

Want to Teach Social Responsibility? Start With Political Philosophy

Connecting students' experiences to constitutional principles helps them use terms like *civic virtue* and *common welfare* in their discussions of daily problems.

Is it possible to teach 5th graders citizenship and social responsibility by having them study political philosophy? Stareen Schneider, who teaches in Muskego, Wisconsin, has had great success with this approach. Using the upper elementary *We the People . . .* program, Schneider introduces her 5th graders to the philosophical principles used by the framers of our Constitution.

Developed by the Center for Civic Education, *We the People . . .* begins by familiarizing students with the concepts of natural rights, republicanism, and constitutionalism.¹ For example, after teaching lesson three, on republicanism, Schneider was happy to hear words like *civic virtue* and *common welfare* becoming part of the everyday vocabulary of her 5th graders. She said the students "actually lived lesson three," when the mayor of Muskego, after receiving several letters from the students, invited the class to attend the common council meeting. There, several students spoke to the council, using the *common welfare* concept in their presentations about pending state legislation designed to limit the number of landfills in a city the size of Muskego.



Linking Experience to Constitutional Principles

We the People . . . programs emphasize active student involvement; they encourage students to relate important concepts and principles to their own experience, think critically about these principles, and apply them to historical and contemporary events. To understand how this process works, consider the concepts *common welfare* and *civic virtue*. The elementary version of lesson three briefly explains these terms, and then students discuss why the framers included them in the Constitution. Students then consider situations in which their personal interests might conflict with the common welfare and contemplate questions like "When should you put the needs of others above your own interests?"

The strategies used to link students' experiences to constitutional principles vary with the targeted grade levels. For example, to teach upper elementary students the purpose of government, teachers ask students what their lives would be like without any rules, laws, or government. They often use the many illustrations and cartoon drawings provided in the program for this age group to help involve students in the

basic ideas of the text. In contrast, high school teachers ask their students to consider philosophical questions about the "state of nature" and then to compare their answers with John Locke's philosophies. Thus, elementary students consider their immediate experience, while high school students go beyond their everyday experience to think like philosophers.

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Congressional Hearings: Learning By Doing

The culminating activity of the program is a simulated congressional hearing in which students assume the roles of constitutional experts who must testify before Congress. Teachers receive all the materials necessary to conduct the hearings, including detailed procedures and specific questions to ask the student experts. Ideally, the teacher asks people from the community to serve as the congressional committee members. They listen to the students' testimony, ask them questions about their topics, and provide them with feedback on their performances.

At the upper elementary level, teachers give students all the questions in advance of the hearings (See fig. 1 for an example of the questions

used for the upper elementary level unit on the responsibilities of citizenship.) Students at middle school and high school levels are given the basic questions before the hearing, but during the hearing the "congressional committee members" also ask the students follow-up questions based on the students' testimony.

Most teachers who use these programs in their classrooms come away convinced that *We the People . . .* is an important addition to student learning in their classrooms. As Schneider puts it: "The way to teach children is to allow them to participate in their classes and become actively involved in their learning. *We the People . . .* was the perfect way for my class to learn about their Constitution and to learn to respect, appreciate, and love their country." □

Fig. 1. Simulated Congressional Hearing Questions, Upper Elementary Level

UNIT FIVE: CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE ON THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CITIZENS

Members of Congress are concerned about the low number of voters in recent national elections. They have formed this congressional committee to examine the topic of the responsibilities of citizens in our constitutional democracy. As experts on this topic, you will have to answer the committee's questions, keeping in mind that, for many of these questions, there is no one correct answer.

Is voting a responsibility of citizenship? Why or why not?

- Why do you think so many people in the United States do not vote?
- Do you think people should be required to vote? Why or why not?

The committee may also ask some or all of the following questions:

1. Might it be a problem if very few people voted in national elections? Why or why not?
2. Should people have to be able to read and write before they can vote? Why or why not?
3. In what other ways, besides voting, can citizens participate in their government?
4. Young people, from 18 to 25 years of age, vote less often than any other age group. Why do you think this happens?
5. How can students your age participate in our government?

¹Approximately 33,000 teachers and 2.2 million students used *We the People . . .* programs during the 1989-90 school year. The Center offers inservice training in the use of *We the People . . .* to teachers throughout the country. For more information about how to bring *We the People . . .* to your students, contact the Center for Civic Education at 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302; or call (818) 340-9320.

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