

We the People Curriculum: Results of Pilot Test

A report to the Center for Civic Education

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July 2004

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Civic Education in the United States

In the United States, civic educators are debating the need to mandate the inclusion of civic education in high school curriculum. The renewed interest in civic education stems from a decline in the political involvement of youth over the previous two decades: only about one-third of young people aged 18–29 voted in the 2000 presidential election, compared with one-half that did so in the 1970s.¹ Surveys and behavioral studies conducted over the past few years routinely found high levels of apathy, low rates of voter turnout, a loss of confidence in governmental institutions, and poor showings on history and civics tests.² On the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment, only 26 percent of a nationally representative sample of twelfth-graders scored at the proficient level or higher.³

The decline of political engagement among youth has sparked an increase in research on civic education. During the past 10 years, researchers have conducted numerous school-based studies of civic education to assess the role of civic education classes and their effect on students. Although these studies yielded some interesting findings, many had methodological limitations, making generalizations based upon the studies problematic. Limitations include: small sample size; no random assignment or representative sample of classrooms or students; exclusion of attitudinal measures; and the inability to track students from pre-test to post-test.⁴

Because of these limitations, further research into whether civic education can increase political interest and participation in young people is needed. However, information on civic education in general is only one aspect of the research needed. The What Works Clearinghouse at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in the U.S. Department of Education has begun to focus on identifying specific curricula that can improve the quality of education in the United States. IES encourages studies that include experimental or high-quality quasi-experimental design because studies with methodological rigor provide the best opportunity to determine what works in education.

Experimental and high-quality quasi-experimental studies require extensive resources; before conducting such studies, researchers gather as much information as possible about the potential impact of an intervention or curriculum. By conducting a pilot study in which a small number of students

are exposed to an intervention, researchers can measure the effectiveness of their instruments, such as surveys or assessments, and gauge the relative impacts on treatment and comparison groups. This information helps ensure that the full-scale study is conducted with the utmost efficiency and rigor, as well as guarantee effective use of resources. This report describes the result of a pilot test for one curriculum, *We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution*.

The Curriculum

We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution is published by the Center for Civic Education, located in Calabasas, California. It is a program that teaches students about American constitutional democracy, with the primary goal of promoting civic competence and responsibility among the nation's elementary, middle, and secondary students. Funded by Congress, the program is taught in all 50 states.



The instructional program is intended to enhance students' understanding of the institutions of American constitutional democracy and to reinforce the contemporary relevance of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The culminating activity is a simulated congressional hearing in which students "testify" before a panel of judges. Students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles and evaluate, take, and defend positions on relevant historical and contemporary issues.

Since the inception of the *We the People* program in 1987, more than 26 million students and 82,000 educators have participated in the program. *We the People* enjoys the active participation of members of Congress, as well as support from professional, business, and community organizations across the nation.

Background of Study

In January 2003, the Center for Civic Education contracted with MPR Associates, Inc. to evaluate the *We the People* civic education curriculum. The evaluation included an assessment of student knowledge of civics and understanding of democratic principles and practices, as well as a measure of change in student attitudes towards civic and political participation. In Fall 2003, MPR conducted a pilot test of the knowledge assessment and survey instruments. This report presents the findings and results of that pilot study.

The Pilot Test

The pilot test had two components:

- A survey of student attitudes towards civic and political participation. This survey was administered at the beginning and again at the end of the course.
- An assessment of student knowledge about U.S. government and political history. The knowledge assessment was administered at the end of the course.

Students who took courses using the *We the People* curriculum were compared with students who took courses using other civics curricula.

The Survey: Design and Validity

The survey of student attitudes towards civic and political participation was designed by MPR Associates, Inc. in collaboration with Dr. Richard Niemi at the University of Rochester and Dr. Elizabeth Theiss-Morse at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln, both eminent scholars of political attitudes and beliefs. The survey consisted of 85 questions and measured the extent to which students engaged in various types of political participation and their attitudes towards government and citizens' responsibilities.

The survey drew on previous attitude surveys that have been successful with high school students and that were found to be statistically valid and reliable. In addition, the survey underwent scrutiny by a focus group of high school seniors before being pilot-tested in Fall 2003.

The survey was constructed around a series of questions, called "item banks," that gauge student attitudes or feelings towards a single concept about politics and the community. Answers for each item within the item bank were then aggregated to a single "score" for each student for that item bank. In some cases, certain items were not included in the total item bank score. In general, an item was eliminated when it did not fit, or "scale" well with the other items in the bank. In the description of each category below, items not included in the total score are indicated. The categories of questions asked on the survey included:

Attention to politics. Do students pay attention to politics on television or radio, in the newspaper or news magazines, or on the Internet? Do they discuss politics with friends or family?

Use of information. Do students analyze public policies, draw information from multiple sources, listen to opinions of others, and follow current events, both in and outside of class?

Political participation. Have students worked for a political party or candidate, worn a button or displayed a bumper sticker, contacted a public official or the media about a political issue or cause, participated in a peaceful demonstration or protest, or boycotted or "buy-cotted" products?

Political efficacy. Do students feel that they could make a difference in the decisions made by the government? Did they feel qualified to participate in or to lead political bodies? Do they feel well informed about politics?

Assessment of governments' impact on their lives. Do students believe that federal, state, or local governments have a lot, some, a little, or no impact on their own lives?

Evaluation of government. How do students describe their feelings (negative or positive) towards the U.S. Presidency as an institution, the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the U.S. Constitution?

Appreciation of democracy. What do students believe about representative government, deliberation in the legislature, the use of experts to resolve issues, and the potential benefits or problems associated with direct democracy?

Citizens' responsibilities. How important do students feel it is to vote, attend community meetings, work on campaigns, join a political group, or protest peacefully against laws they think unjust?

Citizens' obligations. How essential it is to students to serve in the U.S. military (not included in factor score), give money to charities, pay taxes, obey laws, help when there is a disaster in the community, volunteer, or work hard at their jobs?

Political tolerance. Do students believe that members of a group they disliked should be allowed to run for public office, teach in public schools, make public speeches, hold peaceful public rallies, have their phones tapped by the government, or be outlawed?

Tolerance of ambiguity. Do students avoid looking at problems from multiple perspectives or at problems without one "best" solution? Do they enjoy tackling complex problems where the solution is not clear? Do they find complex problems interesting?

Community responsibility. How important is it for students to be active in public affairs, well-off financially (not included in factor score), become a community leader, help others who are in difficulty, or contribute to the public good?

At the conclusion of the course, students were also asked if they enjoyed the course, if they thought it made them more or less interested in politics and current events, and if they thought it made them more or less likely to participate in politics in the future.

The results of the pilot test indicate that the attitudinal survey was very reliable and that the item banks were successful in measuring student attitudes in a consistent and cumulative fashion. Full results of the item bank reliability analyses are presented at the end of this report.

Student responses to each of the items within a group were summed to reach an overall score for each student in each category. Scores were calculated for

each student on the survey at the beginning and again at the end of the term. A comparison between the pre-test and post-test survey scores was the basis for the statistical analyses.

The Test: Design and Validity

WestEd, a leading publisher of educational assessments, designed an assessment of student knowledge about politics and U.S. government. WestEd assembled a team of civics and government teachers and other experts in civic education who wrote, revised, and discussed a large number of potential items for the test. Eventually an item bank of more than 100 items was developed. The resulting assessment was used to measure student knowledge during this pilot test phase.

The knowledge assessment included many central concepts of the five content areas assessed by the National Center for Education Statistics as part of their National Assessment of Educational Progress. They included the following:

- Civic life, politics and government:
 - Classical liberalism, and classical republicanism;
 - Personal, political, and economic rights; and
 - Evolution of ideas: individual rights, constitutionalism, secular government, and representative government.

- The foundations of the American political system:
 - Classical liberalism: political equality, unalienable rights, government’s role in the protection of those rights, popular sovereignty, and the right to revolution; and
 - Classical republicanism: civic virtue, the common good, representative government, and moral education.

- The U.S. Constitution and its effects on the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy:
 - Framing the Constitution: issues, compromises, and the ratification process;
 - How the system is designed and works: institutions, processes, and locus of sovereignty;
 - Historical foundations of the Constitution: underlying values and principles, understanding of classical political history, (including Greek and Roman history, the British and colonial experience, and experience with state constitutions);
 - Development and expansion of rights: British and colonial antecedents, constitutional rights to freedom of belief, freedom of expression, due process of law, and equal protection; and
 - Statutory rights and court decisions, scope and limits of rights,

the incorporation of the 14th amendment, and the role of citizens in the expansion of rights.

- The relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs:
 - Comparative political systems: confederal, federal, parliamentary, and legal (both adversarial and inquisitorial); and
 - International political arrangements: the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- The roles of citizens in American democracy:
 - Personal and civic responsibility (obedience to laws, civic participation, jury service, military service, voting, etc.); and
 - Issues of individual rights versus the common good, political participation, and liberty versus equality.

The test was piloted in Fall 2003. Results showed that the test is not easy and, therefore, should be a good measure of student attainment. A difficult test reduces the problems associated with ceiling effects, which occur when many high-performing students score so high that growth or differences in achievement cannot be documented. Reducing ceiling effects is particularly important when a curriculum is challenging and used with high-achieving students who tend to do well on tests. However, the test does not appear to be too difficult for average students and is therefore relevant to all students assessed and able to show growth and clear differences between groups where differences exist.

The Method

The primary goal of the pilot test was to provide enough information to determine the validity and reliability of the knowledge assessment and attitude survey instruments. A secondary but still important goal was to use information about student outcomes on the two instruments to permit an accurate power analysis to determine the necessary sample size for a future, full-scale study.

Pilot Test Design

The pilot test was designed as a comparison group analysis. Although surveys or knowledge assessments of young people can be very interesting, they can tell us little about the effects of the *We the People* curriculum without a comparison group. To help us understand how much young people change in terms of their knowledge and attitudes towards government and civic participation, we developed a group of comparison classrooms. In these classrooms, students participated in a civic education curriculum that also meets state standards, but that was different from *We the People*. The students

who participated in *We the People* in their civics class are called the “treatment group,” and those who did not are called the “comparison group.”

Students taking Advanced Placement (AP) Civics or Government often receive more intensive instruction than those in a normal civics class. Since *We the People* is used in AP and general education civics classes, it was important to obtain results for both types of courses. The final evaluation design used a four-cell comparison matrix. The numbers of students who fit into each cell are shown in the table below.

Curriculum	AP Course	General Education
Used <i>We the People</i> (treatment classes)	257 students	241 students
Did not use <i>We the People</i> (comparison classes)	160 students	136 students

Two sets of comparisons were made. The 257 students in AP courses using *We the People* were compared with the 160 students in AP courses not using *We the People*. Similarly, the 241 students in general education courses using *We the People* were compared with the 136 students in general education courses not using *We the People*. Finally, a series of regression models were used to control for factors such as parent educational level, ethnicity and race, gender, and other student characteristics that can affect test scores and survey responses.

Sample of Schools

For any study of a curriculum, it is important to ensure that the schools participating in the study are implementing the curriculum as it was intended. In the case of *We the People*, this means that the schools needed to use most of the textbook and to conduct simulated congressional hearings at the end of the term. Although, ideally, classroom observations can determine whether a curriculum is implemented fully, this is very expensive and time-consuming. For the pilot study, therefore, the most efficient way to ensure that a school implemented the curriculum properly was to include only schools that participated in regional *We the People* competitions in 2002–03. Therefore, all 16 districts (plus one additional private school) in California with schools that had participated in the prior year’s regional competitions were originally considered for inclusion in the pilot study. The original set of 16 districts was eventually narrowed to seven participating districts. Within the seven remaining districts, 16 schools agreed to participate in the study and within them, 33 classrooms participated in all three data collections.

Despite the limitations of the sampling method, the schools are quite representative of California high schools geographically and demographically. Two schools were in southern California, six were in the San Francisco/



Sacramento region, and eight were in the Central Valley. The percentage of Hispanic students ranged from 5 percent to over 70 percent. The percentage of students receiving federal free/reduced-price lunches ranged from less than 1 percent to 66 percent. The percentage of parents who had graduated from college ranged from 10 percent to over 80 percent. Some schools scored in the lowest 10 percent of high schools in the state, others in the top 1 percent, with most schools falling somewhere in between.

Within each district, some schools used the *We the People* curriculum and others did not. To eliminate the influence of school-level factors as much as possible, schools were asked to contribute both a comparison class and a treatment class to the study. In most cases, schools could comply. In other cases, however, due to limited enrollment or other factors, we were unable to obtain both a comparison and treatment class from the same school. For this reason, some school-level indicators were included in the statistical analysis.

Pilot Test Results

Attitude Survey

The attitude survey was analyzed by comparing student responses to questions on the survey at the beginning and end of the term. Some students showed a great deal of change over time, but others showed little change. The results were compared for students participating in *We the People* with those not participating.

The analysis took the following characteristics of students into consideration:

- Enrollment in an AP course
- Parent education level (if one parent had graduated from college)
- Whether the student liked the course
- Prior involvement in political or community groups
- Ethnicity
- Achievement in school (grades, highest level of math course completed)

Controlling for these variables by using a selection model regression analysis, we found that students in courses using *We the People* were more likely to show greater growth in the following areas:

- Attention to politics
- Use of information
- Political participation
- Sense of political efficacy
- Responsibilities of a citizen
- Obligations of a citizen
- Sense of political and community responsibility

For the following categories, there was no difference over time between students in classes using *We the People* and those not using that curriculum:

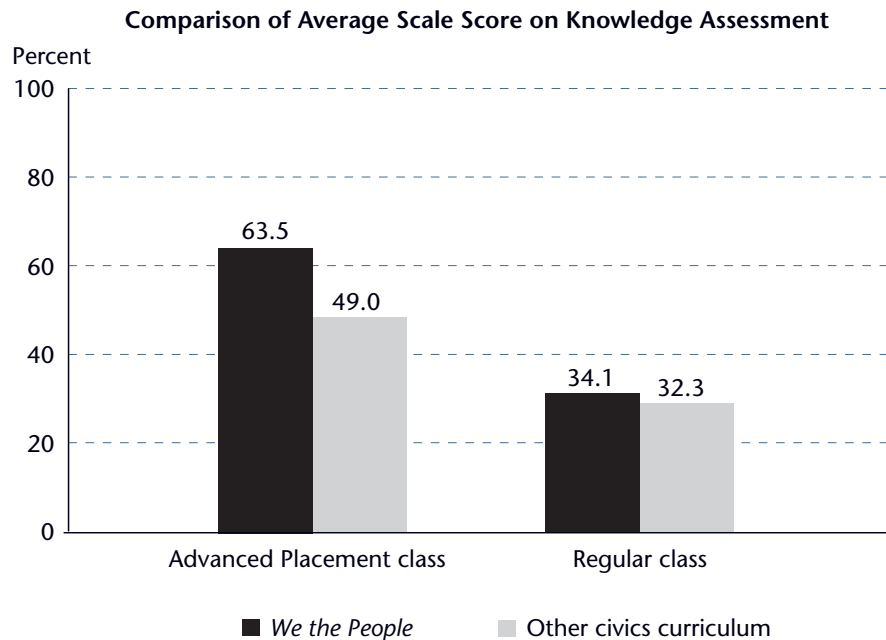
- Assessment of government's impact on their lives
- Evaluation of government
- Appreciation of democracy
- Political tolerance
- Tolerance of ambiguity

In the categories where no difference was found between *We the People* students and the comparison group, four of the five categories were based upon an item bank with only a few (four or less) items. Two categories (appreciation of democracy and tolerance of ambiguity) had relatively low reliability scores (see Technical Tables). In addition, few of these categories are correlated with future political engagement.⁵

The seven categories where *We the People* students showed greater growth than the comparison group tend to be more directly associated with future political engagement. In particular, the sense of political efficacy and beliefs in the importance of citizens' responsibilities and obligations are most closely associated with increased political engagement.⁶

Knowledge Assessment

The knowledge assessment was given near the end of the course. The average scale scores for each group of students are shown below.



The scores show statistically significant differences between those students who used *We the People* and those students who used a different civics curriculum and between students enrolled in AP classes and students in regular classes. Additionally, there is a significant interaction effect since *We the People* has more of an effect in the AP classrooms than in the regular classrooms. Possibly AP students have more experience with cooperative group learning and the critical thinking skills required for this curriculum and thus respond more readily than students in regular classrooms.

To determine whether *We the People* adds significantly to student performance over and above class placement, we performed a linear regression analysis using the six independent variables as predictors of student scale score. Those factors that made a difference in student performance (in order of the strength of effect) are: AP course enrollment, overall achievement in school, exposure to *We the People*, parent educational level, and ethnicity. The only factor that did not make a difference was student gender.

Thus, the hypothesis that participating in *We the People* significantly adds to student performance over and above the role of class placement is confirmed. AP classes can be considered an indicator of high ability, so we can extrapolate our results to indicate that *We the People* contributes positively to student performance even after accounting for the effects of ability.

Next Steps

These findings are preliminary; the full evaluation study will be able to extend these analyses. The final knowledge test (Forms A and B) developed by WestEd is a reliable, valid test of student knowledge of the U.S. Constitution and U.S. history and government and a viable evaluation instrument on which to base further studies.

Now that the pilot test is complete, we hope to conduct a full-scale study, scheduled for the 2005–06 school year. This study will be conducted in multiple states using a representative sample of students and schools in each state. We plan eventually to extend this study, to follow students as they leave secondary school and enter the workforce or pursue an advanced education, measuring their ongoing levels of political and civic participation. Such a study should provide the best possible measure of the impact of *We the People* on student learning and attitudes towards politics.

Conclusion

We the People is a well-established curriculum used in all states. Over the past 17 years, some 26 million students have participated in this curriculum. Finding a valid measure to assess its influence on student learning and attitudes is important because of the need to discover curricula that can counter the growing apathy and lack of civic knowledge among youth in the United States. This pilot study found evidence that students participating in *We the People*:

- Developed a greater sense of citizen responsibility and obligations to the community;
- Had stronger feelings of political efficacy;
- Scored higher on achievement tests of knowledge of U.S. government and civics; and
- Showed greater interest in politics and current events.

More information on the pilot study is available from:

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Technical Tables

Internal Consistency

Reliability refers to the ability of a questionnaire to measure attitudes accurately. Internal consistency reliability (Marshall and Hales 1972) is determined by checking the components of a questionnaire against each other. Internal consistency reliability in the form of Cronbach's Alpha is the type reported in this document.

Internal consistency reliabilities vary from a low of 0.0 to a high of 1.0 and represent the proportion of the variance in the respondents' scores attributable to true differences on the psychological construct. DeVellis proposed the following: Alpha scores below 0.60 are unacceptable; from 0.60–0.64 are undesirable; from 0.65–0.69 are minimally acceptable; from 0.70–0.79 are respectable; and from 0.80–0.89 are very good.⁷ At 0.90 and above, one should consider shortening the scale.

Based upon these recommendations, the Cronbach's Alpha scores as shown in this table were obtained for the scales used in this report. All are acceptable, and only one score is "undesirable." Most fall in the respectable range.

Factor	Alpha	Number of items
Attention to politics	0.82	9
Use of information	0.74	5
Political participation	0.69	11
Sense of political efficacy	0.72	6
Responsibilities of a citizen	0.77	5
Obligations of a citizen	0.74	7
Sense of political and community responsibility	0.83	5
Assessment of government's impact on their lives	0.75	3
Evaluation of government	0.73	4
Appreciation of democracy	0.60	4
Political tolerance	0.84	6
Tolerance of ambiguity	0.65	4

Regression Tables

We used a full information maximum likelihood estimator: treating for the students' previous grades; whether at least one parent had attended college; whether the class was AP; the number of political, school, and community organizations they had joined prior to the beginning of the class; whether they speak a language other than English at home; and the reported level of political interest in other students at their school. We adjusted for clustering by teacher.

Variable	Model			
	1 Attention to politics	2 Use of information	3 Political participation	4 Sense of political efficacy
Constant	1.105***	0.603***	0.611	-0.924***
	0.159	0.077	0.042	0.164
Measure pre-test score	0.486***	0.597	0.611***	0.588***
	0.029	0.035	0.042	0.036
Liked class	0.171***	0.144***	0.028***	0.132***
	0.027	0.026	0.005	0.022
African American	-0.016	0.108	0.018	0.085
	0.059	0.065	0.022	0.083
Latino	-0.077	0.005	0.014	0.027
	0.052	0.046	0.014	0.059
AP	0.170	0.145	0.037	0.194*
	0.118	0.085	0.039	0.093
WTP	0.662***	0.540***	0.230***	0.599**
	0.144	0.134	0.044	0.217

Variable	Model			
	5 Responsibilities of a citizen	6 Obligations of a citizen	7 Sense of political and community responsibility	8 Assessment of government's impact on their lives
Constant	-0.977***	-0.706**	0.380*	-0.687*
	0.208	0.228	0.157	0.304
Measure pre-test score	0.491***	0.589***	0.545***	0.379***
	0.042	0.402	0.029	0.034
Liked class	0.103***	0.075*	0.218***	0.123
	0.027	0.034	0.027	0.065
African American	0.023	-0.154	0.136	-0.120
	0.089	0.129	0.082	0.097
Latino	-0.101	-0.036	-0.028	-0.086
	0.076	0.056	0.050	0.086
AP	0.128	0.091	0.119**	0.154
	0.163	0.128	0.046	0.094
WTP	0.933***	0.698***	0.521*	0.386
	0.171	0.187	0.233	0.281

Variable	Model			
	9 Evaluation of government	10 Appreciation of democracy	11 Political tolerance	12 Tolerance of ambiguity
Constant	-0.761*	1.235***	-0.283	-0.178
	0.329	0.255	0.154	0.117
Measure pre-test score	0.426***	0.519***	0.560***	0.233***
	0.039	0.044	0.027	0.042
Liked class	0.103**	-0.011	0.074**	0.057**
	0.038	0.036	0.028	0.019
African American	-0.160	-0.062	-0.028	-0.134*
	0.096	0.052	0.096	0.067
Latino	-0.071	-0.081	-0.096	0.030
	0.075	0.051	0.060	0.041
AP	0.015	0.130**	0.152**	-0.048
	0.143	0.047	0.056	0.032
WTP	0.704	0.031	-0.039	0.041
	0.457	0.432	0.200	0.130

References

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⁷DeVellis, Robert F. 1991. *Scale Development: Theory and Applications*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.