

Writing a School Constitution: Representative Democracy in Action

Lorraine S. McGarry and Donnan M. Stoicov

At the beginning of every school year at Park Forest Elementary School (PFE), it's customary for teachers to invite their students to participate in establishing guidelines for behavior and citizenship in their respective classrooms. We began the 2012–13 school year, however, by taking this process a step further: all students attended a series of eight all-school gatherings, or “Town Hall Meetings,” throughout the first two weeks of school, during which classes shared their visions for an ideal school/learning community with one another. Prior to the Town Hall Meetings, teachers facilitated classroom discussions to elicit their students' ideas about their wishes, hopes, and dreams for the school year; visions of an “ideal school”; shared values; and expectations for themselves and others within their learning community. Students from each grade then shared their ideas over the course of eight all-school Town Hall Meetings.

While these meetings generated many important ideas for the year ahead, they also evoked some feelings of frustration and boredom because, as one student expressed, “It's hard to hear everybody's ideas” in a large group. Through this process, many students came to recognize the difficulty of sharing ideas and solving problems in a large community using direct democracy. This experience set the stage for a project, spanning six months, to write a school constitution through representative democracy and a constitutional convention.

Setting and Preparation

PFE is a public elementary school with approximately 500 students in grades K-5. A core philosophy is to provide a “laboratory” in which students can experience and learn from democracy in action. As a learning community, we continually seek to help students develop the skills necessary for meaningful participation in our democracy. Thus, we provide opportunities for students to engage with significant, historical documents in ways that are meaningful and age-appropriate for them.

We designed a school-wide learning experience in which all students in grades K-5 could engage with the U.S. Constitution, encountering representative democracy in action through the development of a “PFE Constitution.” This gradual process, lasting about six months, proved to be tremendously successful in helping our elementary students understand the U.S. Constitution and the power of representative democracy within their own learning community.

With the adoption and implementation of Common Core State Standards, teachers and administrators across the country are carefully examining curriculum and practices to ensure that they can continue meeting the unique needs of their students and communities within a system of aligned standards. The promising news for those of us who work with children is this: Each time we create an authentic and stimulating learning experience that prepares our students for the challenges of adult life and citizenship, we are inherently meeting the objectives of the Common Core Initiative.

Through the constitution-writing project, we helped our students engage in collaborative discussions with diverse partners, construct arguments with evidence and reasoning, make sense of problems and persevere in solving them, and analyze one of America's founding documents.¹ Closely aligned with the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards,² our project design allowed us to address numerous Common Core standards, while providing students with a meaningful experience in representative democracy.

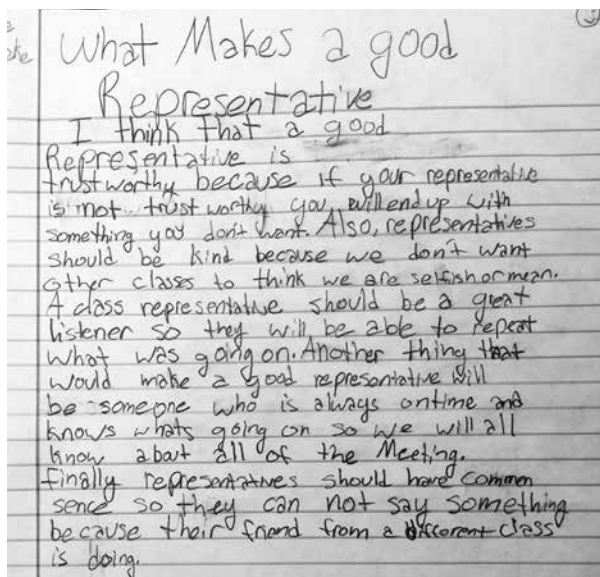
The C3 Framework states that, by the end of grade 2, students (individually and with others) should be able to “describe how communities work to accomplish common tasks, establish responsibilities, and fulfill roles of authority.” (p. 32). This behavior is an indicator of learning for Dimension 2 of the Arc of Inquiry, showing that students have learned the vocabulary (e.g., election, voting, representative, constitution) and responsibilities of all “citizens” (students and teachers in the school) as well as those who have been chosen, by their peers, to act as representatives. Students also “take action” (Dimension 4), as they participate in offering ideas for the constitution during class discussions, elect suitable representatives, and ratify the final document for the school.

Dimensions of the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.

Electing Representatives

We wanted to provide students with an authentic opportunity to evaluate student candidates running for office and act as



informed voters. Although 2012 was a presidential election year, we did not hold a mock election for U.S. president. Instead, students elected classroom representatives from among their peers to represent them at the PFE Constitutional Convention.

We began the election process by providing teachers with lesson ideas to help students explore representative democracy as a way to share ideas and create a unified vision for our school. These lessons included age-appropriate methods for helping students identify desirable qualities for classroom representatives and to evaluate potential candidates based on those qualities. For example, in grades K-2, students examined their favorite characters from children’s literature (e.g., Curious George, Olivia, and Franklin) to evaluate whether these characters would make good “classroom representatives.”

In grades 3-5, students examined how local and state representatives are elected, engaged in writing opinions to explain the desirable qualities of classroom representatives, and delivered speeches in support of various student candidates. The characteristics that the students deemed most important for classroom representatives to possess were responsibility in carrying out duties, trustworthiness in accurately representing the needs and wishes of classmates, and the ability to solve problems and compromise with other representatives.

Students in each classroom voted by secret ballot for one representative and one alternate, tallying the votes right in the classroom. Teachers later remarked that older (in grades 3–5) students’ discussions and voting choices revealed that these students had considered candidates’ qualifications, as opposed to merely their popularity.

Holding a Constitutional Convention, Part I

A few weeks after the election, representatives and alternates were released from their classrooms for two afternoons to attend sessions of the PFE Constitutional Convention. Given that the representatives and alternates ranged in age from five to ten years old, we began the first meeting of the convention by introducing the meaning of the word “constitution,” with some of the older

students sharing what they had already learned about this term. Then we all listened to a recording of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution sung by children.³

During this opening activity, several students expressed their thoughts about a constitution being like a “contract,” or agreement among people, which details “rules and laws” for living together. A couple of older students also expressed their ideas about constitutions protecting “human rights” and ensuring that “all people are equal.” In addition to helping clarify the purpose of a Constitution for our wide-ranging age group, these student contributions led us naturally to a discussion about the importance of both “rights” and “responsibilities” of individuals and of groups of people.

Classroom representatives and alternates then engaged in a series of activities to sort all of the ideas that had been generated by “the People” (the student body and staff) at the beginning of the year into two groups: ideas about “rights” and ideas about “responsibilities.”

Final Draft of Rights and Responsibilities

Our Rights:

We have the right to feel safe in our school.

We have the right to speak what we believe and not be judged for it.

We have the right to be appreciated and recognized and to celebrate our success.

We have the right to creative, engaging, and fun learning.

We have the right to learn and to help others learn.

We have the right to have a safe learning environment both inside and outside.

We have the right to be respected.

We have the right to help our community both inside and outside.

We have the right to be treated fairly and to have opportunities to serve our school.

Our Responsibilities:

We have the responsibility to learn and to teach others what we have learned.

We have the responsibility to share appreciation of others, to take notice their needs, and to show faith in them.

We have the responsibility to work hard and to do our personal best.

We have the responsibility to respect our school and those in it and to use our manners.

We have the responsibility to care for others and our environment.

We have the responsibility to actively engage in learning.

We have the responsibility to work with others and cooperate.

Before the classroom representatives and alternates adjourned Part 1 of the constitutional convention, they established three

work committees that would convene at the next meeting: a committee to write our preamble, a committee to revise and edit our rights and responsibilities, and a committee to illustrate our constitution in order to make it accessible to our youngest citizens.

A Constitutional Convention, Part II

At the second session of our constitutional convention, representatives and alternates began their work in committees to create the components of our document. The preamble committee analyzed the text of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution and used it as a model for the structure and language of a PFE Preamble.

The rights and responsibilities committee used the “Dotmocracy” opinion-survey form⁴ to select the most important items in each category and craft language to communicate the ideas of “the People” in short, powerful sentences in the Constitution.

As explained by its members, the rights and responsibilities committee “took all the data and ... added it and saw how many people liked it and ... how many people didn’t like it and, if some people talked about the same thing, ... combined it and made one.” The illustration committee took the revised rights and responsibilities and reproduced them with colorful illustrations that kindergarten and primary students would understand.

At the end of the afternoon, all representatives and alternates reconvened to share their work, compile it into a draft Constitution, and vote to approve the draft using a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” vote for each item.

Ratification by the People

In the month following the second session of the constitutional convention, classroom representatives and alternates brought the physical draft of the constitution to their classrooms and shared information about their process and the document with the classmates whom they had represented. Fifth-grade representatives assisted the representatives from kindergarten and primary classrooms by visiting their classrooms and helping the younger representatives explain the document and answer questions from their peers. For example, after mentioning “the responsibility to actively engage in learning with a group of primary students,” a fifth-grade representative intuitively paused to ask, “Do you know what that means?” When the younger students shook their heads, another fifth-grade representative chimed in, “It means to, like, really be listening to what your teacher is saying about what she’s teaching you.” The younger students immediately demonstrated understanding by saying, “I agree!”

Finally, after the draft constitution had traveled to every classroom, an all-school gathering was held in which all PFE students and staff had the opportunity to vote by a show of hands on the constitution, which was ratified. The final, ratified document now hangs prominently in the school atrium, with copies posted in all rooms.



Snapshots of students from Maple Street School in Manchester, Vermont. They performed civic-themed songs at a recording session, a 9-11 Memorial event, and the Vermont Legislature where they received a standing ovation on January 7, 2014. View free videos at the producer/composer’s website, sandywilburmusic.com.

Conclusion

The process of writing a school constitution gave our students an opportunity to engage meaningfully in democratic practices and to develop an understanding of the need for representative government. By wrestling with authentic questions of “self-government,” our students were able to practice the important citizenship skills of asking questions, listening for understanding, seeking alternative viewpoints, disagreeing constructively, and building consensus within a group. As acknowledged in the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards, these skills not only prepare students to become active and responsible citizens, but “are also crucial to success in the 21st century workplace and in college.”⁵ Providing opportunities for students to experience authentic inquiry within the safety of their elementary learning community, as students try to synthesize myriad ideas into a workable document for the entire student body, allows them to approximate the time-consuming—and often messy—democratic process from an early age and to learn to work together as students, colleagues, and citizens. 🌍

Notes

1. National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, “Common Core State Standards Initiative,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org.
2. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013). * Free PDF of the C3 Framework at www.socialstudies.org/c3 * Buy the paperback book (with introductory essays) at www.socialstudies.org/store.
3. Sandy Wilbur, “We the People” (New York: sandywilburmusic.com, 2012). This free, six-minute video shows elementary students performing the song in a studio, with overlays of historical photos of children. See also performances of “Four Score and Seven Years Ago” and “She Still Carries a Torch.”
4. Jason Diceman, “Dotmocracy,” dotmocracy.org.
5. NCSS, C3 Framework, p. 19.

LORRAINE S. MCGARRY, *Teacher, Park Forest Elementary School, State College, Pennsylvania*

DONNAN M. STOICOVY, *Principal, Park Forest Elementary School, State College, Pennsylvania*