

# **Evaluation of the *We the People* Program: Student Knowledge**

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### **Disclosure of Potential Conflict of Interest**

The author of this study is based at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The author does not have financial interests that could be affected by the findings of this study.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study compares student knowledge outcomes of high school teachers who have experienced the *We the People* professional development program and instruct the associated curriculum with a control group who has not received the WTP PD. It employs a quasi-experimental design without random assignment. The research was conducted in schools across the state of Indiana during the fall semester of 2014. The findings indicate that students in the WTP group scored significantly higher on a test of civic knowledge than the control group students. The results demonstrate the effectiveness of the WTP PD in preparing students in civics and American government.

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## The We the People Program

*We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* (WTP) is a curriculum intervention that has involved over 30 million students and 80,000 teachers in all fifty states and the District of Columbia since 1987. The program instructs students in the foundations and institutions of American government. It is distinctive for its emphasis on constitutional principles, the Bill of Rights, and Supreme Court cases, and their relevance to current issues and debates. Students take part in a range of learning activities, such as group projects, debates, and student speeches. A WTP textbook reflecting the curriculum is available in both a print and an ebook version that facilitates interactive learning. As a culminating activity, WTP students take part in simulated congressional hearings. This exercise requires students to use primary source documents, conduct research, and develop succinct, yet complete, answers to probing questions. Some classes take part in district, state, and national WTP hearings in Washington, D.C. The finals of the national high school competition are held in congressional hearing rooms on Capitol Hill. Middle school classes compete in the national invitational competition that is also held in Washington, D.C. each spring (<http://www.civiced.org/programs/wtp>).

The WTP curriculum and the associated professional development (PD) program focus on essential questions aligned with the six units of the textbook:

1. What are the philosophical and historical foundations of the American political system?
2. How did the framers create the Constitution?
3. How has the Constitution been changed to further the ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence?
4. How have the values and principles embodied in the Constitution shaped American institutions and practices?
5. What rights does the Bill of Rights protect?
6. What challenges might face American constitutional democracy in the twenty-first century?

Secondary school students' learning is dependent on the knowledge base and pedagogical skills of their teachers. Effective professional development includes three essential components: content knowledge, pedagogy, and student assessment. WTP teacher PD is administered through training institutes, workshops, and seminars. Teachers in Indiana typically begin their WTP PD with a multi-day summer institute held at Indiana University in Bloomington. Teacher participants interact with law, history, and political science scholars who are responsible for conveying high level content related to one or more of the essential questions and demonstrating effective pedagogy. In addition, the teacher participants interact with mentors, master teachers familiar with both the content and the pedagogy of the *We the People* curriculum. The mentor teachers are responsible for helping teacher participants master the content and understand how best to implement the program content in their classroom. WTP PD also provides pedagogy sessions delivered by mentor teachers and university and college social studies methods professors that demonstrate "best practices," including written argument development, Socratic questioning, interactive teaching strategies, primary document analysis, and critical reading of non-fiction sources.

The final component of the WTP professional development program focuses on assessment. In small groups of 4-6 teacher, and guided by mentor teachers, participants prepare written statements answering congressional hearing questions designed to complement the six units in the *We the People* textbook. The participants are assessed based on: 1) their understanding of the basic issues involved in the question; 2) their knowledge of constitutional history and principles; 3) their use of sound reasoning to support their positions; 4) their use of historical or contemporary evidence and examples to support their positions; 5) the extent to which they answered the question asked; and 6) the extent to which most members contributed to the group's presentation.

Research indicates that teachers who participated in *We the People* professional development felt that they gained content knowledge and enhanced their skills substantially whether or not they went on to teach the WTP curriculum (Fairbank, et al., 2009). WTP PD has a positive impact on elementary and middle school teachers' content knowledge as well as their attitudes towards teaching civics, teaching practices, and pedagogical content knowledge. Teachers who attended the week long *We the People* summer institute gained in their ability to impart the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democratic citizenship to students (Vontz, 2010).

The WTP approach to civics instruction also is associated with positive learning outcomes for students (Vontz and Leming, 2005-06). Several studies have shown that *We the People* students gained superior knowledge about key elements of government and politics, and that the program promotes greater amounts of political tolerance and engagement (Leming, 1996; Brody, 1994; Neimi, 2001; Hartry and Porter, 2004; Owen and Soule, 2010; Eschrich, 2010; Owen, 2013; Owen and Riddle, 2015).

## **Study Design**

The present research examines the effectiveness of the *We the People* teacher professional development program on high school student outcomes, specifically students' acquisition of knowledge of civics and American government. The study compares the civic knowledge outcomes after taking a civics course of students whose teachers received WTP PD to those whose teachers had not gone through the WTP PD program, do not teach the WTP curriculum, and do not use the WTP textbook or materials.

The study employs a quasi-experimental design (QED) without random assignment to compare students in civics, social studies, and American government classes taught by teachers with and without WTP PD at multiple school sites across the state of Indiana in the fall semester of 2014. A coordinator from the Indiana State Bar Foundation, which plays an active role in civic education in the state, facilitated the recruitment of the schools in the study. The Bar Foundation also helped to secure permission to conduct the study in the schools after Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through Georgetown University.

The schools in the study were assigned exclusively to either the intervention or the control condition. Schools whose civics/American government teachers had participated in WTP PD and who taught WTP classes were recruited to take part in the study. Schools in the

comparison group were matched to the extent possible with the WTP PD schools based on the criteria of school size (number of students), location (urban/suburban/rural), and type (neighborhood/selective enrollment/technical; public/private). There were two Title I schools serving high-need populations in the sample—one in the WTP group and one in the control group. Twenty-one teachers from twelve high schools statewide took part in the study—six WTP intervention schools and six control schools. In three of the schools there is only one instructor who teaches all of the civic education classes.

### Sample Attrition

There was no attrition among the schools or teachers in the study. A number of steps were taken to minimize the possibility of attrition. Teachers from each group attended orientation sessions in Indianapolis prior to the start of the academic year when the research would commence. The coordinator in the state kept in regular contact with the WTP and the control teachers, which included hosting dinners for teachers in each group at local restaurants. The state coordinator also visited at least one class taught by each of the teachers in the study. Finally, teachers were provided with a stipend upon completion of all study requirements.

Complete data were collected on 1,015 students—663 in the WTP group and 352 in the control group. Sample attrition was assessed at the student level using student rosters that were obtained for all participating classes for both the WTP and control groups. The rosters were used to identify: 1) stayers, students who remained in the sample for the entirety of the study, and 2) leavers, students who dropped out of the study. Joiners, students who joined a class after randomization and after the study had begun, were excluded from the analysis, as “the WWC never considers joiners to pose a risk of bias when they are excluded from the analytic sample.”<sup>1</sup>

The study sample meets WWC standards for attrition under “cautious” assumptions.<sup>2</sup> The overall sample attrition is 20.20%. The differential attrition between the WTP and the control group is 7.98%. According to Table II.4 of the WWC Handbook, version 4, the “cautious” boundary for a sample with overall attrition of 21% is 9.9% differential attrition, and the study sample falls within this boundary. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1**  
**Sample Attrition**

	<b>WTP</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Entire Sample</b>
<b>Total</b>	801	471	1,272
<b>Stayers</b>	663	352	1,015
<b>Leavers</b>	138	119	257
<b>% Attrition</b>	17.22	25.20	20.20

<sup>1</sup>What Works Clearinghouse, Standards Handbook, Version 4.0, page 23.

<sup>2</sup>What Works Clearinghouse, Standards Handbook, Version 4.0, page. 13.

## Measures

A pretest-posttest design was used in the study. Teachers administered the knowledge pretest during the first class meeting and gave students the posttest at the conclusion of the course. The study employs 30 political knowledge items that were included in both the pretest, which established a baseline, and the posttest. The knowledge items were constructed after consulting prior research, civics inventories, grade-appropriate civics tests, sample Advanced Placement (AP) tests, and state civic education rubrics, including the Indiana state rubric. We intentionally avoided using any materials related to *We the People* when creating the pretests and posttests, so the test instruments are not overly aligned. The test consisted primarily of multiple choice questions with three open ended items. Each item was coded 1 for a correct answer and 0 for an incorrect answer. There is a debate in the literature about the treatment of the “don’t know” responses to political knowledge questions. We combined the “don’t know” response with those indicating an incorrect answer (Luskin and Bullock, 2011). The content of the items covered constitutional principles, the Bill of Rights, U.S. government institutions, political parties and elections, and race and politics. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) for the pretest is .784 and for the posttest is .881. Thus, the internal consistency of both measures is greater than .50 (Cronbach’s alpha) and meets WWC guidelines. (See Appendix for test questions.)

The pretests and posttests were administered in the same way under the same conditions. All of the pretests and posttests were given in digital format using SurveyMonkey Pro. Teachers were provided with links and administered the tests during class periods using computers and tablets available at their schools.

## Non-Response of Individuals

The reference sample for this study is the number of students enrolled in civics classes in non-attriting schools (in this case all of the schools) on the day the posttest was administered. Joiners were not included in the sample, so “the allowable reference sample consists of individuals in non-attriting clusters at follow-up.”<sup>3</sup> The primary reason for students leaving the study were that they were absent on the day the test was administered and were not able to make it up under controlled conditions. Students were required to answer every question before exiting the online test. Since students had the “I don’t know” option available for every item, missing data were limited for students who completed the test. Students who exited the test prematurely and did not complete the test were excluded from the analysis.

Thirty-eight students who were enrolled in civics classes in non-attriting schools on the day of the posttest dropped out of the study, for an overall attrition rate of 3.6% due to non-response. Differential attrition due to non-response of individuals in the sample is limited at .38%. There also is no evidence of differential attrition across individual schools. (See Table 2.)

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<sup>3</sup>What Works Clearinghouse, Standards Handbook, Version 4.0, p. 26.

**Table 2**  
**Non-Response of Individual Students**

	<b>WTP</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Entire Sample</b>
Reference Sample	697	366	1,053
Non-response	24	14	38
Analysis Sample	663	352	1,015
% Attrition	3.44	3.82	3.60

**Baseline Equivalence**

The pretest knowledge scores were used to assess the baseline equivalence of the WTP and control samples. The pretest and posttest knowledge measures are identical. The sample meets WWC’s standard for baseline equivalence with statistical adjustment required. The difference in the mean pretest score between the WTP and the control group is 1.18, and the effect size is .23. (See Table 3 and Table 4.)

**Table 3**  
**Pretest Means and Standard Deviations**

	<b>n</b>	$\bar{x}$	<b>SD</b>
WTP Students	663	14.63	5.29
Control Students	352	13.45	4.57

**Table 4**  
**Sample Baseline Equivalence**

	$\bar{x}$ Difference in Pretest Score	Pooled SD	Effect Size (Hedge’s G)	WWC Standard for Baseline Equivalence
WTP/Control	1.18	4.93	.23	Statistical adjustment required to satisfy baseline equivalence

## Student Knowledge Analysis

An analysis of the unadjusted pretest and posttest mean scores shows an improvement in student knowledge for the WTP students of 3.78 points that is statistically significant (t-test,  $p=.00$ ). However, there is no improvement in the scores of the control students, which decline by one point. (See Table 5.)

**Table 5**  
**Unadjusted Pretest and Posttest Mean Student Knowledge Scores**

	<b>n</b>	<b>Pretest <math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>Pretest SD</b>	<b>Posttest <math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>Posttest SD</b>
WTP Students	663	14.63	5.29	16.22	5.38
Control Students	352	13.45	4.49	12.44	4.89

To satisfy the adjustment requirement for baseline equivalence, a hierarchical linear model was estimated using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in the knowledge scores of the WTP and the control group students. WWC identifies ANCOVA as an appropriate technique for meeting the statistical adjustment requirement for satisfying baseline equivalence.<sup>4</sup> Students' score on the posttest is the dependent variable. The pretest score is entered as a covariate in the model. The WTP/control group variable is entered as a fixed factor. School is treated as a random factor. Effect size is measured by Hedges'  $g$ .

The adjusted mean civic knowledge posttest score of students whose teachers had received WTP PD was significantly higher than that of control group students. The adjusted posttest mean for the WTP students was 15.47 and was 14.23 for the control group. (See Table 6.) The mean difference is 1.61, and it is statistically significant ( $p=.00$ ). The effect size (Hedge's  $g$ ) is .24, which is very close to the WWC guideline of .25 indicating a "substantively important" finding.<sup>5</sup> (See Table 7.) The WWC improvement index<sup>6</sup> is 9.48%.

**Table 6**  
**Estimated Mean Knowledge Scores of WTP and Control Group Students**

	<b>n</b>	<b>Adjusted Posttest <math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>SE</b>
WTP Students	663	15.47	.139
Control Students	352	14.23	.193

<sup>4</sup> WWC Standards Brief, Baseline Equivalence, p. 2, footnote.

<sup>5</sup> What Works Clearinghouse, Procedures Handbook, version 4.0, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> What Works Clearinghouse, Procedures Handbook, version 4.0, p. E11.

**Table 7**  
**Adjusted Mean Difference and Effect Size**

	<b>Adjusted <math>\bar{x}</math> Difference</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Effect Size (Hedge's G)</b>
WTP/Control Students	1.61	.242	.00	.24

**Conclusion**

This study compares student knowledge outcomes of high school teachers who have experienced the *We the People* professional development program and instruct the associated curriculum with a control group who has not received the WTP PD. The findings show that students in the WTP group scored significantly higher on a test of civic knowledge than the control group students. The results demonstrate the effectiveness of the WTP PD in preparing students in civics and American government.

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## APPENDIX

### TEST ITEMS

--John Locke states: "Absolute arbitrary power, or governing without settled laws, can neither of them be consistent with the ends of society and government." Which of the following statements is most consistent with the Locke quotation above?

--Which of the following did critics of the Articles of Confederation consider the document's greatest flaw?

--"We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; . . ." This quotation is evidence that some of the basic ideas in the Declaration of Independence were...

--At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, a bicameral legislature was proposed as a solution to the disagreement over...

--The Constitution requires that the President's nominations to the Supreme Court be approved by the Senate. This is an example of...

--In the United States, what occurs when state and national laws are in conflict?

--The primary purpose of the Bill of Rights was to...

--The establishment clause in the First Amendment says that...

--Thomas Jefferson wrote the following to John Jay in a letter in 1786: "... our liberty, which cannot be guarded but by freedom of the press . . ." Why should freedom of the press be guarded?

--In the Supreme Court case of *Schenck v. The United States* (1919), Schenck was prosecuted for having violated the Espionage Act of 1917 by publishing and distributing leaflets that opposed

--What is one responsibility that modern Presidents have that is NOT described in the U.S. Constitution? --Which of the following is a power of the President...

--The War Powers Act was an attempt by Congress to check the power of the President because...

--To override a presidential veto, how much of a majority is required in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives?

--In the area of United States foreign policy, Congress shares power with the...

- The authors of the United States Constitution believed that the voice of the people should be heard frequently. Which part of the Government was instituted to respond most directly to the will of the people?
- How many Senators are in the U.S. Congress?
- How long is the term for members of the House of Representatives?
- What happens to most of the bills introduced in the House of Representatives?
- Filibusters were used by United States Senators from the South in the 1950s and 1960s to...
- How many justices serve on the U.S. Supreme Court?
- In *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), the Supreme Court established judicial review which is...
- What lessons did future U.S. leaders learn from the 1974 U.S. Supreme Court case *United States v. Nixon*?
- Which of the following statements represents James Madison's views about political parties as expressed in *Federalist 10*?
- To revise the Electoral College system for selecting the President, changes must be made to...
- Traditionally third parties have had the greatest impact on American politics by...
- A political action committee (PAC) is...
- In the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a split 5-4 decision that...
- Which U.S. Supreme Court case ordered an end to segregated schools "with all deliberate speed"?
- When necessary to achieve justice, Martin Luther King, Jr., urged his followers to...
- Affirmative action refers to efforts enforced by government to...