

CIVICS CAN SUCCEED: PREPARING YOUNG CITIZENS THROUGH “WE THE PEOPLE”

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In April I had the opportunity to witness students from Indiana testify on Capitol Hill about the United States Constitution. This was not a normal congressional hearing. It was the final round of competition in the national *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* program. This program promotes civic competence and responsibility among the nation’s upper elementary and secondary students.

I wish every Hoosier could witness what the students in this program accomplish. Classes from 56 schools from around the country competed during this three-day national competition and the top 10 schools competed on the third day on Capitol Hill. As the Executive Director of the Indiana Bar Foundation which is the administering agency for Indiana’s *We the People* program, I have had the good fortune to see many schools from Indiana compete at our state competition as well as at the national competition. Indiana’s teams have consistently been finalists at the national competition for many years running. This success is a complement to the depth of Indiana’s program and the dedication of the students and teachers that participate.

Every generation wonders about the next generation and some arrive quickly at cynical conclusions about “kids these days.” The students in this program are the antidote to that cynicism. It is next to impossible to witness these students in action and not feel like we are preparing our future leaders well.

Sadly, not every Hoosier student participates in *We the People*. There are some who may never learn the finer nuances of the American system of government. That is truly unfortunate. The more citizens that are prepared with this knowledge, the more sturdy our democracy will be.

In Indiana, 6,000 students annually participate in *We the People*. Those who do participate in this program excel. Research has shown that *We the People* students outperform the national sample of high school students in every civic knowledge category (Owen, 2011). They even outperform adults (Owen, 2011). Research shows that these students correctly answered five key knowledge questions asked in the American National Election Studies at a rate of 73%, versus only 17% of adults and 8% of other high school students (RMC Research Corporation, 2008).

Unfortunately, like many programs that rely on federal support, the decision to make the investment and fund a particular program does not always come down to an analysis of its effectiveness. This is certainly the case with the *We the People* program. After 25 years of strong bipartisan support to make sure this national program continued to teach our future leaders about the U. S. Constitution, all if its funding was eliminated based on a technical classification that treated it as an *earmark*. Unfortunately once this dreaded description was applied to the program, it was ineligible for continued funding despite the overwhelming support and proof that it works.

The good news, at least for students in Indiana, is that last year the state legislature saw the 25 years of positive impact this program has made and stepped up to support the program in Indiana and replace the federal funding that Indiana's program lost. The American system of government is one of the greatest contributions to human rights in world history. It needs constant attention from each new generation to remain the beacon of light that it is. Civic education, including *We the People* is an absolute necessity and as long as there are those willing to teach and willing to learn, the Indiana Bar Foundation and its many supporters will continue to offer our support.

References

- Owen, D. (2011). *We the People and political knowledge* (Research Report No. 313). Retrieved from Center for Civic Education website: http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/research/WTP_Political_Knowledge_writeup.pdf
- RMC Research Corporation. (2008). *Report on We the People: The citizen and the Constitution: Evaluation brief*. Retrieved from: <http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/WTP/WTP4Pager.pdf>