

eerily silent as the three judges enter and take their seats. In front of them, a panel of young “experts” on constitutional principles waits nervously for the signal to begin. Another round of judging in a We the People congressional hearing has begun.

In the past few years, it has been my good fortune to be one of those three judges in both state and national competitions. In that capacity, I have seen hundreds of students grappling with questions that call for a deep understanding of the principles of democratic government on which our nation was founded. As I listen to their responses, sometimes confident and clear, other times confused and tentative, I think to myself, “They are all winners.” And in truth, they are. So, also, is our body politic.

Origins of We the People

The first We the People program dates back to the bicentennial of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, which spanned 1987 to 1991. The program grew out of the determination of former Chief Justice Warren Burger, head of the Bicentennial Commission, to make this commemoration “a history and civics lesson for us all.” With a grant from the commission, the independent, nonprofit Center for Civic Education developed a curriculum and national competition to realize Burger’s vision.

At the end of the bicentennial, the center continued to develop and expand the We the People program with funding from the U.S. Department of Education. Today, the center administers the program through a network of coordinators in each of the 435 congressional districts as well as the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Since its inception in 1987, more than 26 million students and 82 thousand educators have participated in We the People. The program has also enlisted support and participation from members of Congress, bar associations, and other professional, business, and community organizations across the nation.

We the People in the Classroom

The primary goal of We the People is to promote civic competence and responsibility.

We the People: THE CITIZEN and THE CONSTITUTION and THE CONGRESSIONAL HEARING

Diane Hart

THE DOOR OPENS. Chairs shuffle as the students come to their feet. The room is almost

To accomplish this, the center provides participating teachers with student textbooks and suggested learning activities that culminate in a simulated congressional hearing. This curriculum can be used as the basis of a semester or yearlong course on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. More typically, it is integrated into conventional U.S. history or civics and government courses.

Three versions of We the People textbooks and teacher’s guides are available for upper elementary, middle, and high school classes. All three focus on the history and principles of the Constitution and on the role of citizens in a democratic society. Each text develops these themes using age-appropriate content and learning activities that are designed to work well with students of varying ability levels.

The textbooks are organized around essential questions such as, “What is government?” and “What are the responsibilities of citizens?” At the high school level, the questions are more challenging, as the list of units of study in Figure 1 indicates.

The teacher’s guides that accompany the textbooks lay out interactive lessons that feature critical thinking exercises, problem-solving activities, and cooperative learning tasks. These lessons have been carefully designed to develop students’ intellectual abilities and their participatory skills while increasing their civic knowledge. In these lessons, students are encouraged to apply what they are learning to current issues. They also have many opportunities to examine the relationship of constitutional principles to basic concerns

such as fairness, justice, equality, and the common good.

After working through the curriculum, students take a multiple-choice test and prepare for the simulated congressional hearing. Upon completion of the course, they receive a certificate of achievement signed by their member of Congress or another prominent official.

The Simulated Congressional Hearing

The culminating activity of the We the People curriculum is the simulated congressional hearing. During this hearing, panels of students testify as “experts” on the Constitution before a panel of judges acting as members of Congress. The hearing is a performance task designed to assess students’ knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles. It also provides a good way to assess students’ ability to take, defend, and evaluate positions on relevant historical and contemporary issues.

To prepare for the hearing, the class divides into groups, with each group becoming a panel of “experts” on the content covered in one unit of the We the People textbook. Each panel then prepares expert testimony on specific questions related to its area of expertise. These questions are provided by the Center for Civic Education. See Figure 2 for sample questions from past years.

The structure of a hearing is simple but rigid. Each panel of experts is given four minutes to present testimony in response to one of its questions. The prepared testimony is then followed by six minutes of questioning by the judges. During this question and answer

Figure 1
Essential Questions of the We the People High School Curriculum

Unit One: What are the philosophical and historical foundations of the American political system?

Unit Two: How did the Framers create the Constitution?

Unit Three: How did the values and principles embodied in the Constitution shape American institutions and practice?

Unit Four: How have the protections of the Bill of Rights been developed and expanded?

Unit Five: What rights does the Bill of Rights protect?

Unit Six: What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

Figure 2

Sample Questions for a Congressional Hearing

As the samples below show, the difficulty of questions asked in congressional hearings increases from grade to grade and from one hearing level to the next.

UPPER ELEMENTARY

Unit One: What Is Government?

- What are the basic purposes of government according to the Founders of our nation?
- Do you think our government today serves these purposes?
- What else might the government do?

explain how they work in our system of government today.

State Level:

- What are the differences between a country that has a constitution and one that has a constitutional government? Why are those differences significant?
- According to the Founders, what characteristics should a constitution or higher law have? Why is each of those characteristics important?
- How can a constitutional government be organized to prevent abuse of power and protect natural rights? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an organization?

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Unit One: What Is Government?

John Locke was an English philosopher who thought about why it was necessary to have a government.

- What did Locke think would happen without government?
- What did John Locke believe to be the purpose of government?
- Do you think government might have purposes that Lock did not mention? Explain your answer.

National Level:

- What are the political principles and values set forth in the Declaration of Independence?
- What were the sources of the political principles and values expressed in the Declaration of Independence?
- Thomas Jefferson said that the ideas he included in the Declaration of Independence were not new or his alone. He said that the Declaration was “intended to be an expression of the American mind.” What evidence is there that the ideas in the Declaration were widely held among Americans of his time?

HIGH SCHOOL

Unit One: What Are the Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System?

District Level:

- What are the fundamental characteristics of a constitutional government?
- What are the essential differences between a constitutional government and an autocratic or dictatorial government?
- Describe at least five provisions of the U.S. Constitution that provide a means of preventing the abuse or misuse of government power and

period, the judges may ask for clarification, probe deeper on a specific point, or challenge students to apply what they know to a new problem or issue.

At the end of the question period, the judges individually score the panel's performance based on six criteria:

- understanding of issues addressed
- application of knowledge
- evidence of sound reasoning
- ability to support positions with evidence
- responsiveness to questions
- participation by all panel members

The scores for each panel are then added together to arrive at a score for the class as a whole. The scoring guide used by the judges can be found in Figure 3.

Elementary and middle school classes conduct noncompetitive hearings. These hearings may be held in classrooms or in a more public forum, such as a school assembly, with members of the community taking on the role of congressional committee members. High school teachers may conduct noncompetitive hearings, but are encouraged to participate in the nationwide competitive program.

The high school We the People competition begins at the congressional district level, with classes from local schools vying for the district championship. District winners go on to compete at a regional or statewide hearing. The winners at the state level compete in the We the People national finals in Washington, D.C.

Each spring more than 1,200 high school students and their teachers converge in our nation's capital to compete in the We the People finals. The last rounds of hearings are held on Capitol Hill in congressional committee hearing rooms. This setting makes the hearing finals about as authentic as a performance task ever gets.

Measuring Success in the We the People Program

Those who have participated in the We the People program and the congressional hearings would probably agree that success does not necessarily mean winning. For a painfully shy or tongue-tied student, success may mean overcoming a natural reticence long enough to testify in a public forum. For non-native English speakers, success may mean finding the English words they need to answer a judge's



question. For others, success may mean generating enough confidence to state a point of view or to disagree with a fellow panelist.

As an educator, I view every student who competes in a simulated hearing as a success story. But in my role as a judge, I am required to assess the performance of students using a strict scoring rubric. Based on that experience, as well as the comments of other judges, I have compiled a list of tips from a judge's point of view for a successful hearing. See Figure 4.

The most important measure of success, however, is not how well students score in a competition. What matters is how well the program reaches its goal of preparing students for the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society. The thousands of teachers who use the program believe that the program delivers on its goal. Their intuition is backed by research suggesting that participation in We the People does have a positive long-term impact on students.

For example, a series of studies conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) between 1988 and 1991 showed that students enrolled in We the People at upper elementary, middle, and high school levels "significantly outperformed comparison students on every topic of the tests taken."¹ Even more impressive were the results of a subsequent test in which ETS compared scores of a random sample of 900 high school students who participated in We the People with 280 sophomores and juniors in political science courses at a major university. The high school students outperformed the university students in every topic area and on almost every test item. The greatest difference was in the area of political philosophy, where the participating high school students scored 14 percent higher than did the university students.

In 1993, Professor Richard Brody of Stanford University conducted the first study to look systematically at the effects of the We the People program on students' civic atti-

Figure 3
Simulated Congressional Hearing Scoring Rubric

Figure 4
Tips for a Successful Hearing

- Come to the hearing with name cards for each panel member. This will help the judges to address students by name during the question and answer period.
- Have students read the scoring guide carefully, noting the emphasis on understanding, application of knowledge, and reasoned argument. This is what the judges are looking for in both the opening statement and the question period.
- Make sure that your students stay focused on the prepared question and sub-questions in their opening statement. The judges want to hear how students have thought this question through, not everything they know on this general subject.
- Tell students that it's okay to use notes when delivering their opening statement. Experts who testify before Congress do it all the time. Memorizing a presentation can backfire, especially when students forget their lines and don't know how to proceed.
- Give students lots of practice fielding possible follow-up questions before the hearing. During this period, they will have to rely on that experience rather than on pre-prepared notes.
- If students do not understand a question asked by a judge, advise them to ask for clarification. Time is too short to waste on answers that are not on target.
- Encourage students to keep their answers to questions as direct and to the point as possible. The judges do want to find out what students know beyond what was in their prepared statement. But they do not expect to hear from every student on every question unless they specifically indicate.
- Make sure students know that it's okay to respectfully disagree with each other when answering a question and to explain why. In fact, judges like to see civil and reasoned debate among students.
- If students don't have a response to a question, advise them to say so frankly. This will signal the judges to move on to what students do know.
- Encourage students to include concrete examples from history, the Constitution, current events, Supreme Court case law, and their own communities in their answers. Judges are impressed when students are able to marshal a wide range of evidence to support or illuminate a point.
- Remind your more verbal students that participation is one of the scoring criteria. If necessary, help them find ways to bring more reticent panel members into the discussion.
- Keep the focus of the hearing on substance, not style. The judges are there to hear students present their own thinking, not to listen to a prepackaged, theatrical presentation.
- Let your students look like students. The judges are trained not to be swayed by factors such as clothing or grooming. Your students do not need to buy new clothes to compete successfully.

Figure 5
Key Findings of the First Survey of We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution Program Alumni

In February 2001, the Center for Civic Education conducted its first survey of alumni from the We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution program. Altogether, 341 alumni who were eligible to vote in November 2000 responded. Their responses were compared to a 2000 study conducted by the National Election Studies (NES) of young people in the same age group, as well as with a 1999 study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute of more than 260,000 American college freshmen. Key findings include the following:

- Eighty-two percent of alumni reported voting in November 2000, in contrast to 48 percent of those surveyed in the NES study.
- Seventy-four percent of alumni indicated that it was essential or very important to keep up to date with political affairs, as compared with 23 percent of American college freshmen.
- Fifty-four percent of alumni thought that becoming a community leader was essential or very important, as compared to 29 percent of college freshmen.
- Forty-eight percent of alumni thought influencing the political structure was essential or very important, while only 14 percent of college freshmen agreed.
- Forty-six percent of alumni read the newspaper often, and 60 percent paid a great deal of attention to stories on politics and public issues. In contrast, 35 percent of NES respondents had not read a daily newspaper in the past week, and 40 percent had not watched a national television news broadcast in the past week.
- Thirty-four percent of alumni had contacted a federal elected official or staff person, in contrast to 9 percent of NES respondents
- Thirty-three percent of alumni had taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration on a national or local issue; 16 percent had volunteered to work for a candidate running for office in the past year; and 10 percent had made a financial campaign contribution. In contrast, only 3 percent of NES respondents had taken part in any of these activities.

tudes, with a particular focus on their development of political tolerance. Based on his analysis of survey responses from 1,351 high school students from across the United States, Brody concluded that students involved in We the People display more political tolerance and feel more politically effective than do most adult Americans and most other students. A particularly interesting finding in Brody's study was that the more involved a student was in the competitive hearings, the more politically tolerant he or she was likely to become.²

A survey of We the People conducted by the Center for Civic Education in 2001 suggests that these positive effects persist into early adulthood. The survey results indicate that alumni of the program are far more likely to vote, pay attention to public affairs, and participate in politics than are their peers.³ The key findings of the survey are summarized in Figure 5.

Those who participate in We the People year after year as teachers, coordinators, volunteers, and judges may, or may not, be aware of such research findings. To most of these participants, the success of the program becomes palpable each year just as soon as the judges take their seats, the students on the panel introduce themselves, the question is read aloud, and another simulated congressional hearing begins. G

Notes

1. Educational Testing Service 1988, 1990, 1991 reports.
2. Richard Brody, "Secondary Education and Political Attitudes: Examining the Effects of Political Tolerance of the We the People . . . Curriculum" (Report prepared for the Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, CA, 1994).
3. "Voting and Political Participation of We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution Alumni Survey Results 2001" (Report prepared for the Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, CA, 2001).

Diane Hart is a writer and consultant specializing in the social studies and assessment. She is the author of several social studies textbooks as well as resources for teachers, including *Authentic Assessment: A Handbook for Educators*. Her most recent works include *History Alive! The United States* for middle school students and *Government of Palau: A Nation that Honors Its Traditions*, a civics textbook for a newly emerging democracy in the South Pacific.

For more information about the We the People program, contact Robert S. Leming, Director, We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution,

Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302-1467; (800) 340 4223 (phone), (818) 591-9330 (fax), or leming@civiced.org (e-mail); or visit www.civiced.org.