My name is Andrew Pillow and I am a teacher at KIPP Indianapolis College Preparatory Academy, as well as a Teach Plus Alumni Fellow. I am writing in support of House Bill 1384 which proposes requiring civics education as a part of student curriculum.

I was never one of the brightest students in class. A trend that has unfortunately persisted into adulthood. However, I have always known the basics about how our country worked. I credit this to being born into a well-educated family, and attending strong K-12 magnet school. Through these advantages I learned this information essentially by osmosis myself I developed a strong superiority complex over those who didn’t have this same knowledge.

One of my earliest memories is watching one of those terrible late night talk-shows, probably Jimmy Kimmel or something like that. One of his resident sidekicks was on the streets of Manhattan asking very basic questions about government. I still remember the question: “How many branches of government are there?” Obviously as this was supposed to be funny most of those interviewed didn’t know. People were saying everything from 1 to even 9. But 5th grade me was shocked that these adults didn’t know something that by that time I had known for years. My shock soon turned to the desired reaction of laughter. “What an imbecile.” (I had just learned that word myself and using it in a sentence to make fun of someone who didn’t know something I did only boosted my ego) “Who was his social studies teacher?”

While stroking my 5th grade ego I had actually stumbled upon the only real thing that separated me from the people on the screen. My comprehensive civic education, or there lack thereof.

This is a conclusion we have luckily already come to here. House Bill 1384 is the first step to making sure that Hoosier students are not in that large slice of Americans that don’t know how many senators each state gets, or that can’t name a single supreme court justice. The age this bill targets is middle school. I teach those grades. Those are the right ages. Middle school is when you start forming the basis for who you are going to be as a person. We want that person to be someone who values civic engagement.

People are often hesitant to mandate anything in schools and it is unfortunate that this has to be a bill. But if left to their own devices, schools will prioritize math and reading because that’s what the tests are over and that’s where the teeth are. I myself have been moved out of social studies into math and English class for that reason. As a teacher my opinion only counts for so much. Schools need to hear it from someone higher than us.

Now that I have been a social studies teacher, the late-night TV show, “are you smarter than a 5th grader bit” isn’t as funny. As a matter of fact the prospect of seeing one of my former students blunder a question about how the electoral college works on national tv has become my biggest fear. But this was never really about optics or my ego as a teacher. It’s about creating a strong union where citizens are informed and engaged.

Thank you to Rep. Cook for introducing this bill. I encourage you as a committee member to vote in support. Our country works better when people are knowledgeable and can participate in our institutions. With that being said I’ll be damned if I ever spot Jimmy Kimmel outside of circle center mall stumping Hoosiers with questions about congress. We can prevent that, and we should. Thank you.