

## **A More Perfect Union: Civic Education for American Families**

**Syllabus Detail—<http://www.primetimefamily.org/perfect-union-resources/>**

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of PRIME TIME, we are highlighting civic education as a means for teaching the vital responsibility of every American to understand our country's founding principals and systems of government and to actively support the maintenance of democracy and local communities. Fall 2016 Louisiana sites will receive a new series of books and discussion resources entitled "A More Perfect Union: Civic Education for American Families." This series emphasizes the relevance of basic democratic tenets to contemporary issues. Via exploration of books, web-based video, online primary source documents, and news stories, participants will be guided to identify and examine American principals and values while connecting them to current issues and events. Online resources will be posted to <http://www.primetimefamily.org/perfect-union-resources/> to aid program coordinators, scholars, storytellers, and preschool facilitators in the planning and implementation of their programs.

### ***HUMANITIES THEMES***

The session themes included in this series reflect ideas and principals that are central to American democracy (unity, equality, liberty, the common good, the power of voting, and representative governance). The themes of the sessions are intentionally familiar and relatable terms that serve to help families better comprehend the more challenging session titles which are terms found within the Preamble of the Constitution of the United States: We the People, Establish Justice, Domestic Tranquility, General Welfare, Blessings of Liberty, and Establish this Constitution. The theme/title combination is meant to draw attention to the contemporary relevancy of the language the founding fathers chose as means for articulating the basis for the systems and institutions that form the American government. PRIME TIME humanities scholars will be trained to ensure that both the parents/guardians and children think critically about the ways in which the themes, books, and online resources connect to personal experiences, local news, national movements, and current events.

### ***BOOKS***

*A More Perfect Union* includes an array of books that present diverse circumstances, events, and places; navigated by an array of characters that highlight America's founding principles and democratic ideals. Each session includes one high quality children's book for families to read and discuss in relation to the session theme/contemporary issue. Each family is allowed to keep the session books (6 in total) to add to their home library. Copies of books provided for scholar/storyteller use must be returned to the program coordinator at the end of the program. To infuse a degree of quality control and to assist scholars in planning and implementing strong discussions, sample questions are included in this guide. Scholars and Storytellers can use these questions to ignite discussion or carefully develop their own open-ended questions.

### ***ONLINE RESOURCES***

Each book is complimented by an online resource that ties the session theme to a contemporary issue. The online resources are brief videos, news stories, and primary source documents that are either accessible to low-level readers or can be understood with guidance from a scholar. Recommended by project humanities scholars, online materials were chosen based on their relevancy to the session theme, brevity, accessibility for low-level readers, and source (government websites, reputable news sources, and leading educational resource developers). All program coordinators, scholars, and storytellers will receive access to the online resources via links posted to the PRIME TIME website. To infuse a degree of quality control and to assist scholars in planning and implementing strong discussions, sample questions are included in this guide. Scholars and Storytellers can use these questions to ignite discussion or carefully develop their own open-ended questions. **In most cases, online resources will require basic audio/visual equipment (a computer or smart device connected to a large screen or projector with speakers) in order to display the content to program participants. Program coordinators must contact [primetime@leh.org](mailto:primetime@leh.org) if there are issues with this requirement.**

## **SESSION DETAIL**

Each program consists of 6 weekly sessions that last 90 minutes. The storytelling and discussion portions (approximately 60 minutes) of each of those program sessions includes the introduction of the theme, presentation of a theme-related book by a trained storyteller, a humanities scholar-led review of the associated online resource (primary source document, video, or news story which connects the theme to a current event or trending issue), and a discussion using open-ended questioning. Below is a session-by-session outline of PRIME TIME's *A More Perfect Union* syllabus.

### **Session 1**

Humanities Theme/Title: Democracy/"We the People"

Book: *We the Kids: The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States* by David Cartow. *We the Kids* introduces families to the Preamble and the terms within it that will guide discussions during the upcoming sessions. This is a humorous picture book version of the Constitution's preamble in which the illustrations take center stage, depicting a group of children and a dog in a backyard adventure that mimics the words of the Preamble. The book, like the Preamble, introduces the general rights and responsibilities available to citizens. A short and friendly read on an in-depth topic; participants will be able to comprehend and relate to this title without having read this book in advance of the session.

Contemporary Issue: Citizenship

Online Resource: Video (<http://www.tpscongress.org/citizens-unite/>) "Citizens Unite! (11 minutes, 21 seconds) was produced by the Center on Congress at Indiana University with support from the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources program. This video follows Paul the Robot and Francis the Platypus as they learn how the actions of the citizens who came before us helped to shape our current society. They come to understand the many different things citizens can do to participate in our democracy as well as in our local communities. They also learn about the characteristics of good citizens that are so important to our democracy – things like listening to others, making sound decisions, and speaking up on issues that matter to us. This video is intended to introduce participants to representative democracy and how good citizenship is necessary for its preservation.

### Sample Discussion Questions:

- What do the words of the Preamble mean to you? Why?
- In what ways do these words describe life in this country today?
- What roles do Americans have in maintaining the original vision of America?
- What are some of the things we all do to demonstrate good citizenship?
- The video emphasizes listening to and communicating with others as being important to good citizenship, why do you think they did that?
- Has anyone ever witnessed or participated in some of the "good citizen" activities mentioned in the video, if so, please share your experience?
- What do you think motivates people to do some of those things?

## **Session 2**

Humanities Theme/Title: Equality/“Establish Justice”

Book: *Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles. *Ruby Bridges* tells the true story of 6-year-old Ruby Bridges who was thrust into the national spotlight in 1960 when she was allowed to attend an all-white, New Orleans school in 1960. Ruby faced angry mobs of parents who refused to send their children to school with her. With the support of her family and a single willing teacher, Ruby did not retreat, and after months of attending school alone, white families gradually began sending their children back to the school.

Contemporary Issue: Equality in Education

Online Resource: Video (<http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/10000002460625/an-education-in-equality.html>) “An Education in Equality” (10 minutes, 39 seconds); a short film adapted from a feature-length documentary film entitled “American Promise” was produced and directed by Joe Brewster and Michèle Stephenson with support from the Ford Foundation and the Sundance Institute. Joe and Michèle are the parents of Idris, an African American boy who attends a prestigious private school in Manhattan. Filmed over 13 years, the work chronicles Idris’ journey of “privilege and challenge” as his parents attempt to shield him “from the African-American male achievement gap in education” by sending him to the Dalton School and challenging him to work hard.

Sample Discussion Questions:

- What are some similarities between Ruby and Idris? What are some differences?
- Why do you think both Ruby’s and Idris’ parents chose to send them to the schools they chose?
- What is a “good” education?
- Which character is likely getting a better education? Why?
- Should everyone have the same kind of education? Why or why not?
- If you could choose to attend a public or private school which would it be? Why?
- If someone is unhappy with their education what can/should they do about it?
- In the video, why do you think Idris and his mother argued?
- During her ordeal, do you think Ruby and her parents were ever upset with each other? Why or why not?
- What kind of school-related problems do you experience at home? How do they compare to Idris’ family’s experience?

## **Session 3**

Humanities Theme/Title: Liberty/“Domestic Tranquility”

Book: *The Big Orange Splot* by Daniel Manus Pinkwater. In this story, we meet Mr. Plumbean who lives on a neat street where all of the houses are the same. One day, by unexplained chance, a flying seagull drops a can of orange paint onto Mr. Plumbean’s house, leaving a big, orange splot on the roof. Mr. Plumbean eventually decides to embrace the initially unacceptable splot, and adds a multitude of additional and extreme embellishments to his home, which he says, “looks like all my dreams”. His neighbors are displeased by the renovations. One-by-one they visit him to demand that he restore his house to its original neatness/sameness. After each conversation, the neighbors all change their homes to look like their dreams. At the end of the story, the street is filled with colorful and interesting-looking houses.

Contemporary Issue: Personal Freedom vs. Responsibility to Society

Online Resource: Video (<http://www.clickorlando.com/news/ocala-saggy-pants-law-challenged-by-critics/27625202>) "Ocala 'saggy pants' law challenged by critics" (2 minutes, 23 seconds) was produced by WKMG News in Orlando, Florida. The video is a news segment reporting on passage of a city ordinance banning residents from wearing pants two inches below the waistline. Proponents of the ordinance argue that low pants are indecent and/or offensive. Opponents argue that the ordinance violates freedom of expression rights and will result in unfair and unnecessary fines and imprisonment of young people.

Sample Discussion Questions:

- In the book, Mr. Plumbean's expression of his dreams through his house seems important to him, what do you find important and how do you express that?
- Has anyone ever told you that you could not or should not express the things that are important to you, if so, how did that make you feel? What did you do?
- In the book, Mr. Plumbean expressed himself with an alligator on his lawn, is that okay? Why or why not?
- The Constitution permits freedom of speech and expression for citizens. Do you think Mr. Plumbean would have been protected by the Constitution if his neighbors decided to call the police? Why or why not?
- Do you think those who decide to wear saggy pants in the Florida city shown the video should be protected by the Constitution? Why or why not?
- There was a time in this country (not very long ago) when women wearing pants was considered indecent and wrong. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
- Do you think women who wore pants back then (even though others did not like it and/or found it offensive) should have been fined or jailed? Why or why not?
- Should we always be allowed to express the things that are important to us? Why or why not?
- Who gets to decide what a person can and cannot do? Is that fair? Why or why not?

**Session 4**

Humanities Theme/Title: The Common Good/"General Welfare"

Book: *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss. This book tells the story of the industrious Once-ler who gobbles up a natural resource (Truffula trees) for the sake of supplying a highly demanded and profitable product to eager consumers. The Once-ler is reprimanded and warned by the concerned Lorax (who speaks for the trees) about the delicate balance of nature that is being disturbed by his actions and the impending consequences for all. The Once-ler ignores The Lorax to the benefit of this business, but at great cost to the Truffula tree valley and all its inhabitants.

Contemporary Issue: Consumerism and limited resources

Online Resource: Video (<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/lps07.sci.life.eco.wetlands/the-value-of-wetlands/>) "The Value of Wetlands" was produced by Texas Parks and Wildlife Division and is available through PBS Learning Media (3 minutes, 8 seconds). The video offers a brief but compelling look at the importance of Wetlands, what threatens them, and what some individuals are doing about it.

Sample Discussion Questions:

- What does the warning given by the Lorax, “unless”, mean? Who is he speaking to?
- Who do you think the Once-ler represents in real life? Why?”
- How about the Lorax, does he represent anyone who is real? Why?
- Why doesn’t the Once-ler listen to the Lorax?
- Of all of the characters, who would you choose to be in the story? Why?
- There is a statement made at the end of the video, “finding a balance between man and nature will not be easy.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Have you ever seen or been to a wetlands area, if so please share your experience? Can we do anything to help wetlands or the environment, why/how or why not?

**Session 5**

Humanities Theme/Title: Power of Voting/“Blessings of Liberty”

Book: *Grace for President* by Kelly DiPucchio. When Grace's teacher reveals that the United States has never had a female president, Grace decides to be the first, and begins her career in politics as a candidate in the election for school president. Grace’s campaign provides readers a fun introduction to the American electoral system, but also emphasizes American ideals such as hard work, courage, and independent thought.

Contemporary Issue: National Elections

Online Resource: **Video (TBD)**. This project will be implemented during a presidential election year (2016). A current video/news story with non-political information on all remaining candidates will be identified and incorporated into the syllabus. This content will serve to familiarize families with the contenders for the highest office in our nation.

Sample Discussion Questions:

- In an election there is always a winner and a loser. Is that okay? Why or why not?
- In our system of government, the person or issue that gets the most votes usually wins, is that fair?
- Why do you think there has never been a woman president in the United States?
- When she grows up, do you think Grace could actually become president? Why or why not?
- Would you vote for Grace? Why or why not?
- What would you do if you voted for something or someone that did not win?
- How would you feel if someone you voted for helped to make decisions, rules, or laws that you didn’t like?
- Why do you think the people in the video decided to run for president?
- Would you like to be president? Why or why not?

**Session 6**

Humanities Theme/Title: Representative Governance/“Establish this Constitution”

Book: *Shh! We’re Writing the Constitution* by Jean Fritz. The author of this book provides a factual and detailed account of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and the personalities and struggles associated with writing and ratifying the Constitution using plain and humorous language. The book also includes the complete text of the Constitution of the United States. Due to the length of the book (44 pages), participants will receive this book at the start of session 1 and will be encouraged and reminded to read/review 7 to 8 pages during each week of the program in preparation for the final session. The storyteller will read a summarized version of the story prepared by Dr. Gary Joiner and Freddi Evans on the final evening in preparation for the discussion.

Contemporary Issue: The Role of Government

Online Resources: Video (<http://www.timeforkids.com/photos-video/video/tfk-explains-us-constitution-103921>) "TFK Explains: The U.S. Constitution" (2 minutes, 46 seconds). This video was produced by Time Magazine's *Time for Kids* (TFK), to commemorate Constitution Day, and succinctly explains details of the document's purpose, drafting, authors, and relevance to our current system of government.

Digitized Primary Source Document: (<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1667751?q=constitution>) The Constitution of the United States. Available online via the National Archives digital catalog. Participants will view a digital image of the original Constitution of the United States.

Sample Discussion Questions:

- What is the purpose of a constitution?
- How are the delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention different from or similar to today's senators and representatives?
- Why was it so difficult for the delegates to complete the Constitution?
- Remembering the words in the Preamble, do you believe the Constitution makes those things possible for all Americans?
- Is the Constitution important to you? Why or why not?
- Can you imagine living in Louisiana as a separate country from other states? Why or why not? What do you think that would be like?
- If you could write a constitution for your own country, what's one thing you would include? Why?
- Have you ever seen anything that looks like the Constitution document? What was it? Was it important too?