



# We the People ... Project Citizen

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

### *Content*

- local and state government
- U.S. history
- principles of the U.S. Constitution
- civic participation

**We the People ... Project Citizen** is a portfolio-based civics education project for middle grade students in grades 6-9. It focuses on promoting an understanding of the U.S. Constitution as well as responsible participation in state and local government. Project Citizen actively engages students in learning how to monitor and influence public policy, and advocates civic participation of students, their parents, and members of the community. The project is funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

**We the People ... Project Citizen** combines well-developed curriculum materials for students with staff development for teachers to increase students' understanding of the role of state and local governments in the American federal system. Teachers learn to provide a series of structured, cooperative learning activities that help students to interact with their government in a five-step process that includes: (1) identifying a public policy problem in their community; (2) gathering and evaluating information on the problem; (3) examining and evaluating solutions; (4) selecting or developing a proposed public policy; and (5) developing a plan of action. The program has been expanded to allow for the possibility of implementing action plans.

In addition to classroom activities, as a culminating activity, students participate in simulated legislative hearings before a panel of community representatives who act as legislative committee members.

### *Context*

- wide range of state, district, and school settings
- students of diverse abilities, primarily 7th and 8th grade students
- sometimes used as an extracurricular activity

## PROGRAM CONTEXT

Since 1995-96, 1,800 teachers in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., have used Project Citizen. Over 30,000 students have participated in Project Citizen. Most students were in grades 7 and 8. Project Citizen can be adapted for a wide range of student ability levels from special education to gifted classes. It is appropriate for grade levels 6-9. In some cases, Project Citizen is used as an extracurricular program.

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



**A**s We the People ... Project Citizen has matured, the staff development program has grown more consistent. The training is usually conducted by state coordinators who are responsible for distributing materials and providing leadership for statewide use. Most state coordinators are classroom teachers who serve in the capacity of trainer.

**A**n extensive professional development manual includes demonstration lessons that may be used in the training or in classrooms with students. The focus of the training is on (1) understanding the content and structure of We the People ... Project Citizen; (2) assessing student portfolios and oral presentations; (3) using instructional strategies appropriate to the program; and (4) demonstrating and debriefing sample lessons.

**T**raining approaches vary widely, from one-hour presentations to comprehensive and substantive sessions that focus on transforming the classroom into an interactive environment that engages students in “real” issues. Regardless of the type of training, follow-up is essential to ensure implementation and is supported by a network of state leaders and teachers.

**T**he most valuable training for teachers includes a step-by-step review of the Project Citizen materials, examination of student and class portfolios, discussions of ways to integrate Project Citizen into the existing curriculum and classroom, demonstrations of Project Citizen lessons, and hands-on opportunities for teachers to engage in the experience as both teachers and students.

### SUMMARY OF RESULTS

**We the People ...** Project Citizen’s success depends on well-designed materials, curriculum, and staff development to improve student achievement.

#### *Process*

- review of program materials
- analysis of student portfolios
- curriculum redesign
- demonstration lessons
- support from state coordinators

#### *Intended Audience*

- individual volunteer teachers
- entire department or team

## EVIDENCE OF INCREASED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



### *Success Indicators*

- civic involvement
- knowledge of history
- knowledge of principles of the U.S. Constitution

**We the People ... Project Citizen** has been evaluated in a number of studies. In a 1991 evaluation, middle school students who participated in the program scored significantly better ( $p < .01$ ) on a test of knowledge of the history and principles of U. S. Constitution than did students who participated in their regular constitutional instruction program. In 1997-98, the University of Texas, Austin, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs conducted an extensive assessment of **We the People ... Project Citizen**.

Specifically, the assessment revealed that:

1. Students using **Project Citizen** believe they can make a difference in their communities.
2. Students using **Project Citizen** do make a difference in their communities.
3. Students and teachers believe **Project Citizen** helps students develop a greater understanding of public policy and the challenges of policy makers.
4. Students and teachers believe **Project Citizen** helps students learn how their government works and develops commitment to active citizenship and governance.
5. Students and teachers believe **Project Citizen** involves students in their communities and helps students learn about specific community problems.
6. Students and teachers believe **Project Citizen** encourages students to work in groups.
7. Students and teachers believe **Project Citizen** teaches students important communication skills.
8. Students and teachers believe **Project Citizen** teaches students important research skills.
9. Students enjoy **Project Citizen**.

**We the People ... Project Citizen** has improved students' knowledge and understanding of the active citizenship and public policy. While primarily a curriculum project, the staff development program is expanding to facilitate implementation of the content and instructional strategies that engage young adolescents in authentic work within their community. The evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of **Project Citizen** as a program that is developmentally appropriate for middle-level students.

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## SAMPLE SITES



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|---|--|---|
| <p>✓ Avondale Middle School<br/>Maria Kopicki<br/>8th Grade Law Teacher<br/>1445 West Auburn Road<br/>Rochester Hills, MI 48309<br/>phone:248-852-2600<br/>fax:248-852-0593<br/>e-mail:<br/>Maria Kopicki @moa.net<br/>web site:unavailable</p> | <p>✓ John Wood Middle School<br/>Norm Goldberg<br/>Teacher<br/>14800 Judson Road<br/>San Antonio, TX 78233<br/>phone:210-650-1300<br/>fax:210-590-1552<br/>e-mail:unavailable<br/>web site:unavailable</p> | <p>✓ Justice Resource Center<br/>Debra Lesser<br/>122 Amsterdam Avenue<br/>Suite 504<br/>New York, NY 10023<br/>phone:212-580-5905<br/>fax:212-580-5918<br/>e-mail:unavailable<br/>web site:unavailable</p> |
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## DOCUMENTATION

Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. (1998). *An Assessment of We the People ...Project Citizen: Promoting Citizenship in Classrooms and Communities*. The University of Texas at Austin Policy Research Project Report #129.