

**Report on *We the People... The Citizens and the Constitution*
Summer Institutes, 1997-99**

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Executive Summary

The Center for Civic Education developed a survey to send to participants in **We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution** Professional Development Institutes from 1997 to 1999. These weeklong regional summer institutes provide teachers who are interested in the **We the People...** Program an opportunity to receive professional training in effective program implementation. The survey, sent to all 360 participants, was designed to assess the numbers of teachers who went on to implement the program, including the simulated hearings, either competitive or noncompetitive, and to garner feedback on the program from participants. Some teachers were involved in the **We the People...** program before attending the institutes. The surveys returned numbered 236.

Results indicate that the **We the People...** summer institutes are very successful, though certain areas may be improved. Sample successes include:

- Prior to attending the institute, only 27.3% of participants held simulated congressional hearings, while after attending an institute 77% held simulated congressional hearings.
- Participants holding competitive hearings increased 23.1%, and those holding noncompetitive hearings increased 53.8%.
- More than 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the institute was a valuable professional development experience, was intellectually stimulating, and knowledge gained at the institute was useful during the academic year.

The following findings represent possible areas for consideration:

- Lack of time was the obstacle most often mentioned to implementing the entire **We the People...** Program. It would be beneficial to address strategies for efficiently teaching each unit and for preparation of hearings.
- Many participants indicated that it would be highly beneficial to give teachers experienced with the program more of a role in the institutes. For example, they suggested having these teachers provide samples of their own program syllabi.

- Of the six units in the *We the People...* text, units 5 and 6 proved the most difficult for participants to implement in the classroom.
- 57.3% of survey respondents reported that their congressional district coordinator contacted them after the institute; 67.9% were contacted by their state coordinator. Participants who conducted competitive congressional hearings after the institute were also more likely to have had contact from their state coordinators. Additionally, from participants' written comments, those who heard from their coordinators, especially when contacted by phone, were appreciative. Consequently, coordinator contact represents a fairly easy area in which to make effective improvements.
- In participants' written feedback, many elementary and middle school teachers indicated that the institute would have been more useful if sessions were devoted specifically to their grade levels. Additionally, teachers who work with students of lower academic levels felt that their specific needs were not adequately addressed during the institutes.

Introduction

The **We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution** program, administered by the Center for Civic Education, is an instructional program on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy for elementary, middle, and high school

students. The program is based on curricular materials developed by the Center and acclaimed by leading educators. Both competitive and noncompetitive simulated congressional hearings, structured to test students' knowledge of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, are built into the curriculum. During the past 12 years, more than 82,000 teachers have taught approximately 26,500,000 students the *We the People...* curricula. Recognizing the importance of professional development, as well as the relative lack of training in teaching U.S. government at the level required for the **We the People...** Program, the Center holds five regional Professional Development Institutes designed to train teachers in use of the program. Elementary, middle, and high school teachers, along with experienced teacher mentors, receive lectures on theory and methodology for using the program in their classrooms. These institutes were held at different universities from 1997 to 1999:

- Western Region Summer Institute, Pepperdine University, UCLA
- Central Region Summer Institute, Indiana University
- Mountain/Plains Region Summer Institute, University of Colorado¹
- Southeast Region Summer Institute, Florida State University
- Northeast Region Summer Institute, Harvard University, Boston College

Purpose of Survey and Sampling

In December 1999, the Center sent surveys to all 360 participants in the summer regional institutes held during the previous three years (1997-1999). The survey consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. It was designed to obtain feedback

¹ The Mountains/Plains and Southeastern institutes have been administered since 1998.

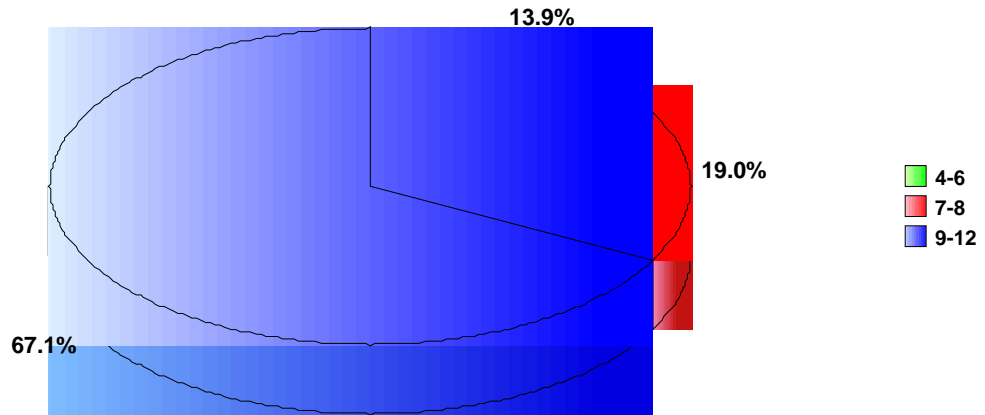
on the efficacy of the institutes, as well as to determine how many teachers went on to use the program, including competitive or noncompetitive hearings, in their classrooms. Of the 360 surveys sent, 236 people participated in the survey.

Background Information on Summer Institute Participants

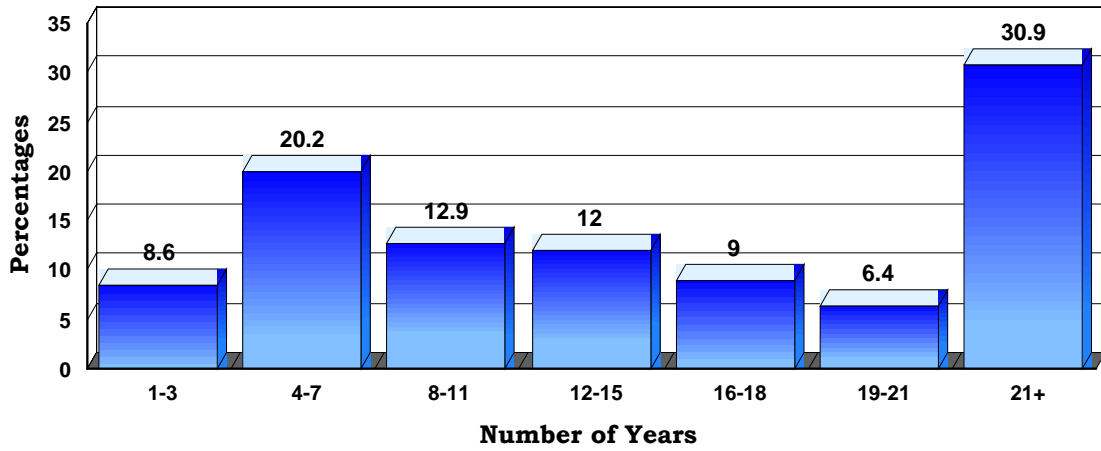
About half of all institute participants attended the Western or Central Region institutes. The Northeast Region, Mountain/Plains Region, and Southeast Region claimed attendees in that order. The number of survey respondents reflected the number of various institute participants. Though the majority of survey respondents reported attending just one institute, slightly more than 10% reported attending more than one summer institute in the past three years. Additionally, 11.4% of respondents reported that they attended at least one of the institutes as a mentor. The majority of respondents (67.1%) report teaching high school students (grades 9-12). Next are middle school teachers (19.0%) and upper elementary teachers (13.9%).² Interestingly, summer institute attendees tend to be highly experienced teachers—more than 30% of survey respondents have been teaching at least twenty-one years, and only 8.6% have been teaching three or fewer years. Across institutes, there was little variation in grade level taught or years of teaching experience.

² Valid percent (VP) is predominantly used throughout this report when referring to percentages. This choice was made because, for any given question, not all survey respondents answered the question. Valid percent, therefore, takes the percentage based on the number of respondents actually answering the question rather than the total number of survey respondents.

Grade Levels Taught by Participants

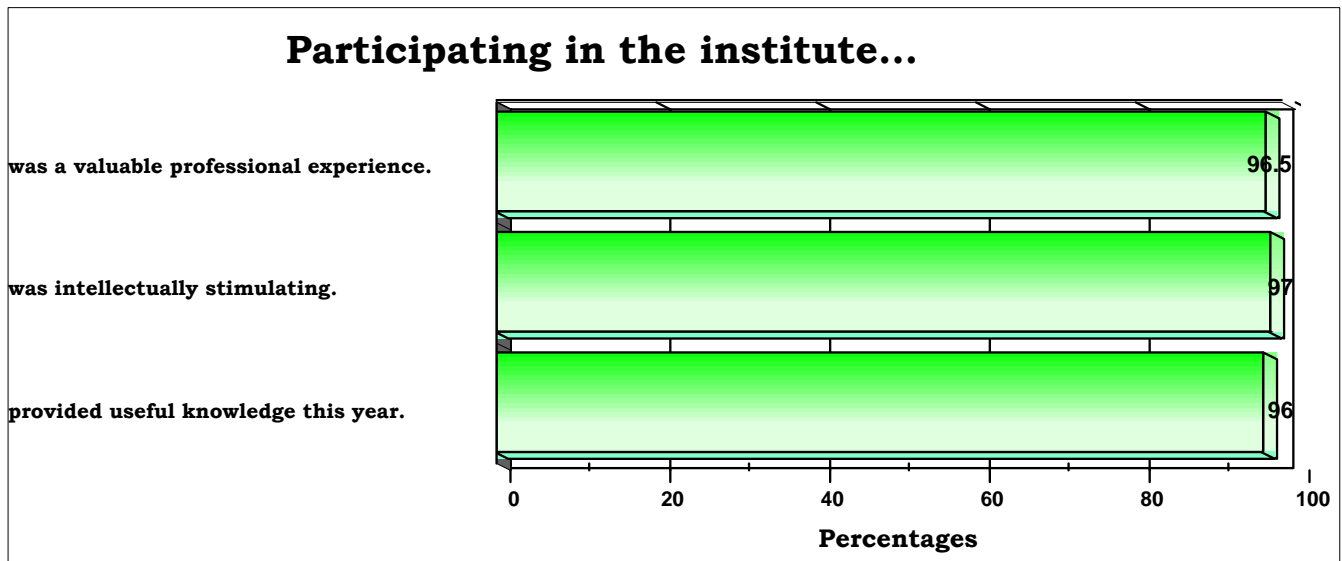


Years of Teaching Experience



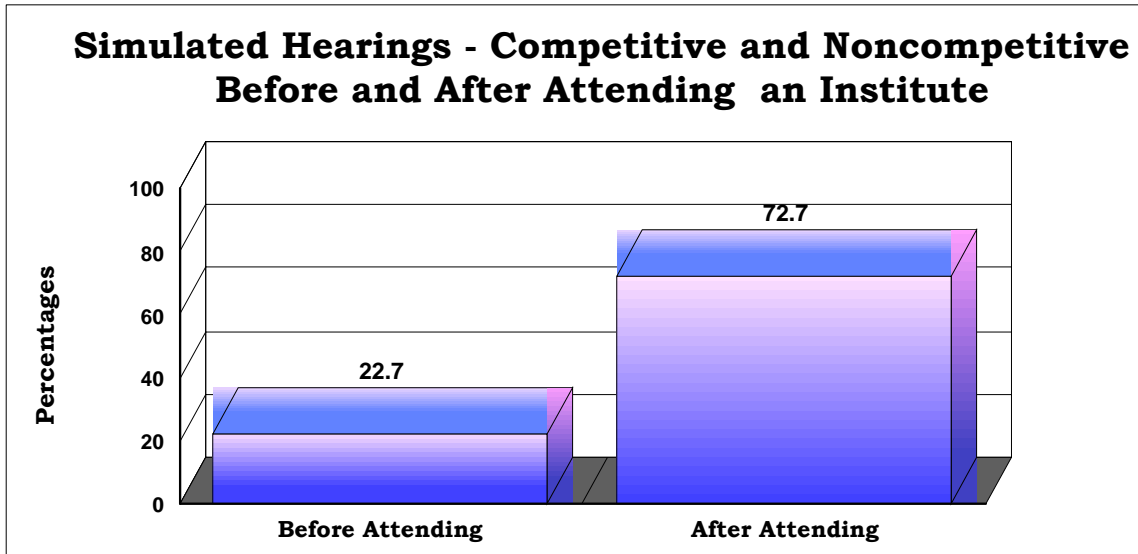
Effectiveness of the Institutes

Participants find the summer institutes interesting, rewarding, and valuable. Virtually every survey respondent agreed or strongly agreed that the institute was not only a valuable professional development experience, but also intellectually stimulating, and were able to use knowledge gained at the institute during the school year.

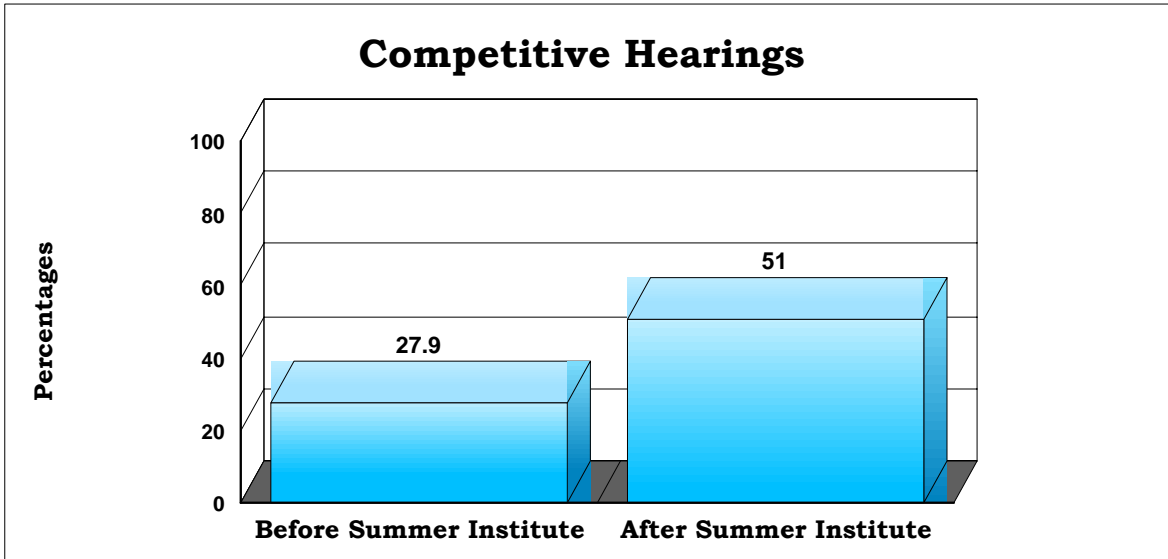
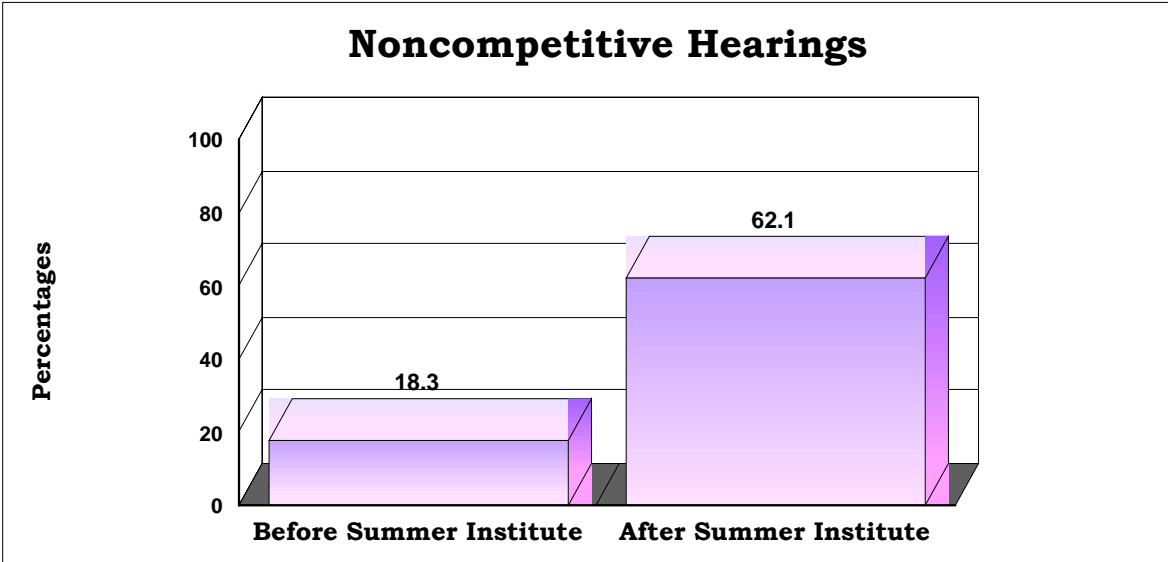


Furthermore, a quarter of all respondents report that they earned graduate credit at the institute. Less than half of all respondents use the *We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution* as their main text, with the majority, 56.5%, using it as a supplemental text.

The institutes are also very inspiring for participants. For example, prior to attending an institute less than one-fourth of participants had held a simulated congressional hearing. After attending the institute nearly three-fourths of participants reported holding competitive or noncompetitive hearings.



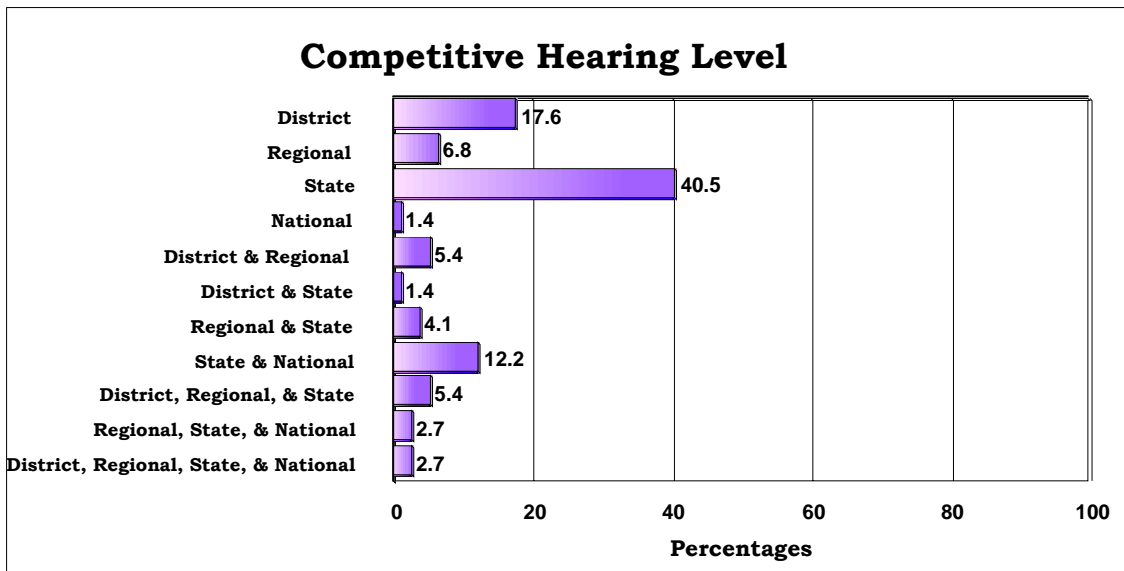
Of survey respondents, 18.3% reported holding noncompetitive hearings before the institute. After attending the institute, 62.1% reported holding a noncompetitive hearing. Likewise, only 27.9% of respondents held a competitive hearing before the institute, but 51.0% reported holding a competitive hearing after the institute.



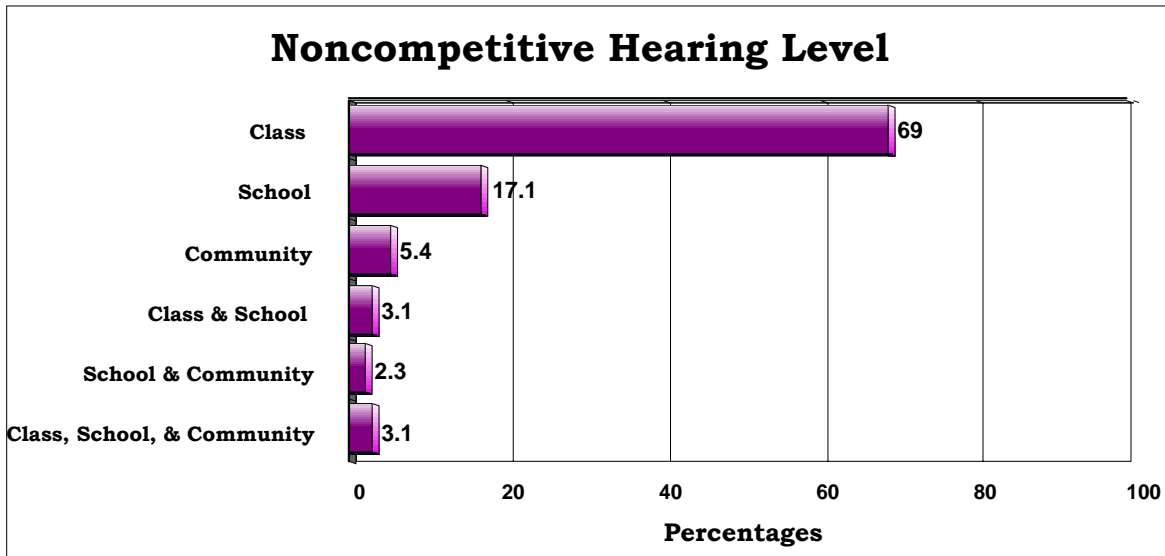
Several factors contributed to participants holding a competitive hearing after the institute. For example, those who used *We the People...* as a main text, had held a competitive hearing before the institute, taught secondary school, and who had contact with their state coordinator were significantly more likely to hold a competitive hearing

after the institute. Those who participated in the Central Region Summer Institute held in Indiana were also more likely to hold a competitive hearing than other regional institute attendees.

Of those participating in competitive hearings, 17.6% participated at the district level only, 6.8% participated at the regional level, and 40.5% participated at the state level. The numbers are not always progressive because some states do not hold competitions at all three levels.



Of those conducting noncompetitive simulated hearings, the vast majority, 69.0%, held them only at the class level, while another 17.1% held them only at the school level. Slightly more than 5% of respondents who held noncompetitive hearings reported that they held them only at the community level. Relatively few participants reported participating in noncompetitive hearings at more than one level.



Reflecting on the various components of the institute, the majority of survey respondents found all aspects of the institute (orientation, lectures and discussions, breakout sessions, and the simulated congressional hearing) very valuable. However, they found the lectures and discussions of particular importance, with 87% reporting them to be very valuable, while the simulated congressional hearing was very valuable to 72.9%, 59.8% found the breakout sessions very valuable, and the orientation was very valuable to 48.7% of survey respondents. In written feedback, one teacher, **Gary J. Hopper**, remarked that the institute in general was a “very valuable use of my time—one of the best run organizations I have been affiliated with.” Twenty-three others echoed his opinion.

Regarding the institutes’ simulated congressional hearing, many commented that participating in the institute proved to be very helpful, but also quite stressful. Some stated that they gained empathy for their students’ intense experiences with the hearings

while others disliked adding a competitive nature to the institute. However, many felt that the value of the institute-run hearing comes in its participatory nature—as **Sandranel Bahan** remarked, “Its all Greek till you actually *do* it.”

Some elementary and middle school teachers commented that many parts of the institute seemed geared primarily to high school teachers. Their needs, therefore, were not adequately met. For instance, **Marc Cadin** commented that though he thoroughly enjoyed the guest speakers, “The middle school sessions were mostly lectures and they were very boring.”

The breakout sessions provided an opportunity to discuss teaching strategies with veteran teachers. Many participants felt that the teachers who had prior experience using *We the People...The Citizen and the Constitution* were particularly helpful in imparting teaching strategies. They expressed an interest in giving these teachers an increased role throughout the institute.

Teachers’ Obstacles to Implementing the We the People... Program

Teachers’ comments reflect that perhaps the greatest obstacle they face in implementing the entire **We the People...** Program in their class curriculum is lack of time. Not only does the program itself require a large commitment, but preparing for the competitive nature of the hearing is enormously time consuming. Furthermore, often the **We the People...** Program does not match with the established criteria for state testing, which means that *We the People...* must be taught as a supplementary text. Additionally, some teachers commented that the timing of the state competition in their state comes too early, prohibiting them from successfully competing in the simulated congressional

hearings. For example, **Brian Johnson of Oregon** noted that their state competition comes quite early in the school year and consequently, the "...students must be finished with the entire text in 3 ½ months. ...It's too much in too short a period of time." Furthermore, for those who do not teach U.S. government until the spring semester, or who only teach government for one semester, are unable to participate in regional or state competitions.

A few teachers said that the video was a good tool to motivate their students to want to compete and suggested that a dynamic video of past competitions be made available to all teachers to share with their classes. Lack of resources was cited as an obstacle to participating in congressional hearings. One teacher, **Katherin M. Sniffin**, who was committed to holding a noncompetitive hearing, found that she had no funding. She therefore had to shoulder all expenses herself, such as postage, gifts, and refreshments for the judges.

Some competitive teams also have difficulty funding travel expenses. **John Cazares** of Texas notes that it cost his class \$6,000 to travel from El Paso to their state championship competition in Austin, but because of the timing of the program, they only had a month to raise the money. A few teachers commented that **We the People...** is difficult to implement in elementary classrooms, as it often needs to be modified to make it age appropriate. Some participants, representing all teaching levels, commented that the questions are quite challenging and geared towards high-achieving students, and are too advanced for their classes. A final obstacle is that many administrations fail to cooperate with or support teachers who choose to implement **We the People...** rather than pre-approved district curricula.

Participants' Suggestions for Improving *We the People...* Implementation

Though many teachers found obstacles to implementation of the program, they also were quite helpful in providing suggestions for the Center to help overcome some of these obstacles. Many wished for more contact from the Center immediately following the institute to help them with some of the more practical aspects of implementation. This was especially true for elementary and middle school teachers who felt some confusion as to how to proceed for their student levels. **Joyce Moore** even recommended generating a list of elementary schools participating in hearings so that teachers could contact one another. Many, like **Stephanie Galloway**, wrote that it would help teachers new to the **We the People...** Program if experienced teachers were sent, after the institute, to help them share ideas and insights for effective implementation. Others expressed a wish for ongoing training and support during the entire program implementation. Providing a video tape of past successful class competitions that teachers could show their students as a explanatory and motivating tool was another suggestion. **Richard Parsons** would like the district coordinator to talk with each participating class before the hearings to fully explain the process. Many teachers simply wrote that they need more money to implement the program and compete in the hearings, or at least need effective strategies to raise funds. Finally, it was suggested that if Center staff would personally contact unsupportive administrations they would be more likely to support participation.

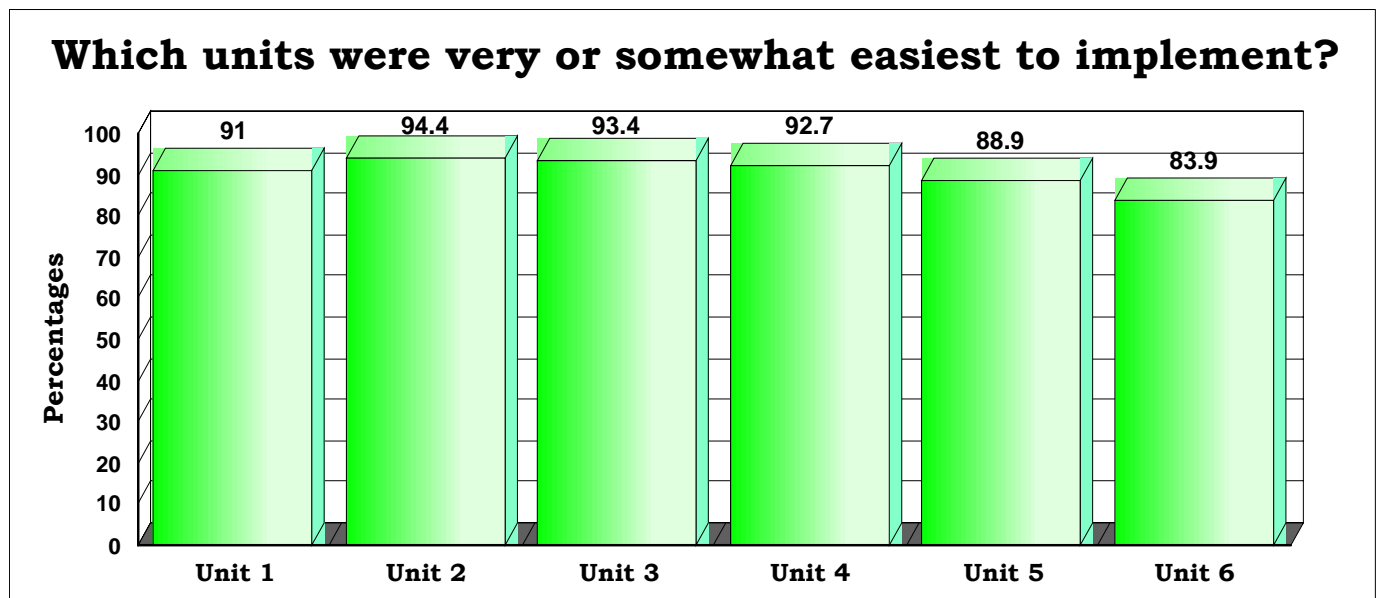
Coordinator Contact with Participants after the Institutes

The majority of teachers, 57.3%, reported that their congressional district coordinator contacted them after the summer institute. However, coordinators employ different methods for contacting institute participants—some write letters, others call, and still others do both. From the teachers' comments, many seemed to especially appreciate a phone call from their district coordinator. Perhaps the Center could encourage all district coordinators to follow a standard procedure for contacting institute participants, such as sending a letter first and following up with a phone call. Many teachers were also highly appreciative of district coordinators who helped find judges for school-based competitions. Unfortunately, some teachers commented that they never heard from their district coordinator and did not even know his or her name. Those who were contacted seemed particularly pleased with the coordinator's willingness to help. Consequently, encouraging district coordinators to follow a standard protocol for contacting participating teachers after a summer institute is all the more important.

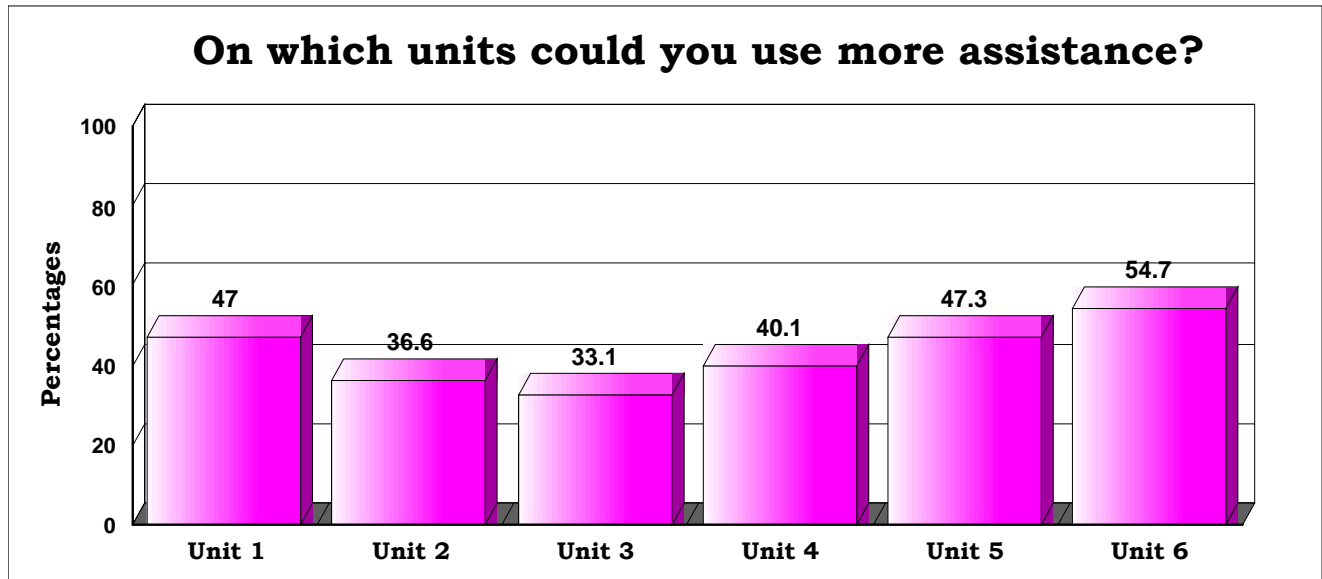
Many state coordinators also contacted participants after the institute, 67.9%. The most helpful coordinators mailed materials, telephoned, offered strategy sessions and workshops with other teachers and mentors, asked for feedback on the institute, and kept participants informed about hearings and other opportunities associated with the **We the People...Program**. Those who held competitive hearings after the institute were more likely to have had contact with their state coordinators than other participants. As with the teachers' response to district coordinators, state coordinators who contacted teachers and made an effort to help were especially appreciated. Their attention may even help prompt participants to hold competitive hearings.

Participants' Feedback on Unit Implementation and Teaching Strategies

For the most part, teachers found the units of the *We the People...* text easy to implement in their classes after they had attended the institute. For example, for each of the units 1 through 4, over 90% of those who responded said that the units were somewhat or very easy to implement. Units 5 and 6 were comparatively more difficult to implement, with only 88.9% and 83.9%, respectively, rating them somewhat or very easy.



While teachers were able to implement the units, they still indicated that they would like more assistance on some units.



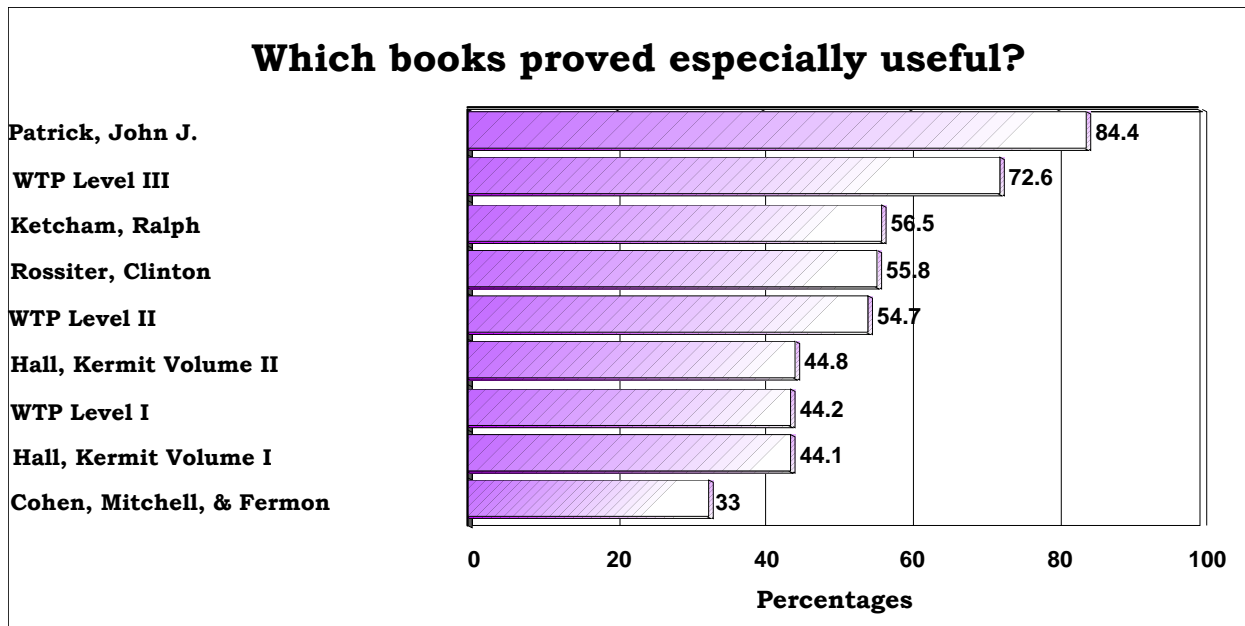
More teachers would like more assistance with units 1, 5, and 6: 54.7% of respondents wanted more assistance with unit 6, 47.3% wanted more assistance with unit 5, and 47.0% requested more assistance with unit 1. Fewer years of teaching experience is correlated with needing additional assistance with units 1 and 2. Those who held competitive hearings after the institute were significantly more likely to want additional assistance implementing all units. They would appreciate more time focussed on units 1 and 6 (“The Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System” and “The Roles of the Citizen in a Democracy”), than participants who did not hold a competitive hearing. Units 2 and 3 seem to be the easiest for all participants to implement and thus the smallest percentage of teachers seek assistance implementing these.

Although respondents' feedback on the effectiveness of the strategies taught at the summer institutes rated them as effective, quite a number of participants commented that this area might be improved if experienced teachers took on a greater role. This might be accomplished by having them provide sample syllabi, and by spending more time discussing how each lesson should be taught while going through the teacher guide. **Betty Burtram** suggested, and nine others mirrored her comments, "Instead of having participants create lesson plans, give teachers lesson plans created by the most successful teachers in the program. Use the early afternoon session to model or practice the plans."

Many wished that more emphasis was placed on teaching strategies for elementary and middle school teachers, and fifteen people commented that more separate groupings of elementary, middle, and high school teachers would have been beneficial. For instance, Bonnie Busco wrote that, "Materials should be presented on different levels—one each for high school, junior high, and elementary school—so that it can be brought back to each school according to the level being taught. I was representing K-6 and there were very few applicable experiences that applied to my level."

Usefulness of Books Provided at the Institutes

A number of books were given to participants of the summer institutes, and survey respondents were asked to comment the usefulness of each book. Of all the books distributed, the largest number of teachers (N=178/211; VP=84.4) found John J. Patrick's edited volume *The Young Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court of the United States* extremely useful.



However, of those who held competitive hearings after the institute, the two volume set on the *Major Problems in American Constitutional History*, by Kermit L. Hall, was regarded as the most valuable. The Center’s *We the People... Level III* was also praised, with 72.6% (N=143/197) of respondents rating it extremely useful. While significantly fewer numbers of teachers found the Center’s *Level I* and *Level II* books extremely useful (VP=44.2 and 54.7, respectively), this is more likely to be due to teachers’ grade level than to actual problems with the texts themselves. It should be noted that of the nine books given to participants, none were voted by a majority to be not very or not at all useful. For example, fewer people rated Cohen and Fermon’s *Princeton Readings in Political Thought* as extremely useful than any other book. However, roughly one third of all respondents still rated this collection as extremely useful.

Conclusion

The vast majority of summer institute participants who returned the Center's survey found their institute experience highly beneficial professionally as well as intellectually stimulating. However, the survey responses indicate that there are areas where the summer institutes may be improved. For example, though the majority of participants found the institutes' simulated congressional hearing very valuable, many also commented that they disliked its intensity and stressfulness, and wished that less time was spent preparing for the hearing and more time was spent on lectures and discussion of teaching strategies.

While the institutes are very effective in inspiring participants to hold either competitive or noncompetitive simulated congressional hearings, survey results still indicate that the majority of respondents use *We the People...* only as a supplemental text.

Obstacles to fully implementing the program in participants' classes included:

- lack of time required for successful implementation;
- failure of the program to entirely correspond with state guidelines for testing;
- lack of funding to compete or hold noncompetitive hearings;
- reluctance of school administrators to support teachers' use of the program

Consequently, implementation might be improved in several ways. Some suggestions from participants included:

- Increase contact following the institute from district and state coordinators as well as from experienced teacher mentors. Those with program experience can help participants organize their lessons for increased efficiency in time as well as provide suggestions for coordinating **We the People...** materials with state

mandated curriculums. Contact with participants should not be limited to the period immediately following the institute, but should continue throughout the academic year.

- Provide fund-raising tips for hearing expenses or class travel either at the summer institutes or with the district or state coordinator later in the school year.
- The Center should contact school administrators of participating teachers to provide information on **We the People...** in an effort to encourage their support.
- Provide teachers with sample syllabi from experienced teachers of all grade and student ability levels to help teachers new to the program develop ideas about effective implementation. Additionally, send participants a video of past successful teams competing in the simulated congressional hearings. This tape could be shown to students as a motivating tool and to help explain the program.

Some participants who teach elementary and middle school students expressed concern that the institute was geared more for high school teachers than for those who teach other grades. Consequently, they asked for more teacher mentors representing lower grade levels and more breakout sessions and other activities during the institutes. In addition, they wished for more support after the institute to fully implement the program. Teachers of these grade levels suggested that they would be more inclined to fully implement the program if they received a list of other elementary and middle school teachers using the program with whom they could correspond. Additionally, they asked for more contact with experienced teachers after the institute.

The **We the People...** Program was criticized for being too advanced for lower achieving students. Thus, teachers of these students were not sure how to effectively alter the program materials. Therefore, the Center might consider offering one or two alternate sessions during the institute that would specifically address the needs of these teachers.

Regarding the text, participants expressed the most difficulty implementing units 5 and 6. Thus, participants might benefit from additional institute instruction in these units. Additionally, it should be reiterated that participants found all the books distributed at the summer institute valuable to their implementation of the program.

In conclusion, the **We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution** Professional Development Institutes are very successful. They provide an opportunity for participants to learn more about teaching U.S. government and the **We the People...** Program and its implementation. They also serve to inspire teachers to use the program. However, there are areas, as detailed above, where the institutes may be improved to ensure even greater implementation of the program.