State House every 6 weeks and awed by the questions and discussions I hear as I travel Vermont visiting classrooms. These threads are out there, all around Vermont, and I can see in them a robust civic tapestry that is not so much frayed as ready to be woven into greater robustness and resilience.

Sarah Copeland Hanzas is Vermont's 39th Secretary of State. She was a teacher, coach, small business owner and an 18-year member of the Vermont House before being elected as Secretary of State in 2022.