



## **Civic Engagement**

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## **Voter Registration in Schools**

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## **Position**

**It is the position of the Iowa Youth Congress, the voice of Iowa's youth, to support the clarification and reinforcement of Iowa Code §48A.23 to expand youth voter registration.**

## **Current Situation**

In the 2020 election, only 55% of youth ages 18-29 voted [1] despite a 2019 Iowa law [2] that makes citizens eligible to register to vote upon turning 17. This law is widely unknown, creating a low registration rate overall. Since 2016 in the State of Iowa, there have been approximately 5,000 new 17-year-olds who registered to vote [4]. This dwarfs in comparison to the roughly 45,000 current 17-year-olds in the state [5]. Washington district members themselves seemed surprised when high school students learned that they can register to vote at 17. During voter registration drives, many students have said they cannot register to vote because they aren't 18 yet, demonstrating a lack of knowledge of Iowa law.

Under current Iowa Code 48A.23 [3], it states that "At least twice during each school year, the board of directors of each school district operating a high school and authorities in charge of each accredited nonpublic school shall offer the opportunity to register to vote to each student who is at least seventeen years of age." This law should be increasing voter registration, and turnout among young people in the state, yet it is hardly ever enforced. Many school district leaders are unaware of this law—but even if they aren't, the law is easy to ignore as there is no enforcement mechanism attached. The vagueness of the language used also makes it easier for districts to avoid following it. From the experiences of all members in the Washington district, schools currently provide little to no direction about opportunities to register to vote. They may have some flyers or other advertisements, but outside groups or students mainly push all opportunities.

## **Rationale**

### **1 - Equitable Access**

A current problem in voting is that many youths simply don't have access to the information that they would need to register to vote, such as knowledge about what materials are needed (proof of address and

government-issued ID/Social Security Number). By creating a program that gives consistent, accurate, and helpful information about the benefits and importance of voting, we can make sure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn about and take the first steps to vote. This program will make sure that all students, regardless of other factors, have the time, assistance, and option to register to vote because, without it, this process can seem very daunting. Creating more equitable access will help to ensure that every student, especially those who are minoritized or marginalized, has the resources to register to vote. This could help diversify the registered voters of Iowa, resulting in a more representative elected government.

## **2- Opportunity**

Many high schoolers are busy with clubs, sports, or other responsibilities. It may be difficult for students to find the time, materials, and assistance needed to register to vote. Giving all students an in-school opportunity to register will remove many of these barriers. They will have someone with them to provide instruction and answer questions, as well as distribute the paper registration forms or direct them to the online form. Rather than taking time out of their personal schedules to register, students will have an opportunity built into the school day, making registration much more convenient and appealing. **3-**

## **Increased Turnout**

As referenced above, almost half of Iowa's youth do not vote. Some may simply not have had the knowledge and experience to vote, so by giving all youth the opportunity to register to vote, we believe this will increase voter turnout. Reducing barriers to voter registration has historically led to higher youth turnout. For example, Minnesota adopted Same-Day-Registration nearly 40 years ago like Iowa, but has a high school voter education program unlike Iowa [6], and had a 65% youth (aged 18-29) voter turnout rate in the 2020 election. Higher than the 55% in Iowa [1]. By having trusted adults and other peers show excitement and start conversations about voting, more youth will be pushed to the polls. In addition, studies have shown that pre-registration leads to higher voter turnout by the time the election actually rolls around.

## **4- Youth Representation**

It is critical that youth voices are heard in Iowa, especially with the ability to make such a difference and impact on decisions and policies that people, including youth, want enacted. If youth were given more opportunities and encouragement to register to vote, their voices could be heard, and the government could better reflect the thoughts and opinions of the population. Youth are the future, and it's important to make sure they know how to vote and are going out to vote.

## **Recommended Action**

Iowa Youth Congress recommends that the Iowa Legislature amend Iowa Code §48A.23 to more clearly define an "opportunity to register to vote to each student who is seventeen years of age." This should be defined as two days within the school year that students at least 17 years old will be allowed to register to vote in their school during school hours. The first opportunity should be conducted by schools on National Voter Registration Day (defined as the fourth Tuesday of September) or the next available school day. Schools shall use information and voter registration materials developed by the Iowa Secretary of State's office and/or the County Auditor's office to ensure uniformity. To ensure that schools abide by these requirements, school officials will be asked to send a written explanation of how they organized and ran the voter registration drive to the Iowa Department of Education. The second registration opportunity should occur later in the school year and is encouraged to be conducted by one or more representatives from the County Auditor's office. The representative(s) should coordinate with schools to arrange a time to come into the school and provide students with information and voter registration materials. These enforcement efforts were recommended to the Washington district by a representative from the Iowa

Secretary of State's office. Materials shall be made available to students at request. In addition, on Election Day (defined as the second Tuesday of November) schools that are in session that day must now grant a two-hour excused absence for students seeking to cast a ballot.

Civic Engagement Committee  
Iowa Youth Congress

### **Sources**

Have at least 3 credible sources (more are recommended):

[1] *State-by-State 2020 Youth Voter Turnout: The Midwest*. (2021, April 6). CIRCLE. Retrieved from <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-2020-youth-voter-turnout-midwest> [2] *Voter*

*Registration*. (n.d.). Iowa Secretary of State Paul D. Pate. Retrieved from <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterinformation/voterregistration.html>

[3] *Iowa Code §48A.23*. Iowa Legislature. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/code/48A.23.pdf>

[4] "Iowa Registers 350,000 New Voters In Five Years". *Sos.Iowa.Gov*, 2022. Retrieved from [https://sos.iowa.gov/news/2019\\_12\\_30.html](https://sos.iowa.gov/news/2019_12_30.html)

[5] "IA Demographic Statistics". *Infoplease*, 2022, <https://www.infoplease.com/us/census/iowa/demographic-statistics>

[6] Minnesota Secretary Of State - Your Vote Matters. (n.d.). [www.sos.state.mn.us](http://www.sos.state.mn.us). Retrieved December 30, 2022, from <https://www.sos.state.mn.us/elections-voting/get-involved/your-vote-matters/>