



We The People: The Citizen and the Constitution Evaluation Brief February 2008

WE THE PEOPLE: THE CITIZEN AND THE CONSTITUTION

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, a curriculum developed and disseminated by the Center for Civic Education, is designed to provide students with an understanding of the history and principles underlying American constitutional government. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education under the Education for Democracy Act approved by the U.S. Congress, the program is taught in all 50 states.

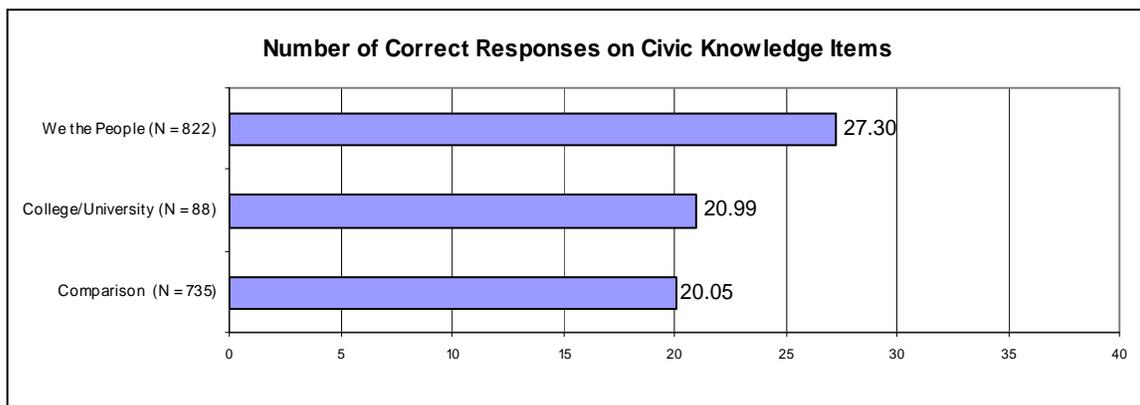
1,557 STUDENTS DRAWN FROM FIVE STATES AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FROM COLORADO

Using a pre/post design, RMC Research examined 822 We the People students from Grades 11 and 12 and compared them to 735 students with similar demographics and achievement levels who did not experience the curriculum. RMC worked with Center for Civic Education’s network of State and District Program Coordinators from Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, New York, and Washington State to identify a pool of We the People teachers who had implemented the program fully at least once prior to 2006–2007. These high school teachers then nominated comparison government teachers from their school or districts who taught similar classes and students using another curriculum. Differences in student outcomes were analyzed using hierarchical ANCOVAs with classrooms nested within treatment conditions (We the People curriculum versus comparison), and differences between groups were controlled for by entering advanced course status and ethnicity as main effects, and using pre-test scores used as covariates. Student groups were effectively equalized through these statistical methods.

RMC staff members recruited political science instructors at two universities in Denver to participate in the study. We the People students’ post-survey scores were compared to a sample of 119 college students from three sections of introductory political science courses.

WE THE PEOPLE STUDENTS OUTPERFORM COMPARISON GROUPS ON POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

We the People participants scored 30% higher overall on a test of constitutional knowledge when compared to their high school peers and 36% higher than university/college students enrolled in introductory political science courses on all study outcomes.



We the People students scored significantly higher than their peers on the following subsections of the test that addressed:

- Constitutional limits on government institutions: *We the People students scored 18% higher than the comparison high school classes.* Questions included topics such as: states' rights, the expansion of congressional power, the limits of free speech, separation of powers, and judicial review.
- Core values and democratic principles: *We the People students scored 11% higher than the comparison high school classes.* Questions included topics such as: natural rights philosophy, federalism, classical republicanism, representative and direct democracy, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution.
- Rights and responsibilities of democratic citizens: *We the People students scored 9% higher than the comparison high school classes.* Questions included topics such as: civic duty, naturalized citizens, constitutional rights, and due process of law.

We the People students scored significantly higher than university/college students enrolled in introductory political science courses on all knowledge tested, including:

- Constitutional limits on government institutions: *We the People students scored 23% higher than university/college students.*
- Core values and democratic principles: *We the People students scored 16% higher than university/college students.*
- Rights and responsibilities of democratic citizens: *We the People students scored 14% higher than university/college students.*
- Knowledge of early American history: *We the People students scored 19% higher than university/college students.* Questions included topics such as: the Revolutionary War, the development of state constitutions, the Articles of Confederation, and the Founding Fathers.
- The relationship of the U.S. to other nations in world affairs: *We the People students scored 17% higher than university/college students.* Questions included topics such as: the U.S. government as precedent, the role of the Department of State, and the United Nations.

WE THE PEOPLE STUDENTS LEARN MORE OF THE CIVIC SKILLS NECESSARY TO BECOME ENGAGED, PARTICIPATORY CITIZENS

We the People students scored significantly higher on civic skills than comparison students.

Civic skills are a necessary part of navigating our democratic society. When asked to rate their civic skills, We the People students scored significantly higher than their peers. Skills students developed included

- learning about problems in our society and what causes them;
- speaking about an issue in front of a group;
- researching sources that give different opinions on a topic;
- critically analyzing news reports and current events;
- logically arguing with and persuading others;
- coming to consensus or agreement with group; and
- working as a team to achieve a common goal.

WE THE PEOPLE TEACHERS ARE MORE CONFIDENT IN THEIR ABILITY TO LEAD DISCUSSIONS OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES AND USE QUALITY TEACHING PRACTICES MORE FREQUENTLY

In contrast to comparison teachers, We the People teachers used quality practices more frequently which may have made them more effective civics instructors.

We the People teachers reported more confidence than nonparticipating teachers in their ability to lead discussions on controversial issues. More than 80% of We the People teachers reported feeling very confident compared to 61% of the comparison teachers. We the People teachers reported using several types of practices more often than comparison teachers, including the following activities.

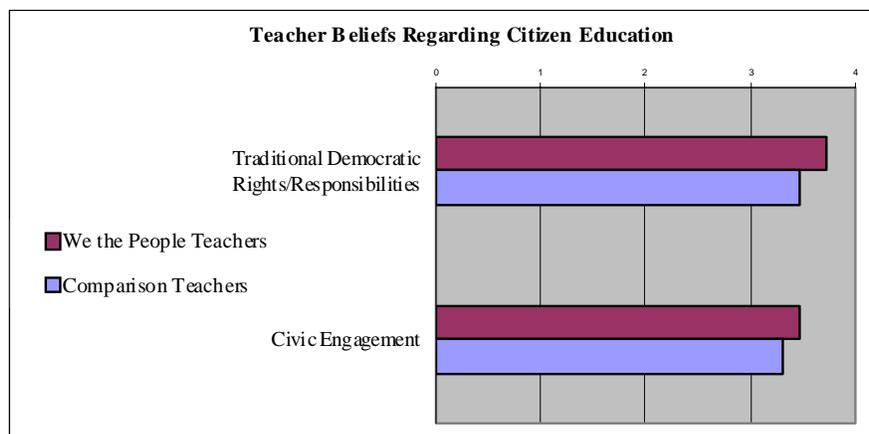
- Directing student participation in simulated hearings of court cases
- Encouraging students to use evidence from textbooks and supplementary materials to support their opinions
- Engaging students in organized debates
- Facilitating student discussion in small groups
- Demonstrating effective research gathering strategies
- Conducting question and answer sessions frequently
- Emphasizing critical analysis of political information in media

Such quality practices engage students' learning on higher levels. Students' responses show they

- believed they will be able to apply what they learned in their future as citizens;
- were encouraged to express their own opinions;
- discussed and analyzed controversial political or social issues;
- frequently worked in groups with students who had differing opinions; and
- learned to appreciate the perspectives of American Founders.

We the People teachers had higher ratings than comparison teachers on two types of beliefs about important citizenship learning: belief in importance of learning traditional democratic rights and responsibilities and belief in the importance of learning civic engagement.

We the People and comparison teachers agreed that each of the citizenship education goals included in the survey was important. Teachers in both groups were most apt to endorse the importance of traditional democratic rights and responsibilities, such as engaging in political discussion and voting in every election. We the People teachers had higher ratings on the scaled measures of traditional democratic rights and responsibilities and civic engagement than comparison teachers. There is a significant, positive association between teaching traditional democratic rights and increases in students' sense of civic responsibility.



We the People teachers provided the opportunity to learn about more topics related to constitutional government than comparison teachers.

Teachers were asked to indicate how much opportunity their students had had to learn about constitutional topics, particularly topics related to the foundations and characteristics of U.S. constitutional government and democratic citizens' rights and responsibilities. We the People teachers provided students with more opportunity to learn about these topics than comparison teachers. Students of We the People teachers had the greatest opportunity to learn about the rights outlined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and the characteristics of constitutional government, but also had considerable to a great deal of opportunity to learn about a number of other constitutional topics, such as natural rights philosophy, the division of powers, the right to equal protection under the law, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression. Comparison teachers' instruction in constitutional government and citizens' rights and responsibilities were characterized by less depth and breadth.

Teacher's report that We the People encourages critical thinking and knowledge application, and enhances reading, writing, research, and presentation skills

The majority of teachers (67%) reported that the program engages students in discussion, participation, and collaboration. They also stated that the program encourages students to think critically and independently, teaches them how to apply their knowledge, and enhances their reading, writing, research, and presentation skills. Teachers also noted that the curriculum taught students about civics, the history of the nation, the political process, and their own rights and responsibilities as citizens.

"This program engages students in civic learning like nothing else can." – Participating Teacher

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Promote and support We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution in mainstream civics education

The positive effects of We the People across a variety of student groups indicate its potential for improving constitutional and civic knowledge and civic skills of all high school students. The Center for Civic Education should work to promote the curriculum in all civics/government and/or constitutional law classes, should adapt materials to meet the needs of diverse students, and should continue to provide professional development to teachers on using the curriculum effectively with all students. The majority of We the People teachers reported having received professional development and curriculum training in institutes sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, which was reflected in their quality instructional practices. Such institutes should be expanded to a broader audience of educators to ensure that the curriculum is available to all students. Please visit www.civiced.org for a copy of the full report.