



Preparing for the Challenges of Citizenship and the Middle School Civics End of Course Exam... in Elementary School

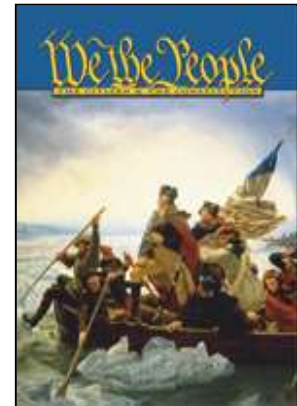
In a recent study conducted by the Study of the American Dream at Xavier University (Greene, 2012), findings revealed that one in three voting-age American citizens could not pass the civics portion of the United States Citizenship Test. Additional findings revealed:

- 85 percent could not define "the rule of law."
- 75 percent did not know the function of the judicial branch.
- 71 percent were unable to identify the Constitution as the "supreme law of the land."
- 63 percent could not name one of their state's U.S. Senators.
- 62 percent did not know the name of the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.
- 62 percent could not identify the Governor of their state.

Building knowledgeable and effective citizens is a lifelong process beginning in the earliest years. With Florida school districts preparing for the new middle school civics end of course exam, teachers and administrators alike are exploring the most effective instructional options not only for the seventh grade course but also targeting the fifth grade civics and government

benchmarks. Students entering middle school will be better prepared to meet the new civics standards if they come in with a strong foundation from elementary school focusing on civic concepts and vocabulary as well as constitutional content. The most successful districts will be those who do not

place the full weight of the Civics End of Course Exam solely on the shoulders of the seventh grade civics teacher. Fourth and fifth grade teachers should also be preparing students for this new middle school challenge by



effectively implementing the elementary benchmarks in civics and government. To achieve better results in middle school, the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. suggests a solid constitutional education foundation in upper elementary grades to help prepare students for the new middle school requirements. Fifth grade US History teachers utilizing the We the People..the Citizen and the Constitution elementary curriculum materials and classroom mock congressional hearing model will provide a concrete, substantive environment to help

students advance to seventh grade civics with the knowledge, skills, concepts, and vocabulary essential for a successful transition. *We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution* is an elementary, middle and high school curriculum with a culminating mock congressional classroom hearing component to help students demonstrate their newfound constitutional knowledge and apply to contemporary issues. The text cultivates a substantive, rich foundation for building conceptual knowledge throughout the grade levels.



Administered nationally by the Center for Civic Education and in Florida by The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc., *We the People* has been the premier program in civics education since its inception in the 1986. Classroom sets of texts were provided at no cost for many years under the Education for Democracy Act but recently congressional funding has been cut for the program. The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. continues to sponsor the program in Florida hosting middle and high school state level hearings, providing professional development opportunities at all grade levels, aligning the materials to the NGSS and Common Core Standards, and assisting districts in locating sponsors for classroom sets of materials until funding is restored.

In elementary school, the program provides an excellent introduction to key concepts, ideas and content pertinent to the incoming middle school civics emphasis. Additionally, the program incorporates a plethora of methodologies and activities to reinforce processes as well as content. The mock congressional hearing at all grade levels provides a rigorous and relevant model enriched with primary source documents and challenging text based discussions combined with opportunities to develop and question personal perspectives. These hearings are an essential component to the ongoing study of the *We the People* text. Research has documented that high school students who actively engage in the *We the People* program by participating in the curriculum and competitive simulated congressional hearing outperform their peers and university students on civics-based tests by 36%. Additionally, *We the People* high school graduates vote at consistently higher rates than students who do not utilize the program. Through the simulated congressional hearings, on both a competitive and a non-competitive level, students are gaining valuable critical thinking, reasoning, public speaking, and cooperative learning skills while learning about the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. These factors are essential for helping students feel more politically effective and participatory.



The culminating activity of the *We the People* curriculum, the mock congressional hearing, is a classroom simulation at all grade levels. But middle school and high school classes also have the opportunity to compete at a state level competition. At the national level, the winning high school class from Florida represents the state at the national competition. Florida students have excelled in the program throughout the years. A unique characteristic of this program is that the entire rostered class participates as opposed to individually selected students who may be the best and brightest. This ensures that all students in a class participate in and contribute to the hearings. Teams from throughout the state participate in the We the People State Finals held annually in Orlando during the month of January.



Building effective and knowledgeable citizens is a lifelong process beginning in the earliest years. The We the People

program begins a solid foundation for civic education in elementary school building student knowledge and skills for successful transition to middle school, high school, and ultimately adult life. The civics and government benchmarks in Florida beginning in the earliest elementary grades help build that foundation. Elementary classes, 5th grade in particular, can utilize the We the People curriculum and mock congressional hearing model to learn about the purpose of government, rights and responsibilities of citizens, and a host of constitutional principles and topics. By building a firm foundation in civic concepts at the elementary level, students will enter the middle grades with prior knowledge that will be highly beneficial when preparing for the civics EOC exam.

For more information on the *We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution* program in Florida, including program materials and dates, please contact Erin Crowe, Program Director for The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc., at ecrowe@flrea.org or Annette Boyd Pitts, Executive Director, at ABPflreaED@aol.com. For information on ordering books, click on the link below.

<http://new.civiced.org/wtp-the-program/curriculum/textbooks>

Works Cited

Greene, B. (2012, April 30). *Study: One in Three American Fails Naturalization Civics Test*. Retrieved August 9, 2012, from U.S. News: <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2012/04/30/study-one-in-three-americans-fails-naturalization-civics-test>