

**Translating Professional Development into Experience:**  
**An Evaluation of We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution**  
**Summer Institutes**

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**G**raduates of the 2005 **We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution** professional development institutes were surveyed online to determine the extent to which their participation at the Center-sponsored institutes influenced their teaching of civics and government. The study was conducted one year following their summer institute participation to find out which aspects of the institutes proved most valuable to teachers, and to note where improvements may be made.

### Key Findings

- 99% of respondents found the institutes intellectually stimulating and indicated that they used the knowledge gained from the summer institute during the subsequent school year;
- 96% of all respondents indicated that participating in the summer institute inspired their teaching of civics and government;
- 96% of all respondents said they would recommend this institute to other teachers;
- 96% of all respondents indicated that the lectures and discussions of the summer institute were either valuable or very valuable to them as teachers;
- 82% of all respondents indicated that the breakout sessions on lessons and instructional strategies were either valuable or very valuable to them as teachers;
- 92% of all respondents indicated that participating in the simulated congressional hearing was either valuable or very valuable to them as teachers;
- Whereas only 15% of respondents indicated that they had held a hearing before attending the institute, 49% said they held a simulated congressional hearing after attending the summer institute (of those holding hearings, 72% participated in a classroom hearing, 18% in a congressional district competition, 18% in a state competition, and 2% in a national competition);
- 29% of respondents have taught less than six years, while fewer than 20% of respondents have taught for more than twenty years
- 38% of respondents had been contacted after attending a summer institute by a congressional district coordinator; 51% were contacted by a state coordinator. Teachers who were contacted were more likely to have held congressional hearings after the institute; and
- The majority of participants at these institutes taught high school (44%), followed by middle school teachers (26%), and upper elementary school teachers (25%). Lower-level elementary school teachers comprised the smallest group (2%). There were seven participants who categorized their teaching-level outside of the standard selections: one college professor, one instructor of secondary special education, one curriculum director, two teachers who cover multiple grades in one classroom (one teaches K-8 and the other teaches K-12), one teacher of a gifted fourth/fifth grade combination class, and one teacher who works at an alternative high school.

## **Introduction**

**We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution** is an educational program developed by the Center for Civic Education. The program instructs students on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy. The primary goal of the program is to promote civic competence and responsibility among the nation's elementary, middle, and secondary school students. Additionally, 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 program utilizes highly acclaimed curricular materials developed by the Center. The culminating activity is a simulated congressional hearing in which students role-play and testify before a panel of judges, thereby demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles. Students evaluate, take, and defend positions on relevant historical and contemporary issues.

More than 28 million students and 90,000 educators have participated in the **We the People** program since its inception in 1987. In 2005, more than two million students participated in the program.

At the heart of the Center's efforts on behalf of students is its attempt to provide participating educators with the intellectual foundation and pedagogical preparation to be effective teachers of civics and government. Previous research has shown that many civics teachers do not feel well prepared in the subject area, especially when asked to use voluntary national standards for civics (1998 NAEP Civics Report Card, 74). This lack of preparedness to teach civics heightens the need for sustained and ongoing professional development for all civics teachers. In 2005 alone, the Center spent more than \$1.1 million on professional development. These summer institutes fill this critical need by providing teachers with crucial knowledge about the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and other foundational documents and ideas of American democracy as well as instruction in pedagogical applications thereof. Additionally, the summer institutes provide instruction on interactive teaching methods in an intellectually rigorous environment to encourage critical engagement with both the content of the curriculum and the process of the culminating activity.

The Center held five national professional development institutes in the spring and summer of 2005. Four institutes were held for upper elementary teachers and secondary teachers, and one institute for instructors in urban environments. Additionally, the Center sponsored thirty-seven states to hold their own state institutes using **We the People** curricula. Participants include

upper elementary, middle, and high school teachers who work with experienced teacher mentors in a combination of lectures, breakout sessions, and classroom simulations to learn about the historical events and philosophical contexts preceding and affecting the writing of the U.S. Constitution and its relation to essential democratic principles. Experts from around the country lecture on various fields, such as constitutional law, education and political science. Teachers prepare for and participate in a simulated congressional hearing, giving them the skills and experience needed to conduct similar hearings in their classrooms.

### **Evaluation Design**

This study used an online survey to interview graduates from the following Center-sponsored regional and state summer institutes held in 2005:

- Institute for Teachers of Urban Students, Boston, MA
- Institute for Upper Elementary School Teachers I, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA
- Institute for Upper Elementary School Teachers II, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA
- Institute for Upper Elementary School and Secondary Teachers I, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA
- Institute for Upper Elementary School and Secondary Teachers II, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA
- AK Summer Institute, Fairbanks, AK
- AR Summer Institute, Conway, AR
- AZ Summer Institute, Flagstaff, AZ
- CA Summer Institute, San Diego, CA
- CO Summer Institute, Denver, CO
- FL Summer Institute, Tallahassee, FL
- GA Summer Institute, Savannah, GA
- HI Summer Institute, Honolulu, HI
- IN Summer Institute, Bloomington, IN
- KS Summer Institute, Wichita, KS
- MD Summer Institute, Columbia, MD
- MI Summer Institute, Holland, MI
- MN Summer Institute, St. Paul, MN
- MO Summer Institute, Columbia, MO
- MS Summer Institute, Mississippi State, MS
- NE Summer Institute, Omaha, NE
- NJ Summer Institute, New Brunswick, NJ
- NM Summer Institute, Albuquerque, NM
- NV Summer Institute, Incline Village, NV
- NY Summer Institute, Saratoga Springs, NY

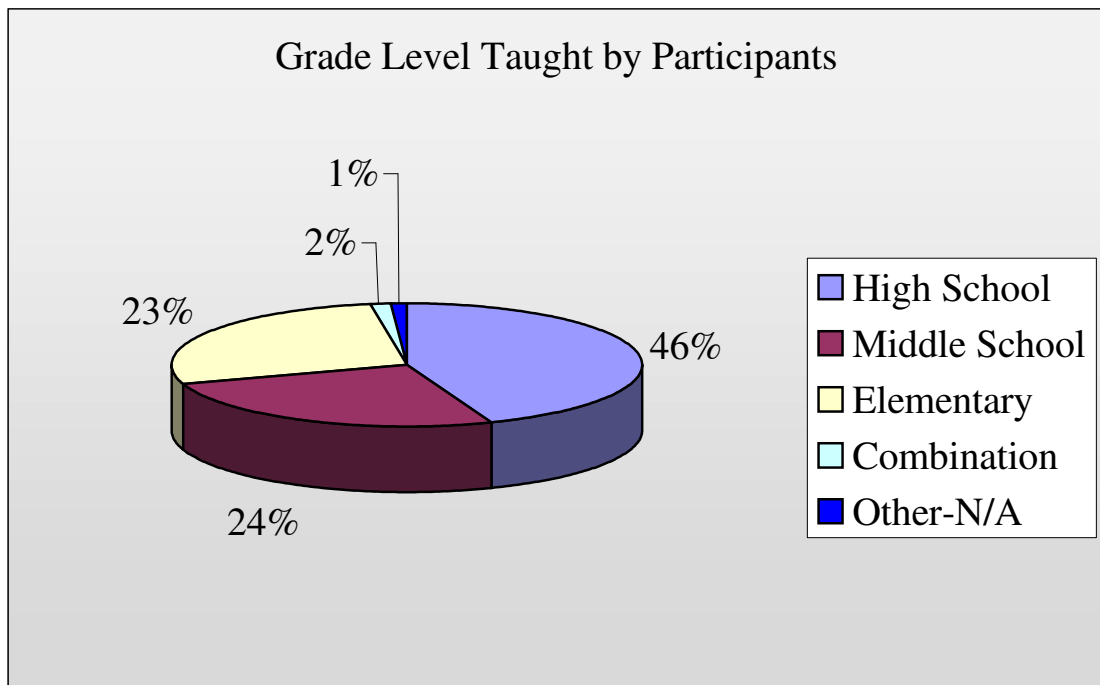
- OH Summer Institute, Columbus, OH
- OR Summer Institute, Portland, OR
- RI Summer Institute, Newport, RI
- SC Summer Institute, Columbia SC
- TN Summer Institute, Chattanooga, TN
- TX Summer Institute, Austin, TX
- UT Summer Institute, Salt Lake City, UT
- VA Summer Institute, Montpelier Station, VA
- WA Summer Institute, Seattle, WA
- WI Summer Institute, Madison, WI
- WV Summer Institute, Charleston, WV
- WY Summer Institute, Jackson Hole, WY

In August 2006, the Center directed all participants of these institutes to an online survey. The survey consisted of both closed and open-ended questions designed to measure the participants' perspectives with regard to the effectiveness of the institutes. The survey was administered online a full year after the teachers' attendance at a summer institute. This allowed participants to rate the effectiveness of the institute after having a chance to apply what they learned in their classrooms. A total of 194 participants responded to the survey questions, 29% of the population.

## Profiles of Summer Institute Participants

Most respondents, 46%, teach high school, while 24% teach middle school, and 23% teach elementary school classes.<sup>1</sup> Three respondents (less than 1%) indicated that they taught multiple grade levels, one respondent worked as a curriculum director, one respondent is a secondary special education instructor, and one respondent was a university professor.

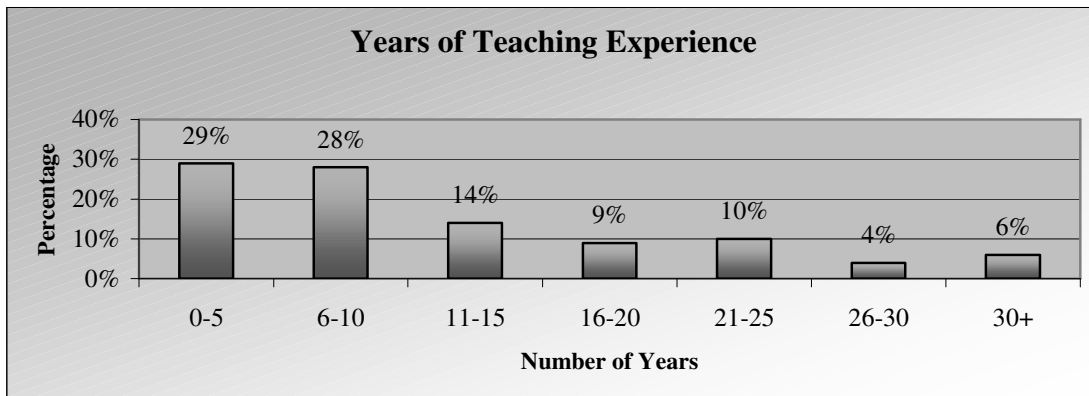
Some of the state institutes limit enrollment to middle and high school teachers, which partially explains the high percentage of high school teachers who responded. High school teachers are also the overwhelmingly majority of those teachers who hold simulated congressional hearings.<sup>2</sup>



The summer institutes of 2005 succeeded in attracting younger teachers, a goal recommended in previous studies of the institutes. Most respondents have been teaching for five years or less; this category included 29% of all survey respondents. Of responding teachers, 28% of responding teachers have taught for six to ten years, while 14% are more experienced teachers, having taught between eleven and fifteen years.

<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on valid percentages as they summarize responses for those who answered the question.

<sup>2</sup> According to a recent phone survey of teachers, 31% percent of all teachers who use the sets reported they were holding hearings. This varied by grade level: 20% of primary teachers, 18% of middle school teachers, and 49% of high school teachers reported holding hearings.



### Effectiveness of the Institutes

A scale of twelve items was developed to measure the effectiveness of the institutes, based upon the extent to which the professional development improved the quality of teacher instruction after teachers returned to their respective classrooms. By examining the mean score of the index, it can be seen that the overwhelming majority of teachers found this institute effective. Ninety-six percent of teachers demonstrated an improved quality of instruction one year following the institute.

Ninety-seven percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed the institutes were effective in improving in quality of their classroom instruction and increasing their knowledge and understanding of United States history and political philosophy.

Ninety-nine percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the institute was a valuable professional development experience. Ninety-nine percent agreed or strongly agreed that they found the institutes to be intellectually stimulating, and ninety-eight percent indicated that they used the knowledge they gained when they returned to their classrooms. Ninety-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that the training received at the institute improved the quality of their instruction, while 90% reported now using more interactive methods in the classroom.

Nearly all the participants found that the institute increased their understanding of the American political system. Ninety-eight percent of participants indicated that their knowledge of the historical foundations of the American system increased; 99% indicated that the institute improved their understanding of how the framers created the Constitution; and 96% indicated that the institute increased their knowledge of the development and expansion of the Bill of Rights. Ninety-eight percent said the institute increased their confidence in teaching students



about the current relevance of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, while 94% indicated that attending the institute improved their ability to facilitate classroom discussions and debates about political issues. Ninety-seven percent specified that their participation in the institute provided them with new ideas on how to teach students about citizenship rights and responsibilities. Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated that the institute inspired their teaching of civics and government, and 99% stated that they would recommend the institute to other teachers.

Likewise, respondents rated all components of the institute very highly. Ninety-six percent of respondents rated lectures and discussions as either valuable or very valuable.<sup>3</sup> Eighty-two percent found the breakout sessions on lesson demonstrations and instructional strategies as either valuable or very valuable<sup>4</sup>, and 92% found participating in the simulated congressional hearing to be either a valuable or a very valuable experience.<sup>5</sup>

Participating teachers found some of the units covered during the institute more valuable than others. Ninety-eight percent of teachers found Unit 2 to be either valuable or very valuable<sup>6</sup> and 97% of participants found Unit 5 to be either valuable or very valuable.<sup>7</sup> Ninety-five percent of respondents found Unit 3 to be either valuable or very valuable, while 94% percent of participants found Unit 1, and Unit 4 to be very valuable or valuable.<sup>8</sup> Unit 6 rated slightly lower with 93% of participants finding it to be either valuable or very valuable.<sup>9</sup> Comments from the respondents suggest that institutes' instruction in Unit 6 may lack the organization and structure of the previous units. Others cited lack of time as an issue with the presentation and training of this unit.

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<sup>3</sup> Seventy percent indicated they found the lectures very valuable and 26% found it valuable.

<sup>4</sup> Forty-seven percent indicated they found the breakout sessions very valuable and 35% found it valuable.

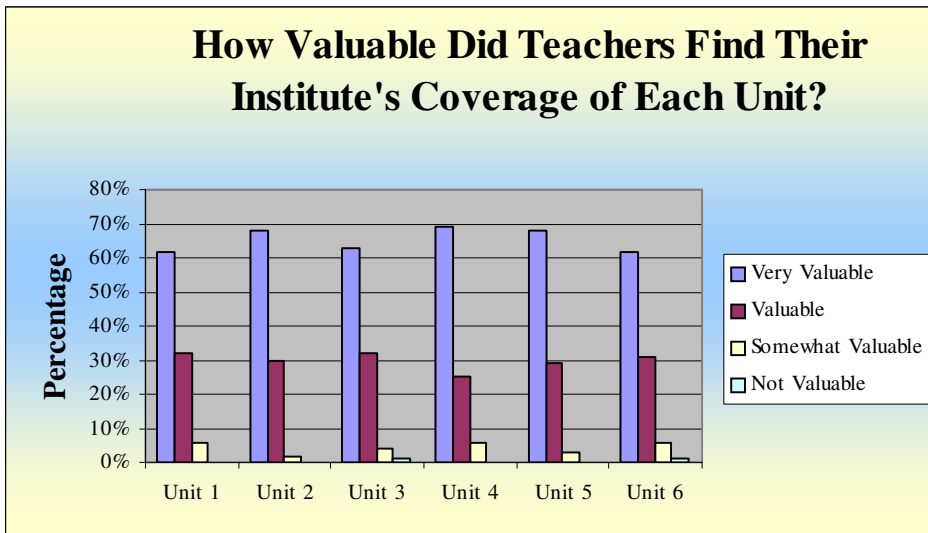
<sup>5</sup> Sixty-eight percent found participating in the simulated congressional hearing to be a very valuable experience, and 24% found participating a valuable experience.

<sup>6</sup> Unit 2: 68% found it very valuable and 30% found it valuable

<sup>7</sup> Unit 5: 68% found it very valuable and 29% found it valuable.

<sup>8</sup> Unit 3: 63% found it very valuable and 32% found it valuable; Unit 1: 62% found it very valuable and 32% found it valuable; Unit 4: 69% found it very valuable and 25% found it valuable.

<sup>9</sup> Unit 6: 62% found it very valuable and 31% found it valuable.

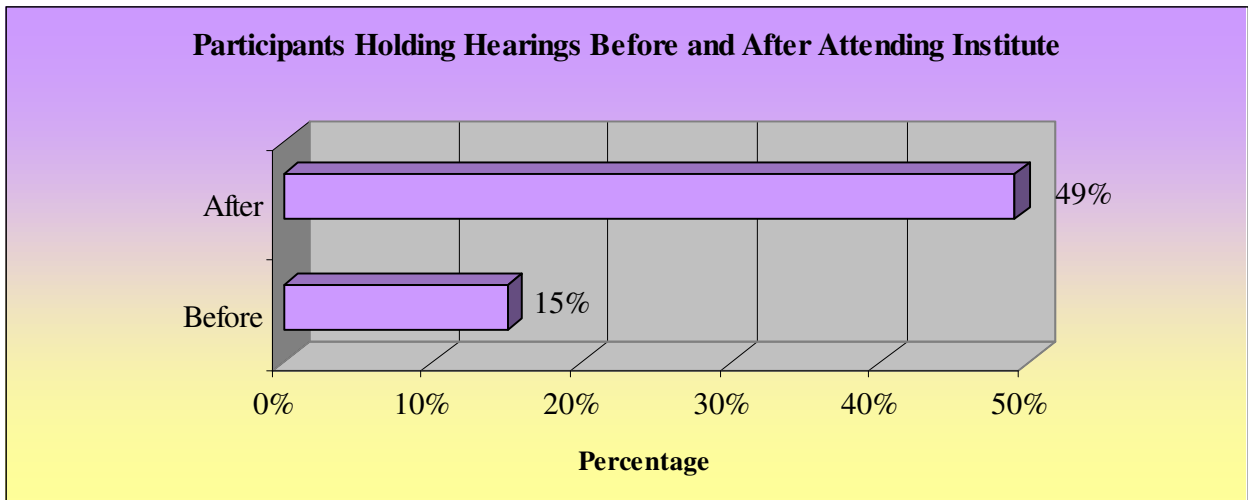


### Simulated Congressional Hearings

One of the priorities of the institutes is to adequately prepare teachers to conduct simulated congressional hearings, the culminating activity of the **We the People** program. The Center considers this a crucial component of its program as it allows students an opportunity to apply the knowledge they have acquired through the curriculum and to practice their analytical skills.<sup>10</sup> This component requires the teacher to be comfortable utilizing interactive methods in their teaching. The institutes attempt to develop that skill by having participating teachers go through the entire process of the hearing during their week there. The Center believes that the best way for teachers to seamlessly apply the interactive methods of the curriculum is to model the institute on those very methods. After returning to the classroom, 94% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the summer institute provided them with the skills needed to facilitate simulated hearings.

Many participants did go on to conduct hearings after their experience at the institute. Prior to attending an institute, only 15% of participants had held simulated hearings. After attending an institute, 49% of participants held simulated congressional hearings (competitive and noncompetitive). Of these, 72% participated in a classroom hearing, 18% in a congressional district competitive hearing, 18% in a state competition, and 2% in the national competition.

<sup>10</sup> Research has verified the importance of utilizing interactive methods in classroom instruction. One study conducted on **We the People** students found that political tolerance increased with each round of the competition. See Richard A. Brody (1994) "Secondary Education and Political Attitudes: Examining the Effects on Political Tolerance of the *We the People*... Curriculum." [http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/BrodyR\\_Secondary94.pdf](http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/BrodyR_Secondary94.pdf)



**Obstacles to Program Implementation**

In their comments, participants cited two factors as the greatest obstacles to implementing the program in its entirety: lack of time and difficulty in integrating the curriculum with existing state and national standards. Teachers found that the program takes considerable time to implement, especially when preparing for and conducting a hearing. One participant wrote “Since Government in my state is only a one semester class, it is hard to get the kids all the information and participate in the hearing.”

Many teachers felt that they needed additional exposure to practical applications of the program. A second participant stated that “While the academic content was great and very informative and the scholars were fine, I feel too much time was devoted to them. We, as teachers, need to become versed in how best to teach our students this material once we return to our classrooms.”

In a related issue, some teachers were more concerned with ways they could incorporate the content of the curriculum with existing standards. A participant explained this need of incorporating existing standards: “...as a California teacher who is expected to follow the California State framework, I don’t think it’s really possible to spend as much time on the **We the People** curriculum and to culminate with the mock hearing in the same time frame...we have too much history to cover before standardized testing at the end of the year.” This sentiment was shared by a number of teachers in their comments—many of them requesting additional time allotted to pedagogical methodologies and more discussions on how to adequately integrate the

program into their existing pre-approved district curricula and standards. Other obstacles mentioned include distaste for the competition-like atmosphere of the hearing, and the need for more support in setting up hearings once they returned to the classroom.

## **Considerations for Future Institutes**

### *Attract More New Teachers*

The 2005 institutes attracted many more teachers new to the field of education than in previous years. Twenty-nine percent of teachers in attendance had taught five years or less and 28% had been teaching from six to ten years. This indicates that the institutes have done a superior job of recruiting newer teachers—a positive development when we consider that many of the 20% of teachers who have been teaching for over twenty years may soon retire. Of course, this could be and likely is, at least partially attributable to a number of outside factors, including, but not limited to, the number of new teachers entering the field of civics and social studies. Regardless, the institute directors should work hard to recruit new teachers who will be able to extend the life of the program and who may be more amenable to its structural requirements. These efforts may include outreach to schools of education that prepare the next generation of teachers, inviting more school administrators to participate, and aggressively promoting the **We the People** program.

### *Better Understanding the Needs of Elementary School Teachers*

The creation of institutes geared specifically to upper elementary teachers has been very successful and none of the participants from either of those two institutes expressed any doubt about their ability to run a simulated congressional hearing. Moreover, 100% of participants of these institutes either agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the summer institute was a valuable professional development experience; the institute was intellectually stimulating; and they had used the knowledge gained from the institute in their classrooms. All participants of the two upper elementary institutes also indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in these institutes increased their knowledge of the historical foundations of the American democratic system and improved their understanding of how the Framers created the Constitution. Ninety-nine percent either agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the institute taught them more about the development and expansion of the Bill of Rights and increased their confidence in teaching students how the Constitution and Bill of Rights are

relevant today. Ninety-eight percent of those teachers attending the elementary institutes reported that their participation improved their ability to facilitate classroom discussions and debates about political issues. All upper elementary institute participants indicated that the institute inspired their teaching of civics and government and that they would recommend the institute to other teachers.

Though the Center's experiment in offering two annual institutes geared specifically to upper elementary teachers has been notably successful, this should not eclipse the importance of maintaining state institutes that serve teachers of all levels. The question that remains for state institute directors to consider is by what means state institutes can better foster inclusion of their upper elementary teacher cohorts.

Elementary texts comprise the largest portion of both free books distributed under the Center's grants and books sold, followed by middle school texts. Yet, only 23% of teachers at these institutes teach primary grade students, and 24% teach middle school. The obvious tilt toward high school teachers seems problematic when there are so many upper elementary and middle school teachers using the texts without the experience of participation in an institute. Moreover, the great emphasis placed on preparation for a simulated congressional hearing and the use of high school text, in many ways, focuses the emphasis of the institutes on high school curriculum. The sheer number of participants who expressed doubt about the applicability of the program for the age group they service attests to the need to separate out upper elementary and middle school teachers much more thoroughly than has been the case in past institutes.

A number of participants teaching at the elementary level commented that they found the institutes geared too specifically to the high school level; too little time was spent on how to utilize the program in their upper elementary and middle school classrooms. Additionally, two teachers stated that their position as elementary school teachers put them at a disadvantage in comparison with high school teachers at the institute. As one elementary teacher states, "...I found a lot of the institute too high level for elementary. It was hard to bring the information to an appropriate developmental level."

It is essential that institutes separate out teachers by level in the pedagogy sessions and that these sessions focus specifically on the application of the program for upper and lower elementary school students. There should be an emphasis on different methods for conducting hearings for younger children. Perhaps institute directors and coordinators can separate upper

elementary and middle school teachers and replace some of the time spent on the simulated hearing at the conference on additional pedagogy sessions.

### *Follow-up*

On all counts, it is especially important that district and state coordinators regularly follow up with participants. Many participants expressed a desire for ongoing communication with their coordinators and the Center on future workshops; additional supplemental resources; specific advice on conducting hearings; resources on teaching the program to younger students; availability of new instructional materials; database of teachers doing **We the People** in each community; networking opportunities with other teachers; updates on events directly related to the content of the course (e.g., Supreme Court cases relating to the Bill of Rights); notifications on local hearings that teachers can observe; more practice questions to share with students; access to bilingual materials for classroom usage; guidance on developing competitive teams; notifications for upcoming seminars and conferences; access to videos/visual supplements to incorporate into lessons; database of **We the People** lesson plans; and monthly **We the People** updates and news. Many of these requests can be addressed through greater district and state coordinator follow-up with participants, and perhaps with periodic email updates from the Center to former institute attendees. The Center should also consider options to better disseminate its collaborative lesson plans and curriculum supplements to former teachers, either through email updates or through its website. Moreover, many teachers indicated that they would like periodic follow-up trainings to address questions they have *after* implementing the program and to reinforce what they learned during their time at the institute.

### *Institute Structure*

A few participants (N=13) indicated that they would have liked to spend more time in pedagogy sessions that could help them with both the full implementation of the program and as a forum to share suggestions of how best to integrate the program into existing district, state, and federal standards. Several participants also commented that they would have enjoyed more discussion time after lectures or scheduled into the institute structure. In addition, many individuals requested that institute directors warn incoming teachers of the intense nature of the institute, and that they be provided with all their readings well in advance.

Given the fact that more than 49% of respondents are not holding hearings after leaving the institute (mainly due to a lack of time), the Center should consider how best to address this challenge. Though follow-up will play an important role in this, it may also help if there were a greater emphasis on how to integrate the program into existing standards of each state and to focus on how to conduct classroom hearings in a shorter period of time than competitive hearings currently require. The Center should also take a more active role in explaining why the congressional hearing is essential to the **We the People** program. Clarifying the correlation between the program and state guidelines for testing might convince teachers that hearings are a valuable use of time.

## **Recommendations**

- Continue to contact the teachers following the institute. Many participants stated that they had trouble finding support in implementing the hearing in their community.
- Spend more time addressing the implementation of the hearing. Many respondents reported that when the time came, they were unable to find judges, confused as to how to integrate the hearing with their classroom lessons, or uncomfortable developing questions to be used in the hearing. Although most were assisted by their state/district coordinator, it would be useful to address this concern during the institute. Additionally, there is a very urgent need to stress the importance of holding the hearing.
- Because **We the People** is widely used at lower elementary levels, it is necessary to adapt the program to fulfill the needs lower-level elementary teachers. Many elementary teachers cited concerns regarding the hearing and its applicability to their grade level.
- Increase the number of new teachers. While this number improved considerably for the summer institutes in 2005, it could be increased for next year.
- Correlation with state civics standards remains a common request of institute participants. Incorporating a presentation with explicit descriptions of how the program can better match state standards would alleviate teachers' concerns. State or district coordinators should consider how to coordinate such an effort, as they are more familiar with local requirements.

- The national institutes for elementary teachers were well received, but the state institutes should consider how to prevent elementary teachers from reportedly feeling “under-qualified” when comparing themselves to middle and high school teachers. This feeling of inadequacy may translate into their impressions of the program. Elementary teachers need to be separated from middle school and high school teachers in order to address their specific concerns for younger students and age-appropriate curriculum for their classroom.
- It may be necessary to specifically address elementary school teachers at the beginning of the institute to instill a sense of confidence and dissuade feelings of inadequacy. Explain that the process of completing the hearings may be uncomfortable, but enables them to better relate to the students’ struggles. Research has shown this process is imperative to their success; including such research at the institute or spending time discussing it may alleviate some of their concerns as well.
- Many respondents requested more time to be spent on “best practices” for classroom instruction. They reported feeling inspired by the philosophy and pedagogy taught, but lacked the practical application experience when returning to their classroom.
- A follow-up seminar or institute would be beneficial to participants as well as to the Center. Teachers wanted to address their concerns and share their experiences with colleagues and trainers after their first year. This scenario would allow them the time and experience necessary to identify where problems occurred. Additionally, the Center would be able to administer a follow-up survey to better serve the needs of future institutes.