

**Testimony of Felisa Tibbitts before the Massachusetts Joint Judiciary Committee  
Hearing on the *Human Rights for All Bill (HB706)*, June 7, 2005**

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*“Human Rights: The Time has Come”*

It is an honor for me to speak before you, distinguished members of the Joint Judiciary Committee. Many years ago I was an intern in the Executive Office for Education in the State House and spent many afternoons following legislation on the floor. I welcome the opportunity to be sitting in a different seat today, one supporting the proposed Human Rights Bill 706.

Allow me to introduce myself and my organization. My name is Felisa Tibbitts, and I am the director of Human Rights Education Associates, or HREA, which is headquartered here in the Boston area. We are one of the leading organizations worldwide dedicated to promoting education and training in and for human rights. We have offices in Casablanca and Amsterdam and are actively training many groups, including human rights monitors and activists worldwide, as well as teachers and members of the general public.

I have lived in Massachusetts for over 25 years and I deeply appreciate the leadership that the State has taken on issues touching upon matters of personal dignity. I believe that the state can, and should, continue to serve as a national beacon for these higher ideals through the passage of Human Rights Bill 706.

Such a bill would strengthen the state’s initial efforts to promote human rights learning in schools. In 1999, Massachusetts developed curricular frameworks to promote the teaching of Genocide and Human Rights Issues. Because of these frameworks, my organization can offer professional development trainings for Massachusetts educators in this area. The theme of human rights has been linked with the existing History and Social Science standards, as well as the Humanities standards. We need to highlight this opportunity for teachers and support them in teaching human rights in the classroom.

There is, then, an invitation for teachers to infuse elements of human rights into the school system. But more needs to be done. It is important – yes – but not enough to learn about the Holocaust and other historical acts of genocide. Our children – our global citizens of today and tomorrow – need to have a clear grasp of the human rights framework – all the essential principles that can serve as a moral compass for how justice can be realized in the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Human rights education is increasingly recognized by educational authorities as a special feature of citizenship education. It is not only organizations like my own and Amnesty International that are promoting HRE in schools. The National Educators Association has recently promoted human rights learning among its constituents. Idaho’s Department of

Social Studies has established the first state-wide scope and sequence for teachers that proposed lessons for concretely integrating human rights themes throughout their middle school and high school curriculum. The U.N. General Assembly in December 2004 voted in a permanent World Programme for Human Rights Education. The first two years of the program (2005-6) are focusing on HRE in primary and secondary schools.

What does it mean to be a citizen of Mass today? It means being a global citizen. Being a global citizen requires that our children become aware of our highest aspirations for human dignity - human rights – and the legal framework that supports this.

I doubt if you representatives would be satisfied with the notion of citizenship that is commonly found among young people. A U.S. study involving policymakers, public school administrators, teachers, parents and community leaders revealed that the qualities they see as defining a “good citizen” are their ability to “provide for themselves and their family financially” (86%), “obey the law” (84%) and “vote in elections” (73%). Only 10 percent believed that participating in political activities such as campaigns was very important to being a “good citizen” (APCO Insight, 2004). Yet, research is also beginning to show correlations between the study of justice-related issues in the classroom and the likelihood of participation in the community in general. In other words, young people are hungry to explore issues of justice in the classroom and engagement with these issues also fosters engagement in their community.

I believe that every high school student in Massachusetts should engage meaningfully in activities and discussions that touch on the following principles:

- the equality of all human beings
- the universality of certain moral and ethical values
- non-discrimination in the enjoyment of rights
- indivisibility in the enjoyment of rights, with governments responsible for upholding the human rights of all persons, and individuals having the responsibility to respect human rights and to challenge institutions and individuals that abuse them (International Human Rights Internship Program, 1997).

We can then say that human rights are genuinely supported in the Massachusetts education system. The time has come to do more in our state. I respectfully ask your support for House Bill 706.