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Preparing kids to 'engage and lead'

Fitchburg Civics teacher, student speak at the State House



Fitchburg High School freshman Georgianna Gallo speaks about civics at the State House on March 13 while her 8th grade civics teacher Kristen Sachse from Memorial Middle School in Fitchburg looks on. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

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FITCHBURG — An 8th grade Civics teacher and her former student were recently invited to the State House to participate in a legislative briefing on civic education, where a panel discussed why getting students involved in government is so crucial – especially now.

“Civics is more important than ever in today’s world,” Fitchburg Civics Teacher Kristen Sachse said. “We give the students the opportunity to find their own voices and use them to get involved in their community. Civics and the action civics project gives them the skills and confidence to be changemakers and it prepares them to engage and lead.”

On March 13, Sachse took a momentous trip to the State House along with former student and high schooler Georgianna Gallo. The duo spoke on a panel about the importance of civic education and how that field has progressed since new teaching standards were implemented.



Fitchburg High School freshman Georgianna Gallo, left, got a VIP tour of the Massachusetts State House on March 13 from State Rep. Michael Kushmerek, right, after she spoke on a panel about civics education. (COURTESY KRISTEN CANTERBURY)

State representatives, students, teachers, and others emphasized the need for continued financial support for the Civics Project Trust Fund to ensure all students have access to quality civic education.

The panel was part of the annual Massachusetts Civics Learning Week that ran March 11 through 15. The week's series of virtual and in-person events aimed to build broader awareness of and support for civic learning, amplify and celebrate youth voices, and empower participants to envision themselves as changemakers in our democracy.

Sachse said that Gallo's speech "went great," and that she was thankful for the opportunity to speak to the legislators and guests about their own personal experiences with civics. The longtime educator said Gallo "worked really hard on her action civics project" last year.

"I felt she was the perfect choice to bring to the State House as she has always been a hard-working student and outspoken about things she is passionate about," Sachse said of the young woman. "She is currently her class president, and I could not be prouder of the student and person that she is and becoming. She is finding her own voice and using it for great things. I cannot wait to see and hear about all the great things she accomplishes in the future."



Students, educators, and legislators were invited to the State House on March 13 to participate in a panel that focused on the importance of civics education. Left to right, fourth grader Galina Bychkovsky and grade three and four teacher Fabiane Noronha from Cambridge; eighth grade civics teacher Kristen Sasche from Memorial Middle School in Fitchburg and Fitchburg High School freshman Georgianna Gallo; freshman Mehak Sankhla and eighth-grade civics teacher Patrick McGravey from North Andover; and senior Meagan Lee from North Attleboro. (COURTESY KRISTINA PIRES/GENERATION CITIZEN)

Gallo said she was thrilled to have the opportunity to participate in the panel.

"After my proud expression of opinion and general voice from my last year's civics project involving MCAS and the graduation requirement, I received an email asking if I would like to go and speak at the Massachusetts State House, which I knew I could not turn down," the 14-year-old said.

She went on to say that the civics project she did in eighth grade while a student of Sachse's at Memorial Middle School "was enjoyable in so many different aspects because not only were we educated, we built unbreakable bonds."

"I loved how interactive the action civics was," Gallo said. "Throughout the entire year, it was the students who were 'in control.' Obviously, Ms. Sachse was monitoring us, but it really allowed students to feel like they were the ones making the decisions when it came to the civic project."

She said the civics project gave her "motivation and confidence" she "could not fathom having before," so much so that she ran for class president and won the election.

Gallo said the State House experience enabled her "to connect with important people, connect with all ages making an impact, and truly express my hard work and efforts when it comes to civic engagement."

"I loved how organized the event was," she said. "Everyone's speeches were kept to a good length, and they were interesting. I really enjoyed the sense of community and that everyone was happy for each other and acted as if we had known each other forever. This event promoted the voice of the youth, interactive activities, and general confidence of public speaking."

After the panel she got a VIP tour of the State House from State Rep. Michael Kushmerek, where she was able to go into the House of Representatives and onto the governor's balcony.

"It was definitely an experience that I won't forget, and I am very grateful I got to be a part of it," Gallo said.

Sachse said "it was impressive listening to all the students and teachers speak" – and that she also just enjoyed being at the State House.

"Hopefully by speaking at the State House, we have shown our gratitude for the legislators who have backed the Civics Project Trust Fund and will continue to," she said. "For those that may have not seen the value, I do hope they realize how important it is for schools like Fitchburg to be able to have access to that money through the grant."

Sachse has been teaching for 22 years, 12 of those at Memorial. She has been teaching civics ever since grade eight history was changed to civics in 2018 under the law. She was invited to speak at the State House by the event coordinator, Matt Wilson from Discovering Justice.

"The event was really to thank legislators for their continued support in funding civics education," Sachse said. "The Civics Project Trust Fund is \$2.5 million dollars, which is not nearly enough for all that need it and the governor in her budget that came out in January would like to cut that to \$1.5 million."

"The Civic Project Trust Fund is incredibly important to the success of our students and teachers," she continued. "It has created professional development opportunities and networks for teachers, guidebooks for civics projects and curriculum and resources for school systems, [and] it has allowed for the expansion of the Commonwealth Civics Challenge to showcase student's civics projects which highlights student civic engagement. We must maintain our investment in civic education."