Creating a Classroom Constitution

Teacher's Guide: Lesson 1

OVERVIEW
Students will learn the importance of government and laws in their daily lives as they examine the consequences of the absence of laws. Students will work together to create a classroom constitution that represents the values of the class as a whole and can be used throughout the school year.

PLANNING
Time Suggested
Two 45-minute class periods

Materials
- Student Handout 1: Governments and Constitutions
- Copies of the United States Constitution (located in student textbook)
- Student Handout 2: Writing a Classroom Constitution
- Butcher paper and markers

Group Size
Organize students into groups of 3 to 5 students each.

OBJECTIVES
- Students will understand the role of law in society.
- Students will examine the organization and elements of the U.S. Constitution.
- Students will play an active role in determining guidelines for classroom conduct.
- Students will participate in the political process by engaging in debate, learning to compromise, and ratifying their classroom guidelines.

PROCEDURE
1. Focus Activity Write these labels on the board: Shopping at a Mall; Driving on Streets and Highways; Attending a Football Game; and Sitting in Your Home. Ask students to think about laws and rules that are followed in each of these cases. To stimulate discussion, ask questions such as, “Can you take anything you want from a store at the mall?” “Could someone keep you from attending the game because of the color of your hair?” “Can your neighbors play loud music outside your window all night?” Each group should discuss the laws that are followed in various places. Then they should discuss what life would be like with no laws. Help students understand that the absence of laws often results in disorder and that a government makes laws and keeps order.

2. Distribute copies of Student Handout 1: Governments and Constitutions. Have student groups discuss and debate the questions in Part One: The Nature of Government. Groups should come to a consensus on their answers to these questions. When groups have completed the questions, engage the class in a discussion of their answers. Answers to Part
Creating a Classroom Constitution, continued

Civic Participation

One is in the answer key. Be sure to help students understand the importance of governments and constitutions in establishing law and order.

3. Next explain that students will be creating a classroom constitution. Have each group review the U.S. Constitution (available in the student textbook). Explain that the Constitution states the basic laws of the United States government. Ask students to locate the preamble, the articles, and the amendments. Ask students to look through the Constitution to answer the questions in Part Two: The Constitution. After students answer the questions, lead a class discussion of the answers. Answers to Part Two are in the answer key.

4. Distribute copies of Student Handout 2: A Classroom Constitution. Explain that the class will write a classroom constitution that the class will follow for the remainder of the year. Start with a preamble. Ask groups to identify the elements that make up the preamble of the U.S. Constitution. Help students see that the preamble establishes the purpose of the Constitution ("to establish justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence"). Have each group write a rough draft of a preamble for the classroom constitution. Call on each group to share their ideas as you write them for the class to see. Using the list of ideas, help the class reach consensus on a final version of their preamble. Students can debate points they feel strongly about. Ask a student to write the final draft on a large piece of butcher paper.

5. Repeat the process to have each group write rules to be included in a classroom constitution. Each group should review the bulleted items on the handout and develop a set of three to four rules. If students need help getting started, state the following rule (or one of your own) as an example: "All students have the right to a peaceful and supportive learning environment." Ask each group to present their proposed rules to the class. After all groups have presented, lead the class in a discussion of each proposed rule. Encourage the students to seek compromise if there are rules on which they cannot agree. Finally conduct a class vote to "ratify" the constitution. A two-thirds majority can be used to accept the constitution. Have students write the final draft on butcher paper for all to see. Students may even sign the constitution they created.

ENRICHMENT

Have students call the mayor's office in your town and ask how local laws are made. Encourage students to interview local lawmakers to find out what laws are currently under consideration. Conduct a class discussion of the pros and cons of these laws.

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PART ONE: THE NATURE OF GOVERNMENT
Discuss each of the following questions as a group and come to an answer agreeable to all.

1. Why is government necessary?

2. What responsibilities does a government have to its citizens?

3. What responsibilities do citizens have to their government?

4. Why are laws important?

5. What problems might arise if a government had no constitution?

PART TWO: THE CONSTITUTION
As your group examines the U.S. Constitution, answer the following questions.

6. What are some of the topics of the seven articles of the Constitution?

7. What is the Bill of Rights? What is the purpose of the Bill of Rights?

8. What basic rights are granted to citizens in the Bill of Rights?
Writing a Classroom Constitution

Today you and your classmates will help your teacher create a classroom constitution. It should help guide the students' and teacher's conduct and expectations in the classroom.

The Preamble Many constitutions begin with a brief preamble, or introduction, that states the purpose and goals of the document. Use the following preamble as a model of what to include in your own preamble.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

—Preamble to the United States Constitution

With your group, develop a preamble to your classroom constitution. Be sure to include major goals you hope to promote in the constitution. We, the Students of

The Constitution Your classroom constitution will be made up of "laws" to promote order so that your class functions smoothly. With your group, develop a list of three or four rules that you would like to see included in the classroom constitution. Be sure to consider the following when creating your list:

- rights and responsibilities of students
- rights and responsibilities of teacher
- how rights and responsibilities will be enforced
- rules for maintaining order among students