

How One Pennsylvania School District “Celebrates the Constitution” and Civics Education All Year Long

PBA acknowledges contributions to this article from Myron E. Yoder, M.Ed., Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator, Allentown School District and Melissa Bell, English Department Chair, Louis E. Dieruff High School, Retired, Allentown School District

Constitution Day, September 17, provides the perfect kick-off for a year-long celebration of important civic and law-related educational programs in your classroom, school or district. Learn how one school district in Pennsylvania is making learning fun and engaging for their students while still fulfilling the requirements of No Child Left Behind and state standards and improving their PSSA test scores.

“We understand that one of our major responsibilities at the elementary level of education is to begin the development of the next generation of American citizens,” comments Myron Yoder, Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator for Allentown School District. “Students are more likely to succeed in life if they are civically engaged. Civics provides a meaning to students why they should learn how to read, write and do math and science. Our district has adopted and further developed the School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program (SVPDP) as our district-wide social studies curriculum for elementary civic education. Our program focuses on academic study and group learning activities that promote increased knowledge and skills, as well as the foundation to becoming engaged citizens through active participation. In the 2007-2008 school year, all K-5 classrooms used the SVPDP, reaching 9,500 students in over 400 classrooms, while teachers in the District’s middle and high schools piloted materials. We are deeply committed to the SVPDP, and our young students are learning the skills and lessons needed to address public problems and become more active community members.”

The consensus among Allentown’s elementary teachers is that the program has helped them teach social studies more effectively, with students grasping American history and governmental concepts better. They have also noticed an increased understanding of the concept of authority. Many teachers have shared that they “can actually see their students thinking.”

The social studies curriculum is able to create, from kindergarten upward, a shared common vocabulary and common understanding of authority, privacy, responsibility and justice. “We have already noticed a deeper sense of community and commitment among our students,” says Ritter Elementary principal Melissa Marcks, a former teacher and trainer in the program. “They have a warm, affectionate regard for everyone in the building and the property itself, making sure litter and graffiti are removed as quickly as possible. The various racial, ethnic and economically dispersed groups at Ritter blend and interrelate, and we could not be more thrilled with the academic boost it has given our students across the board.”

Civic education boosts academic performance and builds civic-minded and responsible citizens. In Allentown, students are being educated to believe that civic and political participation can improve their neighborhoods, city and nation. They are learning that public institutions are likely to work better when citizens participate in public life. More importantly, Allentown School District students are being given the knowledge and skills to effectively engage themselves in these areas.

Three factors contribute to Allentown’s success:

- realistic content and balanced, nonpartisan treatment of issues;
- the use of community resources to connect students to the world outside their classrooms; and
- engaging teaching strategies that focus on class discussion over lecture, small group learning, and role playing or debating.

The Allentown School District is the 2008 recipient of the COMPASS Award. The award is presented by PennCORD, Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy, and honors individuals or organizations that excel in promoting civics programs. PennCORD founding partners include the Pennsylvania Governor’s Office of the First Lady, Pennsylvania Bar Association, the Department of Education and the National Constitution Center. This is the third time the award has been given. The two previous recipients are U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and David Trevasakis, a long-time advocate for civics and law-related education programs and the pro bono coordinator for the Pennsylvania Bar Association.

Practical Ideas for Constitution Day Celebrations and Lessons to Use All Year

What has Allentown done and what can you do in your classroom?

At the Allentown School District, they observed that the first thing most teachers and schools did was to establish school and classroom rules and regulations at the start of the school year. This is a perfect way to work on a constitution in all classes and grade levels. Why not call those rules and regulations your “Classroom Constitution” or “School Constitution”? Some classes have even conducted mini constitutional conventions in their class to develop their class rules and regulations.

From the start of school to September 17 is a great time to establish a class constitution and/or a school constitution and by September 17 it will be ready to sign. Then on Constitution Day the class and/or the school can have their constitution posted and students can make a commitment to their “We the People” by signing their document. Some classes call it “We the Students” and keep it posted prominently for the full year.

The next part of the day can be spent examining the U.S. Constitution and comparing preambles and rules or perhaps use it to start studying the Constitution.

Use a Piece of Literature

A major commitment of Allentown’s work in this program, and social studies in general, is a literature-based social studies approach. Their social studies curriculum enhances students’ skills in reading, writing, mathematics, science and other areas. It is through literature and writing that they interconnect and draw concepts into other curricular areas. If you think about it, almost all literature connects to civic-related themes. Just imagine a piece of literature and ask yourself, *does this piece have issues of authority and power, responsibility, justice or privacy? Does it connect to the Constitution directly? Does it deal with problems in a community setting?* In almost all cases, the answer is yes. In some of Allentown’s social studies classes they may even use more pieces of literature during a year than their English counterparts.

For Constitution Day, Allentown School District encourages the use of a piece of literature at all grade levels, a Read Aloud, or even using the Constitution itself as the piece of literature. This approach is rooted in the belief that literature on any grade level expands social studies knowledge about

other cultures, eras, places and events not experienced first hand. Literature provides the reader with inside perspectives of emotions surrounding human events. Students are offered an opportunity to identify with characters, events and emotions which may be similar to their own experiences. Allentown teachers then make a connection between the literature and the constitution through a PSSA-style writing prompt and in the end you have a social studies concept in reading class with practice in the tested areas of the PSSA.

In 2007, Allentown used a grant to purchase pieces of literature for teachers to use at all elementary grade levels on Constitution Day. Melissa Bell, a retired English teacher made the connections and writing prompts for teachers to use, saving them planning time and allowing them to immediately use the classroom lessons. Ms. Bell’s work follows along with some of the other creative ideas Allentown School District teachers have developed.

Lesson Plan

The Framers and Other Writers: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Celebrating Civics and the Constitution

Overview

This lesson begins with a Read Aloud of a book or excerpts designated for the appropriate grade level.

Objectives

Students will:

- Have a basic understanding of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution
- Identify the powers and responsibilities of the President
- Discuss why it is important to learn to fight with words, not fists

To learn more about the Allentown School District visit their website: www.allentownsd.org/

To learn more about the School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program (SVPDP) visit the Center for Civic Education web site www.civiced.org

A Suggested Reading List from the Allentown School District

This list is by no means all-inclusive. There are many other books that can be used. Some additional books are listed on the PBA Web site, and many others can be found through researching. This list coincides with the lessons developed and used by the Allentown School District.

Kindergarten

The Crayon Box that Talked - Shane DeRolf
The U.S. Constitution - Norman Pearl
We the Kids - David Catrow

First Grade

Frederick - Leo Lionni
The Story of Ruby Bridges - Robert Coles
Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories - Dr. Seuss

Second Grade

House Mouse and Senate Mouse - Peter W. Barnes & Cheryl Shaw Barnes
Marshall, the Courthouse Mouse - Peter W. Barnes & Cheryl Shaw Barnes
SHH! We're Writing the Constitution - Jean Fritz

Third Grade

If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution - Elizabeth Levy
Through My Eyes - Ruby Bridges
Woodrow for President - Peter W. Barnes & Cheryl Shaw Barnes

Fourth Grade

Night Journeys - Avi
The U.S. Constitution and You - Syl Sool
Will You Sign Here, John Hancock - Jean Fritz

Fifth Grade

Constitution Translated for Kids - Cathy Travis
The Founders: The 39 Stories Behind the U.S. Constitution - Dennis Fradin
The Kid Who Ran for President - Dan Gutman
The Kid Who Became President - Dan Gutman
The Landry News - Andrew Clements

Middle School

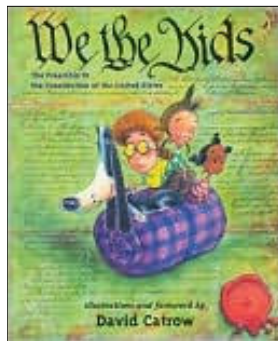
Animal Farm - George Orwell
Lord of the Flies - William Golding
The Giver - Lois Lowry
The Outsiders - S.E. Hinton

High School

Antigone - Sophocles
Brave New World - Aldous Huxley
MacBeth - William Shakespeare
To Kill a Mockingbird - Harper Lee

Kindergarten

We the Kids
by David Catrow



Discussion questions:

- What does the word “preamble” mean?
- On the page with the words “providing for the common defense,” what do you think the dog is doing?
- Students may also be asked to draw a picture that tells a story about the answer they gave to one of the above questions.

PSSA Style Verbal Prompt:

Using the page on establishing justice, explain to the class why rules are needed.

- Give examples in your answer.
- Speak or write in sentences as you explain your answer.

Grades 1 and 2

Woodrow, the White House Mouse by Peter W. Barnes and Cheryl Shaw Barnes

Discussion questions:

- Where does the president live?
- Where does the president do his work and thinking?
- The Constitution says that to be president a person must be at least 35 years old. Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not?
- One assignment given to the president by the Constitution is working with Congress to make new laws. The president can veto a bill sent to him or her by Congress. What does the word “veto” mean?

PSSA Style Writing Prompt:

Write two examples of responsibilities the Constitution gives to the president. Explain your answer in sentences.

- Give examples in your answer.
- Speak or write in sentences as you explain your answer.

Grade 3

Martin's Big Words by Doreen Rappaport



Discussion questions:

- What did Martin Luther King Jr. do to “establish justice” for African Americans?
- What did he do to “secure the blessings of liberty” for all Americans”?
- How did he teach others to fight with words, not their fists?

PSSA Style Writing Prompt:

In his “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King’s big words included: “I have a dream that one day in Alabama little black boys and black girls will join hands with little white boys and girls as sisters and brothers.”

- Write to inform the reader of ways in which his dream has come true in America.

Plan

Before you write:

- Read the prompt carefully so you understand exactly what you are being asked to do.
- Consider topic, task, and audience.
- Think about what you want to write.
- Use scratch paper to organize your thoughts.
- Use strategies like mapping or outlining.

Write

As you write:

- Maintain a clear and consistent position or claim.
- Include specific details; use examples and reasons to support your ideas.
- Use a variety of well-constructed, complete sentences.
- Use a logical organization with an obvious introduction, body and conclusion.

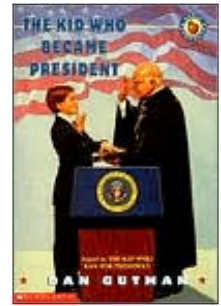
Proofread

After you write:

- Did you support your ideas with specific details?
- Do the point of view and tone of the essay remain consistent?
- Check for capitalization, spelling, sentence structure, punctuation and usage errors.

Grades 4 and 5

The Kid Who Became President by Dan Gutman



This book is a great read for students in a presidential election year!

Suggested discussion questions and writing prompts are provided for use after the Read Aloud.

***The Kid Who Became President* Plot Summary:**

This incredibly funny book is the story of Judson Moon, who is elected president of The United States at the ripe “old age” of 13! Each chapter details the lessons learned by Judson while “on the job.” The three branches of government and the powers granted to each by the Constitution are discussed. This is a great election-year spoof which takes the reader on a journey through the Constitution.

Suggested pages for the Read Aloud:

72-75, 176-181, 208-209.

Discussion questions:

- What are some of the powers and responsibilities granted to the president by the Constitution?
- What important lessons did Judson Moon learn during his year as president?
- The Constitution states that a person must be at least 35 years old to be elected president. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

PSSA Style Writing Prompt:

The Kid Who Became President contains lessons about how our government is organized.

- Write to inform the reader about a power given to the legislative branch, a power given to the judicial branch and a power given to the executive branch.

Plan

Before you write:

- Read the prompt carefully so you understand exactly what you are being asked to do.
- Consider topic, task, and audience.
- Think about what you want to write.
- Use scratch paper to organize your thoughts.
- Use strategies like mapping or outlining.

Write

As you write:

- Maintain a clear and consistent position or claim.
- Include specific details; use examples and reasons to support your ideas.
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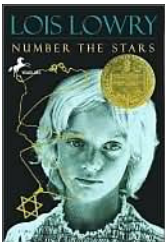
Proofread

After you write:

- Did you support your ideas with specific details?
- Do the point of view and tone of the essay remain consistent?
- Check for capitalization, spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, and usage errors.

Middle school and high school literature connections can follow the same format as demonstrated for elementary. The literature is rich across all areas of social studies. Some example prompts are:

Middle School



Number the Stars by Lois Lowry

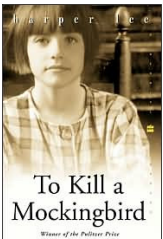
Fulfilling the responsibilities one accepts results in benefits and costs. Some benefits affect others and some benefits come to the person fulfilling the responsibilities. Write to persuade the reader that the benefits of Peter fulfilling his responsibilities were far greater than the costs involved.

Middle/High School

Animal Farm by George Orwell

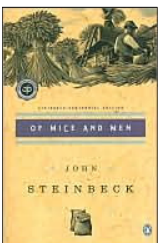
At the end of the novel, only a single commandment remains: “All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.” Write to inform the reader about events which led to this final “inequality” on Animal Farm.

High School



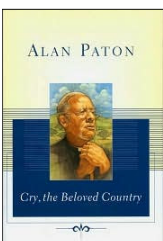
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Tom Robinson was convicted of rape in this novel. The trial leading up to his conviction is described at great length. Imagine you are Atticus Finch, Robinson’s defense attorney, writing an appeal to the appellate court. Based on your understanding of due process guaranteed under the United States Constitution. Write to persuade the reader that Tom Robinson did not receive a fair trial.



Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Imagine that the story ends with Lenny arrested and now in jail awaiting trial for murder. The district attorney believes he is guilty of murder and is seeking the death penalty. Write a persuasive letter to the district attorney explaining why or why not Lenny should be held accountable for the death of another person and what if anything should be done to him in the form of a punishment.



Cry the Beloved Country by Alan Paton

Segregation in the United States and the civil rights movement have at times been compared and contrasted to apartheid in South Africa. Recently you studied the United States civil rights movement and read the book, *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. Write to inform the reader about the similarities and differences between the two countries.

Classroom Idea:

After reading any of these books, have students prepare questions for a local criminal defense attorney, a district attorney or a judge. Talk about the questions as a class, then select 5-10 questions the class would like to ask a lawyer or judge.

Send the questions to the lawyer or judge inviting them to come to your class and talk to your students.

To make your lesson successful it would be helpful to invite the lawyer or judge several weeks in advance – based on when you estimate you will be ready to talk about the book.

Refer to “Effectively Using Judges and Lawyers as Community Resources in Your Classroom” for other tips to help you make arrangements.

The PBA and your county bar association may also be able to help you make contacts with local judges or lawyers to visit your class.

More creative elementary classroom lesson ideas...

- Talk to students about the terms: authority, responsibility, privacy and justice.
- Ask the students what the terms mean to them, how they apply to their lives, who are some authority figures in their lives, what are some of their responsibilities, what does justice mean, what are some things they should keep private, etc.
- Watch the PowerPoint presentation on the PBA Web site that was developed by two first grade classes in the Allentown School District to see and hear what these first graders think each of these words mean. www.pabar.org/lre.asp.
- Make your own PowerPoint project and share it during your Parent/Teacher night or some other school event. This involves parents in the lessons being taught in your classroom, builds support for the concepts at home and shows parents their child's work.
- If you don't have time to do a PowerPoint with sound and narration, include individual or group photos and simple sentences in the children's own words about each of the concepts.
- If you don't have time or access to develop a PowerPoint, take photos of the students and have them write about one of the words and what it means to them. No camera? Have students draw a picture of the concept they chose to write about.
- Then teach your students the "Authority, Responsibility, Privacy, Justice" rap found to the right.
- Try the "Authority, Responsibility, Privacy, Justice Elementary Word Find" on the PBA Web site, www.pabar.org/lre.asp.
- The Center for Civic Education publishes a series of books for Grades K-2 titled, *Orb and Effy Learn about Authority*; *Jessica Fish Learns about Privacy*; *The Zookeeper Learns about Responsibility*; and *Fair Bears Learn about Justice*. A complete lesson on authority from the *Orb and Effy Learn about Authority* book is available on the PBA Web site. In this lesson, children learn that when people have a right to tell others what to do in certain situations, they are exercising authority. When they do not have that right, they are exercising power without authority. Children learn some ways in which people earn the right to exercise authority. The lesson also illustrates problems that are likely to arise in the absence of effective authority. Children learn how and why authority is useful in society. *Reprinted with permission from the Center for Civic Education. Copyright 2006. Center for Civic Education. www.civiced.org.*

Authority, Responsibility, Privacy, Justice Rap

Developed by Mike Keefer
1st grade teacher
Roosevelt Elementary School,
Allentown School District

Listen to a recording of Mike Keefer's first grade class performing this rap.

www.pabar.org/lre.asp - select Celebrate the Constitution

Refrain: Authority, Responsibility,
Privacy, Justice
These are the words that mean so
much to us.

The right to have power is Authority
Parents and teachers use it with you
and me.

Refrain

A responsibility is a duty
Some job you need to do
A responsible person
Is a kind one too!

Refrain

At times we want to be alone
To read or think or play
Privacy is what we need the most
A place to get away.

Refrain

Our last word is Justice
It's always being fair
At home, at school, if we follow the
rules
We'll be welcomed anywhere.

Refrain

We hope they will be important to you
Let's all practice them at (your school
Name) School.