



### **Constitution Homeroom – 15-Minute Activities to Get Students Thinking About Their Rights**

Many schools have time set aside at the beginning of the day for announcements. But what if, on September 17, one of those announcements meant that students' constitutional rights were in jeopardy? How would kids react to an authority encroaching on their liberty? Depending on your school's culture, choose the announcement that you think might provoke the best discussion among your students.

- Affix color-coded stickers or post-its to books in the classroom or library. Announce that students may only read books with a sticker that corresponds to their particular category (girls/boys, different grade levels, taking different courses, etc.).
- Inform students that, in order to discourage “sexting,” their cell phones will be collected at the beginning of each school day, and their text messages screened for inappropriate content.
- Announce that the school administration has decided to disband the Debate Club, the Model UN, the Current Events Club, the Gay-Straight Alliance, or any club at your school that might discuss anything considered “politically controversial.”
- Reassign seating in your classroom so that boys are in the front of the room and girls are in the back. Explain that this new policy has been put in place because of research showing that paying attention in class is easier for girls than for boys.
- Announce that, due to parent complaints, any student whose Ipad or other mp3 player holds music that glorifies violence or contains obscenities will have the player confiscated indefinitely by the school administration. Any teacher suspecting a student of possessing such music in school is permitted to review that student's playlists at any time.
- Tell students that, in the interest of student equity and to prevent theft, no student may wear or bring an article of clothing to school that is worth more than \$75.
- Announce that the athletic department has decided to reduce costs by eliminating all junior varsity girls' sports teams. There will still be varsity sports for girls, and both varsity and junior varsity sports for boys.

## Longer Lessons

### **Teaching the Constitution**

*Lesson 1: The U.S. Constitution: Preamble, Articles, and Amendments:* <http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/the-us-constitution-preamble-articles-and-amendments.html>

Depending on the amount of time available, this can be taught as a flipped lesson, with the video assigned as homework, or the videos can be shown in class. Students can check their comprehension by taking the quiz associated with the video.

Have students fill out the chart below. The first five rows are just the facts regarding the requirements of office. In the bottom row, students should speculate about what desirable personal qualities are implied by the requirements of office – for instance, what does it mean that a senator’s term is three times as long as a representative’s? Why do the Supreme Court justices have life tenure? Why do you have to be older to serve as President than to serve in Congress?

	<i>House of Reps. (Art. I, Sect. 2)</i>	<i>Senate (Art. I, Sect. 3)</i>	<i>President (Art. II)</i>	<i>Supreme Court (Art. III)</i>
<b>Length of term</b>				
<b>Age</b>				
<b>Citizenship</b>				
<b>How many?</b>				
<b>How elected?</b>				
<b>Personal Qualities</b>				

Other Discussion Questions:

- When you think of what government is supposed to do, do you think of the same things that are in the preamble? Did the framers leave anything out?
- Why is it important for the three branches of government to have different responsibilities?

- When one of the branches disagrees with another, it can become very difficult for



the U.S. government to get things done – do you think this is a flaw of the system, or did the framers build in that inefficiency on purpose? Or is it some of each?

*Lesson 2: The Bill of Rights: The Constitution's First 10 Amendments:* <http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/the-bill-of-rights-the-constitutions-first-10-amendments.html>

Again, depending on the amount of time available, this can be taught as a flipped lesson, with the video assigned as homework, or the videos can be shown in class. Students can check their comprehension by taking the quiz associated with the video.

Assign pairs of students one or two amendments (depending on class size) to examine closely. Explain that the Constitution overrules a regular law – the idea of *judicial review* means that, if the Supreme Court decides that a law violates the Constitution, the law is struck from the books.

For each amendment, ask the pairs to come up with one *outlandish* law that would violate the amendment (for instance, “Anyone who posts spoilers on Facebook about *So You Think You Can Dance* within 24 hours of it airing will be sent to prison until the season is over” would pretty clearly violate the First Amendment), and one law that people might actually think is a good idea (for instance, “Hate groups like the KKK are not allowed to hold rallies in public parks”), but would still violate the amendment. As each pair shares their examples, use their ideas to highlight the idea that the Bill of Rights often protects a *minority* whose ideas or actions are unpopular, but whose fundamental rights are as important as those of the majority.

### **Constitutional Two Truths and a Lie**

Divide the class into groups, with each group responsible for reading a part of the Constitution. Each group will come up with two true statements and one made-up statement about the content of their section. When the class comes back together, each group will present their statements, and their classmates will have to guess which statement is made up. [This is a way to highlight some of the lesser-known facts about the Constitution – for instance, if the group reading Article III says, “There is no limit to the number of Supreme Court justices the president can appoint,” many of their classmates may be surprised to learn that that is true!]



## **Dilemma Choices:**

The following dilemmas can be used for any of the following discussion formats – the Fishbowl, the Snowball, Five Thinking Hats, or Talk Show.

1. In health class, students are asked to complete an anonymous survey describing past and present drug and alcohol use. One student refuses to complete the survey, saying he does not want to incriminate himself, and his health grade is docked a full letter grade for failure to complete the assignment. He is also required to meet with the school counselor, since the teacher sees his refusal to complete the survey as an admission of drug use.

*(Teacher notes for Dilemma #1: This dilemma can be used to highlight the Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination, as the student's refusal to complete the survey might cause him to inadvertently confess to something. It can also be used to illustrate the right to due process, as his mandated counseling session could be seen as a loss of liberty without having actually been found "guilty" of anything.)*

2. In a Student Council election speech, a candidate promises to reinstate the practice of saying a Christian prayer before athletic events, saying "there are only, like, five Jewish kids in this school anyway, and I've asked them, and they don't mind." The school administration removes the candidate from the election, citing her "disrespect of others' religious beliefs."

*(Teacher notes for Dilemma #2: This is a First Amendment situation in a few ways. The Supreme Court has found that it is OK for students to pray of their own volition at a school event – this is their right to free exercise of their own religious beliefs. However, it is not OK for a public school to require or even endorse an official prayer, as that would violate the establishment clause, which has been interpreted to mean that government cannot show preference for one religion over another. All this being said, the real issue here is one of free speech – regardless of whether this candidate's proposal would meet constitutional muster, isn't she free to say whatever she wants in an election speech... just like all those kids who promise to get rid of homework and make the cafeteria food better?!)*

3. The school newspaper conducts an investigation of the firewall software used to control student access to inappropriate websites at school. They find that access to information about LBGTQ issues is being restricted and labeled as "pornography," while access to anti-LBGTQ information is not restricted. The school administration asks the newspaper advisor to postpone publication of the article until the school has a chance to review the accusations and make a decision about whether to continue using the software.

*(Teacher notes for Dilemma #3: There's an interesting conversation to be had here about freedom of access to information. Is that something the framers would have wanted? What would they have thought about the internet? Is there anything in the Bill of Rights that gives us a hint? Beyond that discussion is the question of "prior review" – when a school just wants to see a student publication ahead of time – and "prior restraint" – when the school acts to censor what is actually published. Many states have laws explicitly prohibiting prior restraint of student publications. In this situation, is the school engaging in prior review, prior restraint, or neither?)*

4. On National Coming Out Day, the school's Gay-Straight Alliance hosts a guest speaker, and many students wear T-shirts with slogans such as "Jesus Is Not a Homophobe" and "Marriage Is So Gay." One student wears a T-shirt to school that says "Straight Pride" on the front and has quotations from Scripture condemning



homosexuality on the back. The principal asks that student put a sweatshirt on to cover the shirt's message, but the student refuses, saying he shouldn't have to cover his shirt unless other students have to cover theirs. That student is suspended from school for a week.

*(Teacher notes for Dilemma #4: This is an opportunity to talk about dress codes in general, as it is obviously constitutional for a school to place some restrictions on dress, but in this situation, those restrictions would seem to violate the First Amendment's protection of free speech. Since many dress codes require that students' clothing be "respectful," there's an opportunity to talk about whether it matters that a guest speaker was there, or that the theme of the particular day is geared toward supporting gay students. Would the student have been asked to cover his shirt on a different day? How should schools strike a balance between creating a safe and respectful environment for all students, and protecting all students' right to speak freely?)*

5. After spending four hours taking a state standardized test in school, a student tweets, "I've got better things to do than color in circles," and posts it along with a photo of a friend sticking her tongue out next to the stack of test booklets. The school, calling the photo a "breach of testing security," requires the student to delete the tweet and suspends her for five days.

*(Teacher notes for Dilemma #5: Another internet question here – does the school have any business monitoring its students' online presence, or is that protected by the First Amendment? Many standardized test instructions stipulate that no phones or cameras may be used in the testing site, so this student was clearly breaking that rule. However, if that rule exists to keep students from cheating, and none of the test's content was photographed, should the rule still be enforced in the same way? Can the school tell a student to delete a tweet or Facebook post?)*

6. After a student posts a photograph of himself in a trench coat on his Tumblr, his friend comments, "You look like one of those kids from Columbine, dude." The student responds, "Yeah, because I'm wearing a coat, it means I'm going to bring all my dad's guns to school tomorrow and shoot everyone." A classmate's parent who works at the school sees the post on her daughter's computer and reports it to the principal, who alerts the police. When the student is on his way to school the next day, police arrest him and charge him with threatening bodily harm.

*(Teacher notes for Dilemma #6: This also has to do with the internet, but what's more, it is the only dilemma that moves beyond school policy and involves law enforcement agencies. In this era of school shootings, how should schools react to situations such as this? Did the principal have no choice, or could she have used*

*her discretion to decide that the student was just being sarcastic? Should that post have been considered “probable cause” to issue an arrest warrant?)*



### ***Constitution Fisbowl***

Choose one of the dilemmas listed – put it up on the board and read it out loud to the class. Have students write silently for three minutes in response to the following questions:

- How would you feel if you were the student getting in trouble or being asked to change your actions? What if it was your friend?
- What reason might the school have for creating this rule?
- Is there a way to accomplish the school's goal in a way that seems fairer to you?

Then, divide the class into two groups – have one group sit in the middle and discuss their responses for ten minutes, while the other half of the class listens. Make sure everyone in the middle has a chance to speak. Then, have the observer group reflect on the conversation they saw (*not* on the constitutional issue discussed by the inside group):

- Did they think all the relevant points were raised?
- Were the students respectful of one another's opinions, or did some people get shut down?
- What was it like to listen without talking? Was it difficult?

If time permits, choose a second dilemma to discuss, and have the students switch roles.

### ***Constitution Snowball*** (adapted from Dr. Terry Cavanaugh – [www.drscavanaugh.org](http://www.drscavanaugh.org))

Choose one of the dilemmas listed. Ask students to take three minutes to respond individually in writing to the situation. Then, ask them to discuss the situation in pairs for five minutes. Continue to double the size of the groups every few minutes until the whole class has reconvened.

### ***Five Thinking Hats*** (adapted from CitizenScience @ Bristol University)

Choose one of the dilemmas listed. Put students in groups of five, and assign each student one of five thinking “hats” (real or imaginary) that will determine his or her approach to the problem, as described below.

- **Red Hat:** You look at these dilemmas through the lens of emotion. What is your gut reaction to this situation? How do you feel about what has happened, and how might others in the situation feel?
- **Blue Hat:** You look at these dilemmas from the perspective of the school administration. What are you trying to accomplish? How do you think your actions are helping students?
- **Yellow Hat:** You look at these dilemmas from the perspective of the student body. What different reactions might exist among the students? Whose rights are at stake, and what are those rights?
- **Green Hat:** You look at these dilemmas through the lens of creativity. What are the problems here, and how might they be solved in a unique or creative way? What is no one thinking of yet?
- **Orange Hat:** You look at these dilemmas through the lens of pure logic. When you take away emotion and just consider the absolute facts, what changes?



Have each group discuss the dilemma in the mode assigned by their “hat.” After those conversations wind down, have the whole group debrief together without those “hats” on:

- To what extent did you have to change your opinion in order to satisfy the requirements of your hat?
- What did you learn from considering those different perspectives?
- What was helpful about thinking about a problem in this way? What was unhelpful?
- What was one thing someone in your group said that really made you think in a new way?

### ***Talk Show***

Choose one student to be the “host” or facilitator, and assign other students to play the roles in the selected dilemma. The host then interviews the people involved in the situation, also inviting audience members to offer questions or commentary.



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