



**We the People: Civics that Empowers All Students
Preliminary Report
Year 1 (2023-24 Academic Year)**

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SUMMARY

The imperative for quality civic education in the U.S. is especially pressing for young students. Civics instruction at the elementary and middle school levels is far less prevalent than in high school, where the time devoted to civics has been declining for decades. This study examines the potential for civics instruction to be effective in putting young students on the path to enlightened patriotic citizenship. The research evaluates the impact of the Center for Civic Education’s We the People: Civics that Empowers All Students (CEAS) teacher professional development program and the curriculum intervention on student outcomes. The study employs a pretest/posttest randomized controlled trial (RCT) design. The research found large, statistically significant gains in civic knowledge that were especially pronounced for elementary school students who were taught the We the People curriculum. Elementary school students’ civic knowledge improved by 124% after receiving the We the People intervention. Middle school students evidenced a 49% increase in civic knowledge. In both cases, the knowledge gain for the CEAS students was significantly higher than for the control group students who took a conventional civics or social studies class. The findings from the Year 1 CEAS study demonstrate that civic education can have a strong positive impact on young learners, especially at the elementary school level.

INTRODUCTION

There is an urgent imperative for quality civic education that is universally available to American students. Classroom teaching that promotes knowledge about the Constitution and government is sorely needed. The time devoted to civics has declined for decades, especially in elementary and middle school. Only half of American students report having a class that is primarily focused on civics or U.S. government. Only 29% say that they had a teacher whose primary responsibility is teaching civics. Young students may be most amenable to instruction that lays a foundation for civic life. The dearth of effective civic education in lower grades can be explained, in part, by teachers' insufficient preparation and a lack of innovative curricula. The Center for Civic Education's We the People: Civics that Empowers All Students (CEAS) is a professional development program that prepares teachers to instruct We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (WTP) in grades 4 through 8. This study addresses the core question: Does the WTP curriculum intervention significantly improve elementary and middle school students' knowledge of American government? CEAS was implemented in schools in twenty-four states across the country during the 2023-24 academic year. This research analyzes data from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) study of student outcomes.

We the People: Civics that Empowers All Students

This research evaluates the impact of CEAS, a program of the Center for Civic Education, on student outcomes. CEAS provides teachers of all elementary and middle school students with professional development to assist them in implementing an adapted version of the WTP curriculum intervention in their classrooms. The program is designed to increase students' achievement in state civics standards in civic knowledge. (CEAS also works to improve students' reading and writing literacy standards; research on that aspect of the program is not addressed directly in this report.) The Civic Education Research Lab (CERL) at Georgetown University conducts the research for the program. CEAS is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

The cornerstone of CEAS is Center's We the People curriculum which was developed in 1987 and adopted as the principal education program on the U.S. Constitution by the Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. From 1993 to 2011, the U.S. Congress continued to fund the WTP program through the Department of Education as an authorized program through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Over 30 million students and 75,000 educators have participated in WTP and the curriculum continues to be adopted by schools nationwide. In 2024, WTP was the subject of a documentary series, *Citizen Nation*, airing on PBS and streaming on Prime Video and YouTube, which has sparked deeper interest in the program.

WTP is grounded in the foundations and institutions of American government and is distinctive for its emphasis on Constitutional principles, the Bill of Rights, and Supreme Court cases. The curriculum is organized into six instructional units. (See Figure 1.) Students examine the philosophical and historical foundations of the America political system. They study core documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Gettysburg Address, to discover the fundamental principles and values found therein.

Figure 1
We the People Instructional Units

Unit One	What Are the Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System?
Unit Two	How Did the Framers Create the Constitution?
Unit Three	How Has the Constitution Been Changed to Further the Ideals Contained in the Declaration of Independence?
Unit Four	How Have the Values and Principles Embodied in the Constitution Shaped American Institutions and Practices?
Unit Five	What Rights Does the Bill of Rights Protect?
Unit Six	What Challenges Might Face American Constitutional Democracy in the Twenty-First Century?

The culminating experience for We the People is a series of simulated hearings where student teams testify before a panel of judges. Students research and prepare sets of questions where they demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles and government institutions. Middle and high school classes can participate in district, statewide, and national competitions.

Teachers enrolled in CEAS received a total of 52 hours of PD consisting of a five-day summer institute and follow-up sessions throughout the academic year. Participants had access to a CEAS online PD course that they could always access. The summer institutes consisted of 36 hours of instructional time, and were held at twenty sites nationwide, typically at a university, conference center, or historical property. The sessions focused on Level 2, the middle school version of WTP, to provide a deeper dive into the material. Teachers, especially at the elementary school level, often are lacking in civic content knowledge. CEAS elementary school teachers received guidance from mentor teachers for implementing the WTP Level 1 version aimed at primary school students in their classroom as well as a textbook, lesson plans, and supplementary materials. Twelve hours of the summer institute were devoted to presentation and discussion of civics content led by scholars, guest speakers, and mentor teachers. Eight hours of the institute were devoted to pedagogy demonstrations and classroom applications, focusing on using the adapted course materials, creating a supportive and democratic classroom environment, and providing equitable and inclusive interactive learning opportunities for students. The sessions covered meeting grade-appropriate state and local standards in government and civics as well as related English reading and writing skills. The summer institute devoted eight hours to giving teachers a first-hand experience with the simulated hearing. Teachers worked in teams to research and prepare for a hearing presentation in front of judges. Four hours were spent reviewing materials and resources that were created especially for CEAS. The final four hours were devoted to reflection on the experience and methods of evaluating students' achievement. Throughout the academic year, teachers participated in three workshops for a total of fourteen hours of PD. The workshops included presentations of content and classroom discussion, pedagogy demonstrations, group discussion of successes and challenges when implementing WTP, and sharing about the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

STUDY DESIGN

CEAS is a three-year project; this study reports the preliminary results of the Year 1 student study which spanned the 2023-24 academic year. The research employs a multi-site randomized controlled trial (RCT) with school level of assignment designed to meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards without reservations. The RCT design provides for randomized assignment of schools to intervention and control groups. In Year 1, the Center's network recruited schools and all in-service civics teachers within each school. Qualified applicants were accredited public or private elementary and middle schools that offered a course in which the CEAS curriculum intervention could be incorporated during the academic year. The research team randomly assign qualified applicants to the intervention group receiving the CEAS program or the control group. Based on a power analysis, 50 schools were randomly assigned to each of the intervention and control groups. Schools were assigned entirely by chance, and there were no differences in assignment probabilities. Schools enrolled teachers in CEAS who (1) were fully credentialed and (2) were able to provide 40 hours of CEAS classroom instruction. All teachers within an elementary school at the grade level applicable to WTP Level 1 and all civics, social studies, and American government teachers at middle schools were recruited for the study to avoid the potential for study contamination. The study design was sufficiently powered and did not have any confounds given the large sample size. The intervention was not bundled with other interventions or programs.

The impact evaluation compares the students of teachers who received the CEAS PD and implemented the WTP curriculum adapted for elementary and middle school students to their classes to a control group. The comparison group consists of students of teachers who did not receive the CEAS PD program and instruct conventional civics classes. Students in the business-as-usual condition received a standard civics or social studies curriculum that typically emphasizes classroom instruction focused on knowledge building and discussion-based activities as opposed to participatory elements of learning or community engagement. CEAS was implemented in twenty-three states—California, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming—and the District of Columbia.

A pretest/posttest survey design was used in the present study. The pretests were administered online to students in both the WTP and control conditions. They were proctored by teachers in class at the beginning of the WTP or standard civics class. Posttests were given when the curriculum was completed. Teachers were provided with detailed instructions for administering the tests. Support for the testing was provided by CERL and the state coordinators.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 4,836 students in upper elementary school students (grades 4 and 5) and middle school (grades 6 through 8) were enrolled in the study. The elementary school sample consisted of 1,763 students, 1,279 in the CEAS intervention group and 484 in the control group. The middle school sample had a total of 3,073 students; 2,242 participated in CEAS and 831 were in the control condition. Students in grades 4 through 8 were enrolled in the study. They ranged in

age from 8 to 14 years old. Equal percentage of male and female students took part in the research. (See Table 1.)

Table 1
Student Characteristics

Grade	
4 th Grade	9%
5 th Grade	25%
6 th Grade	17%
7 th Grade	18%
8 th Grade	31%
Age	
8-9 years old	7%
10 years old	21%
11 years old	19%
12 years old	18%
13 years old	25%
14+ years old	10%
Gender	
Female	50%
Male	50%

Elementary school students were far less likely than middle school students to have taken a prior course in social studies, civics, American government, or American history. (See Table 2.) Forty percent of elementary schoolers had no previous civics instruction compared to 16% of middle schoolers. More students at both levels had taken a social studies class than had instruction in civics, American government, or American history. In fact, only 11% of elementary school and 27% of middle school students had taken an American history class. In addition to civic content, WTP covers material that is frequently included in the American history curriculum.

Table 2
Prior Civics Instruction

	Elementary School	Middle School
Social Studies Class	56%	78%
Civics Class	3%	5%
American Government Class	6%	8%
American History Class	11%	27%
No Prior Civics Class	41%	16%

Measures

The central measure in the study is students' civic knowledge. A dichotomous measure of elementary school (grades 4 and 5) and middle school (grades 6 through 8) was used throughout the study. Another dichotomy indicated if a student received the CEAS/WTP intervention or was in the control group and was taught a standard civics curriculum.

Civic knowledge in this research reflects standard content for civics and social studies classes. To measure students' acquisition of civics content, a knowledge index was constructed of 24 multiple choice items related to the foundations and principles of U.S. government, the U.S. Constitution, government institutions, the organization and function of the federal system, extra-constitutional institutions, such as political parties and the media, political processes, like voting. These content areas are addressed by the WTP curriculum and standard civics curricula as taught to the control group students. The items were not overly aligned with the WTP curriculum intervention and were based on established measures with known reliability. Each item in the index had four response categories and a "don't know" option. One point was given for each correct item; no points were given for wrong answers or "don't know" responses. The civic knowledge items were combined into identical pretest and posttest additive indexes. Scores on the indexes ranged from 1 to 24 points. The internal consistency reliability of the indexes based on Cronbach's α for elementary school was .69 for the pretest and .84 for the posttest. For middle school, the reliability was .76 for the pretest and .85 for the posttest. The reliability of all four indexes was acceptable.¹ (See Table 3.)

Table 3
Political Knowledge Index Reliability

Elementary School		High School	
Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
.69	.84	.76	.85

Statistical Analysis

Analyses were conducted on the students' pretest/posttest data to determine if there were statistically significant changes in outcomes due to the CEAS intervention compared to the control group which received a conventional civics curriculum. Difference of means tests (paired samples t-tests) were performed to identify within group shifts in the pretest and posttest measures of civic knowledge, communication, and collaboration and teamwork. The tests were performed separately for elementary and middle school students. The pretest and posttest mean scores, the difference of pretest/posttest means and associated significance test, the percentage change in pretest/posttest means, the effect size (ES) based on Hedge's g , and the WWC's improvement index were reported.

¹The U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse requires a Cronbach's α of .50 or greater to be acceptable. See Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education, What Works Clearinghouse Module 5, Outcome Measures. [Module 5 Outcome Measures \(ed.gov\)](#)

The percentage difference between pretest and posttest means was reported for the paired samples t-tests. The percentage change is a useful statistic as it is easily interpreted and accessible to a wide audience. The percentage difference supplements other measures of change that are reported, including ES and the WWC's improvement index, which was calculated from Hedge's *g*. As per the WWCs definition: "The improvement index is the average expected change in the percentile rank for an average comparison group student that then receives the intervention (or also the difference in percentile ranks for an average intervention versus comparison group student)."² For the within group comparisons, the improvement index indicates the expected change in percentile rank of an average student who receives the WTP curriculum intervention or a standard civics curriculum.

Hierarchical linear models were estimated using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the adjusted posttest scores of the intervention and control group students. ANCOVA was an appropriate model for this analysis as it adjusts for non-equivalence in intervention and control group scores at baseline. Separate ANCOVA models were estimated for middle and high school students. Posttest outcome measures were the dependent variables. Pretest outcome measures and a variable coded for the students' teacher were entered as covariates. Intervention/control group was a fixed factor.

ANALYSIS

The civic knowledge of students in the intervention and control groups increased significantly from pretest to posttest. (See Table 4.) The knowledge gain was greatest for elementary school students who received the WTP curriculum intervention. Their mean scores on the knowledge index increased from 4.76 on the pretest to 10.67 on the posttest for a difference of 5.91 points. The pretest/posttest percentage change was 124%. The effect size (Hedge's *g*=1.09) was large and translates to an improvement index of +36 percentile points. The average knowledge index scores of the elementary school students in the control group increased by 2.85 points from 4.83 on the pretest to 7.68 on the posttest. The percentage change was 59%, the effect size of .72 was moderately large, and the improvement index was +26 percentile points. As expected, the knowledge scores of the middle school students were higher at baseline than those of the elementary school students. The mean knowledge gain was higher for the CEAS students (3.96 points) than the control group students (3.10 points), but the gap was smaller than at the elementary school level. The pretest/posttest percentage change was 49% for the students who received the WTP curriculum and 40% for the control group. The effect size in both instances was moderately large at .83 for the CEAS students and .74 for the comparison group students. The improvement index scores were +30 and +27 percentile points, respectively.

² Institute for Education Sciences. 2022. What Works Clearinghouse, Procedures and Standards Handbook, version 5, U.S. Department of Education, pp. 186-187.

Table 4
Civic Knowledge
Difference of Means Test

	Elementary School		Middle School	
	CEAS	Control	CEAS	Control
Pretest $\bar{\chi}$	4.76	4.83	8.03	7.70
Posttest $\bar{\chi}$	10.67	7.68	12.00	10.80
$\bar{\chi}$ Difference	5.91	2.85	3.96	3.10
Sign. Difference	.00	.00	.00	.00
Percentage Change	124%	59%	49%	40%
Effect Size	1.09	.72	.83	.74
Improvement Index	+36	+26	+30	+27
n	1,279	484	2,354	831

The ANCOVA analysis adjusted for baseline nonequivalence of the CEAS and control group students' scores on civic knowledge. The posttest between group difference of mean scores was statistically significant at $p \leq .01$ for both the elementary and middle school students. The adjusted mean posttest difference was notably larger for the elementary school students (3.19 points) than the middle school students (1.10) as was evident in the paired samples t-test results. (See Table 5.)

Table 5
ANCOVA Analysis of Civic Knowledge

	Elementary School		Middle School	
	CEAS	Control	CEAS	Control
Adjusted Posttest $\bar{\chi}$	10.72	7.53	12.00	10.90
$\bar{\chi}$ Difference	3.19		1.10	
Sign. Difference	.00		.00	
n	1,279	484	2,354	831

DISCUSSION

The civic knowledge of students in both the intervention and control groups increased markedly after receiving the CEAS program instruction. Knowledge gain was significantly higher for students who received the WTP curriculum than for those who were taught a traditional civics or social studies class. We would expect to find, as was the case in this study, that elementary school students will gain more civic knowledge than middle school students given the novelty of the material. The increase in civic knowledge was especially pronounced for elementary school students who were taught WTP, as their average posttest score (10.67) was nearly the same as for the middle school control group (10.80). The findings from this

preliminary study support the notion that civic education can be effective for young learners, especially at the elementary school level. The gains in civic knowledge were large and statistically significant, especially for elementary school students participating in CEAS.