

JAMES MADISON LEGACY PROJECT EXPANSION RESEARCH

Executive Summary 2026

CERL
Civic Education Research Lab

Center for Civic Education

Formed at the nexus of academia, practice, and public policy, the Civic Education Research Lab (CERL) at Georgetown University is committed to studying civic education and engagement in a democratic society. Founded by Dr. Diana Owen, a Georgetown political science professor, CERL works with collaborative partners to unite academic rigor with the insights of practitioners in the field. The CERL team conducts evidence-based research on the effectiveness of civic teaching and learning at the K-12 and post-secondary levels. Our studies explore the impact of teacher education on student learning and examine students' acquisition of civic knowledge, dispositions, and competencies through classroom curricula and civic programs. As the requirements of responsible and effective citizenship in the 21st century have become increasingly complex, CERL examines the role of civic education in preparing young people to navigate the digital age political world. CERL's research on civic engagement explores the connection between civic education and community involvement. We also track the evolution and consequences of media technology for participation in elections and community affairs. CERL hosts an online repository of resources and information for scholars, educators, and policy makers. To learn more visit our website: https://cerl.georgetown.edu/ and subscribe to our Substack: @civiceducationresearchlab.

The Center for Civic Education has led K-12 civic education nationwide since its founding in 1965. Through its flagship programs We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution and Project Citizen: Community Engagement in Policy, the Center's innovative, evidence-based programs have reached more than 50 million students and 460,000 educators in over 80 countries. The Center provides professional development, high-quality curricular materials, inquiry-driven digital and print resources, toolkits, and support for civic educators on a broad scale. Its programs are aligned to social studies standards in every state, supported by a national network of state partners, and receive active endorsement from state bar associations, foundations, and educational, professional, business, and community organizations in every state and the District of Columbia. Other Center programs and resources include the Civil Discourse Toolkit, Media Literacy lesson and video series, Civics Inquiries, Constitution EXPLAINED video series, and the 60-Second Civics daily podcast. The Center and CERL have received nine major grants from the U.S. Department of Education. These include the James Madison Legacy Project (2015-2020), Strengthening Democracy through History and Civics (2018- 2021), Project Citizen Research Program (2019-2024), James Madison Legacy Project Expansion (2021-2025), We the People: Civics that Empowers All Students (2022-2025), Project Community: Media Literacy and Public Policy (2023-2025). Project Citizen: Integrated Civic Competencies (2024-2028), We the People: Documents of Democracy (2025-2028), and Literacy for We the People (2025-2029) with the Delaware Department of Education. To learn more: https://www.civiced.org/

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THE JAMES MADISON LEGACY PROJECT EXPANSION

The James Madison Legacy Project Expansion (JMLPE) was a three-year curricular project that updated the Center for Civic Education's We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution curricular program. Drawing upon the research and successes of its predecessor, the James Madison Legacy Project, the JMLPE aimed to transform the We the People curriculum so that all students would achieve greater gains in civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. In addition to the curriculum adaptations, the Center developed an aligned professional learning program to support teachers' implementation of the curriculum.

The objectives of the James Madison Legacy Project Expansion were:

1. to improve student academic performance in civics, social studies, and American government through the We the People curriculum;
2. to prepare students for civic life and responsible citizenship;
3. to improve civic outcomes for students with disabilities and English learners;
4. to design and implement a teacher professional learning program to support instruction of the We the People curriculum through a community of practice; and
5. to improve access to high-quality civics instruction by working with school leaders and increasing teachers' knowledge and instructional efficacy.

In 2022, the Center convened a five-day workshop to begin the process of updating the We the People curriculum and developing a teacher professional development program. JMLPE was fully implemented in the 2023-24 and 2024-25 academic years. Teachers attended five-day summer institutes at sites across the country which included presentations from historians and constitutional scholars, pedagogy demonstrations, and participation in a simulated hearing. Teachers received continuing support as they taught We the People to their students.

JMLPE RESEARCH

The Civic Education Research Lab (CERL) at Georgetown University conducted quantitative and qualitative research on the JMLPE. The Center, with its state partners and Civic Mentors, used the research to inform the development of the curriculum and the teacher professional learning program throughout the duration of the project. In the first year of the JMLPE, CERL fielded a pilot study of expert teachers and their students who were taught the updated We the People curriculum. CERL researched the impact of the fully implemented teacher professional learning program and the adapted We the People curriculum in the following two academic years. The research was anchored by cluster randomized control trials with school level of assignment. The impact evaluation compared teachers enrolled in the JMLPE and their students to a comparison group of teachers who instructed students in conventional civics classes. Separate studies were conducted for students in classes with high percentages of students with disabilities and English learners. The impact of the professional learning program on teachers' content knowledge and pedagogy was assessed. Over the course of two years, a total of 379 teachers and 12,501 students participated in the JMLPE research.

WE THE PEOPLE: THE CITIZEN AND THE CONSTITUTION

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is the Center for Civic Education's flagship curricular program. Developed in 1987 through the Commission on the Bicentennial, it was adopted as the principal civic education program by the U.S. Department of Education. It is a robust and comprehensive curricular program grounded in the foundations and institutions of American government focusing on constitutional principles and history, American political philosophy, the Bill of Rights, Supreme Court cases, and legislation that shaped the American constitutional system. We the People aligns to state social studies standards in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The curriculum is available for elementary, middle, and high school levels. Since its inception, the We the People program has reached over 40,000,000 students and more than 440,000 teachers. The high school and middle school curriculum consists of six units articulated as focus questions.

We the People Instructional Units

Unit One	What Are the Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System?
Unit Two	How Did the Framers Create the Constitution?
Unit Three	How Has the Constitution Been Changed to Further the Ideals Contained in the Declaration of Independence?
Unit Four	How Have the Values and Principles Embodied in the Constitution Shaped American Institutions and Practices?
Unit Five	What Rights Does the Bill of Rights Protect?
Unit Six	What Challenges Might Face American Constitutional Democracy in the Twenty-First Century?

When instructing We the People, teachers incorporate high-leverage strategies, including close-reading of complex texts, primary source analysis, role-plays, civil dialogue models, and analytical and reflective writing. The curriculum includes a culminating summative assessment in the form of simulated congressional hearings. Students in a class form teams aligned with the six instructional units. The Center hosts an annual National Finals where classes from each state come to the Washington, D.C. area to compete.

Research on We the People has consistently demonstrated the program's positive impact on teachers and students. The James Madison Legacy Project, which was implemented in 2015 to 2019, substantially enhanced teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills while increasing their efficacy in the classroom. The We the People curriculum improved high-need middle and high school students' achievement in attaining state standards in civics and government. We the People students made greater gains in knowledge of American history and government, attention to public affairs, and the ability to take part in their community than students who were taught a standard civics curriculum focused on textbook and discussion-based instruction. We the People has been shown to improve students' reading and writing literacy and STEM skills. The JMLPE is informed by and extends this research.

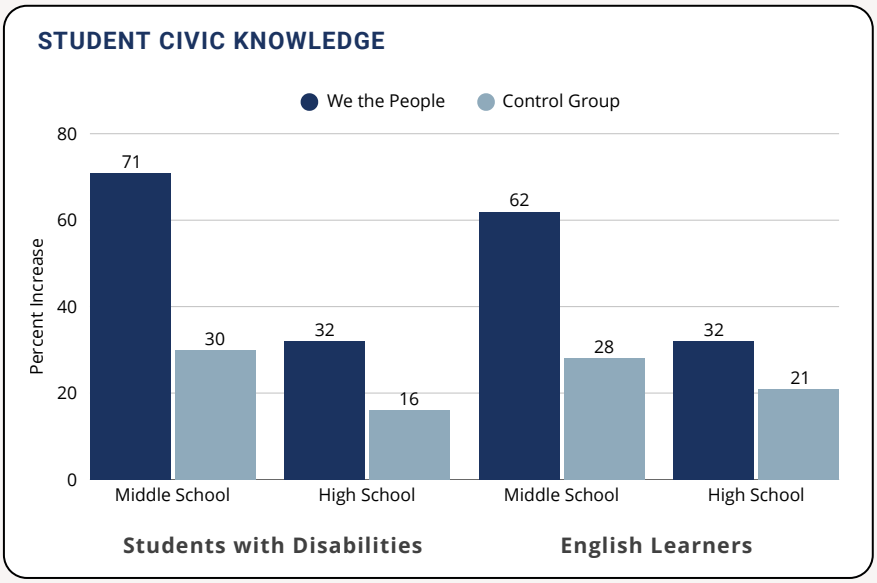
KEY FINDINGS

CERL conducted two separate research studies of teachers and students to evaluate the efficacy of the JMLPE professional learning program and the adapted We the People curriculum. The project focused on middle school (grades 5-8) and high school (grades 9-12) students. For the first study, teachers who were certified to instruct students with disabilities (SWDs) and taught a civics class with a high percentage (50% or more) of SWDs were recruited for the research. Teachers of classes with high percentages (35% or more) of English learners (ELs) were enlisted for the second study. English learners comprised 38% of the students in the study. Teachers meeting the requirements were randomly assigned to the JMLPE intervention or control groups. Control group teachers did not receive the JMLPE professional learning program and instructed a standard civics curriculum. All students of teachers enrolled in the studies were eligible to participate in the research. In most instances, SWDs and ELs took civics classes with the general student population. Thus, the research has broader implications for the civic education of all students. The student outcomes measured in the study were civic knowledge, understanding of core civics constructs, civic attentiveness, interest in government and public affairs, political efficacy, communication and civil discourse skills, teamwork and collaboration skills, media literacy skills, and civic engagement. Teachers' civic knowledge, confidence in their teaching abilities, pedagogy skills, media literacy instruction, and instructional efficacy were assessed.

CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

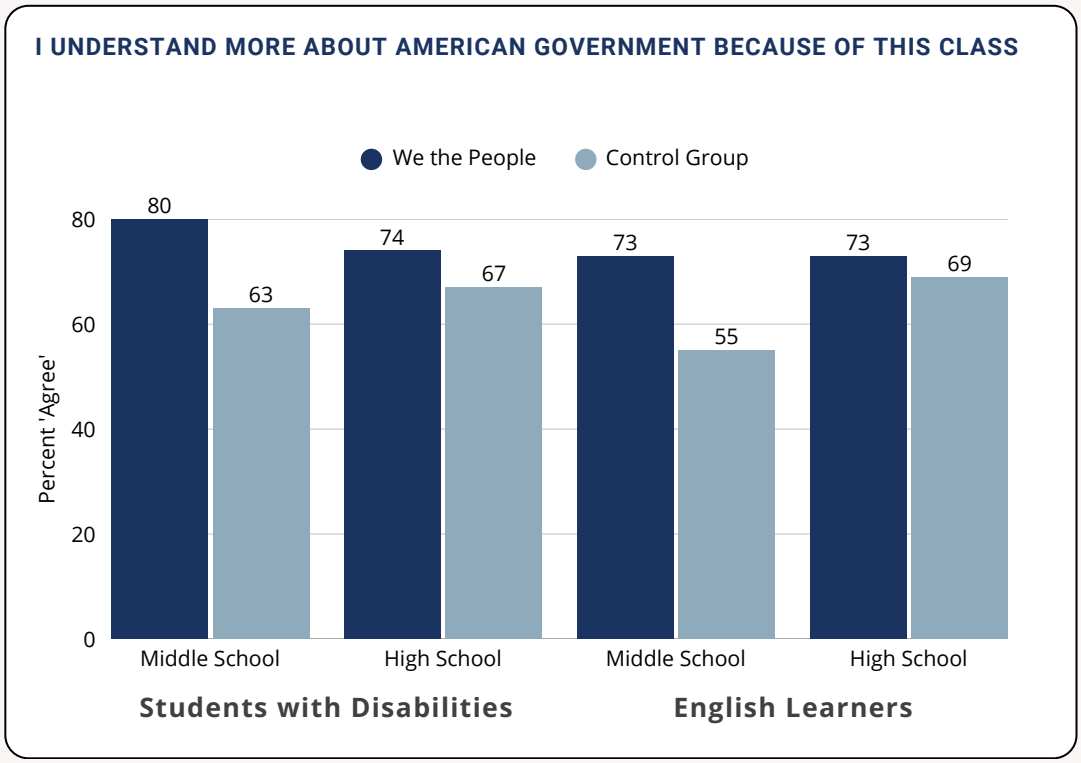
Knowledge of American history and government among middle and high school students who were taught the We the People curriculum improved significantly. The civic knowledge of middle school students in the SWD study increased by 71% compared to 32% for the control group. The scores of middle school students in the EL study improved by 62% versus 28% for the control group. The knowledge gains for high school We the People students surpassed those of the students who were taught a standard civics class.





UNDERSTANDING CORE CIVICS CONSTRUCTS

A majority of students reported that they understood more about American government because of their civics class. The percentages were significantly higher for We the People students than the control group. 80% of We the People middle school and 74% of high school students in the SWD study reported that they understood more about American government because of their class. A similar pattern was found for students in the EL study, as 73% of We the People middle and high school students indicated their understanding of American government had increased. These trends were consistent with students' gaining a greater understanding of American history and the events that shape the United States and having a better sense of their rights and responsibilities as a citizen.

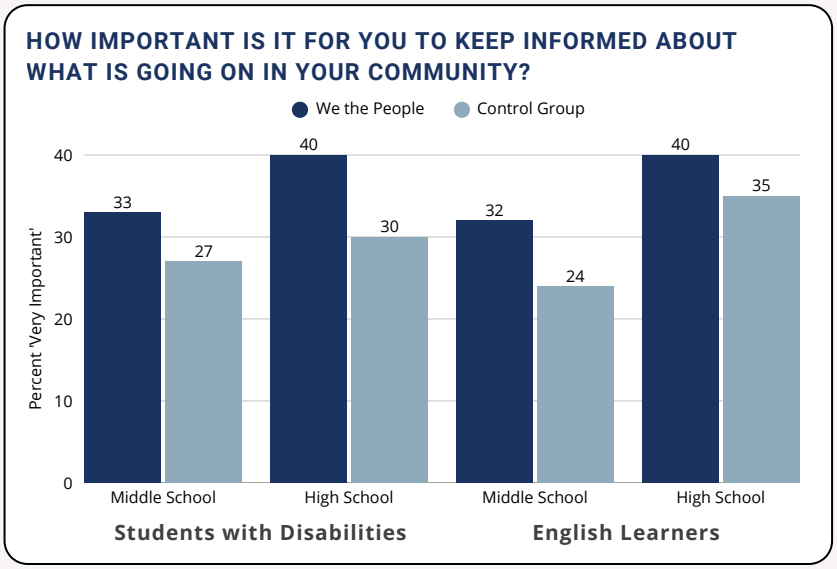




> The simulated congressional hearing was fantastic. Most of the students were motivated to learn so they could be prepared in front of the judges. They really liked how official they felt and getting to apply their knowledge in an authentic way. In addition, the audience feedback was great.
> - *JMLPE Teacher*

KEEPING INFORMED

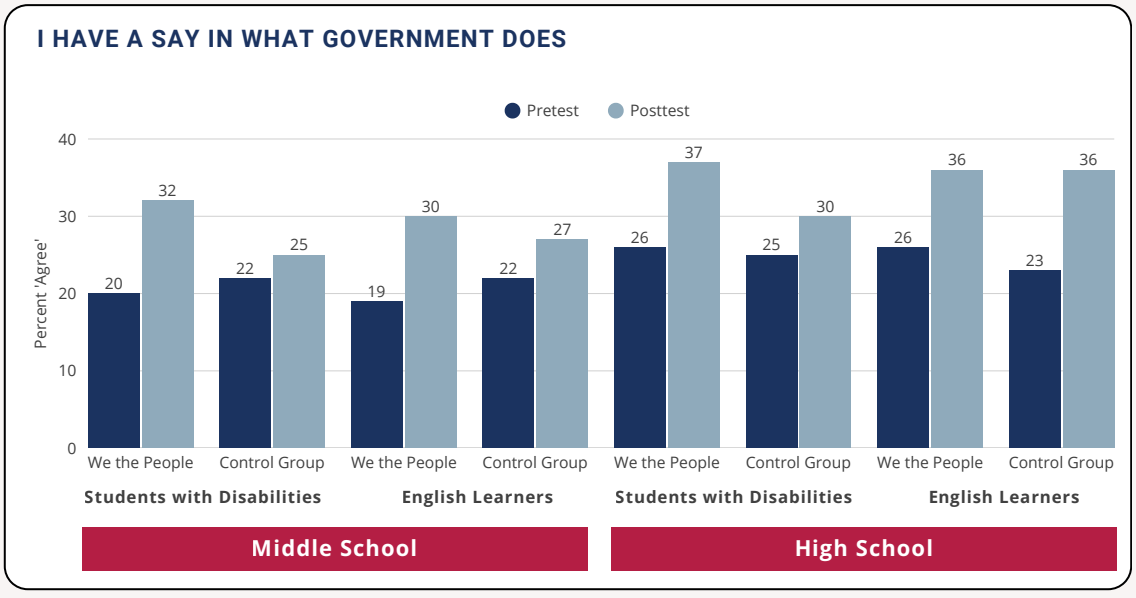
Students were more likely to feel that it was very important to keep informed about what is going on in their community after their civics classes. In classes with SWDs, 33% of middle school and 40% of high school We the People students believed keeping informed was very important compared to 27% of middle school and 30% of high school control group students. The trends were similar for the EL condition.





POLITICAL EFFICACY

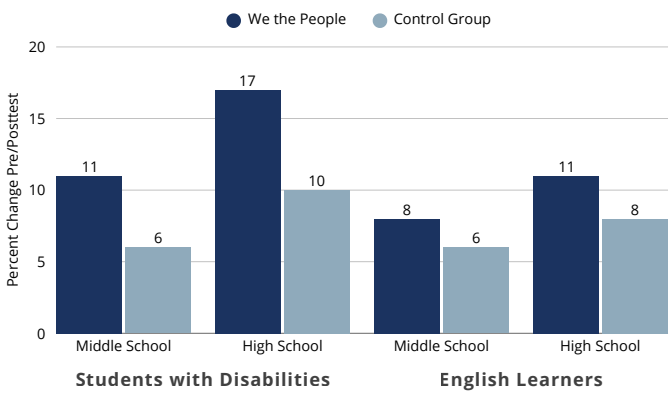
After their We the People experience, students were more likely to feel that they have a say in what government does. The SWD study found the percentage of We the People students who felt they could impact government increased from 20% to 32% for middle school and from 26% to 37% for high school. The percentage of We the People middle school students in the EL study indicating that they felt efficacious rose from 19% to 30%. Efficacy increased from 26% to 36% among We the People high school students.



COMMUNICATION AND CIVIL DISCOURSE

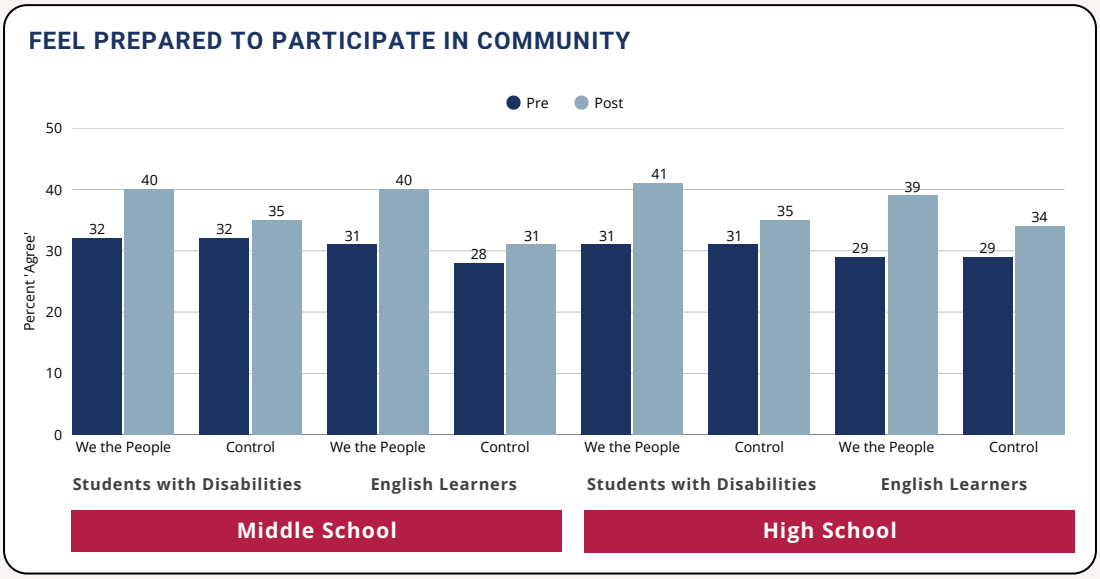
Students' ability to express their opinions and engage in civil discussions with others improved significantly after participating in We the People. The SWD study found that middle school We the People students' scores on a communication and civil discourse skills index improved by 11% compared to 6% for the control group. We the People high school students' scores rose by 17% versus 10% for their comparison group counterparts. Middle and high school We the People students in the EL study also made greater gains in communication skills than the control group, although the differences were smaller.

> "I taught my JMLPE curriculum in my history class and the biggest impact I saw was on my student's confidence. Throughout the year we hosted hearings and each time we did it the kids stood up a little straighter and were a little more sure of themselves as speakers and leaders"
> - *JMLPE Teacher*



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

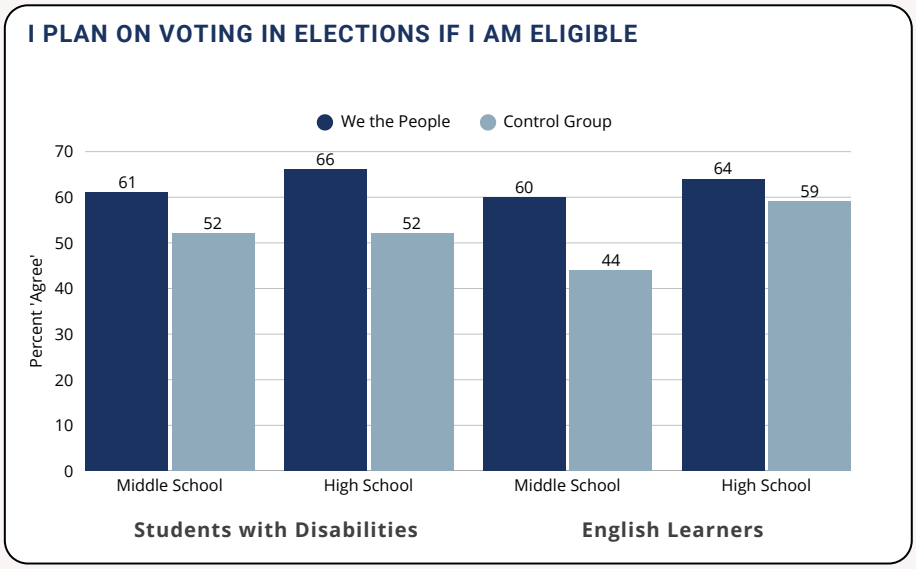
We the People students felt more prepared to engage in their community following their class. Through the simulated congressional hearings, students developed skills necessary for civic participation. The percentage of middle and high school We the People students in the SWD and EL studies who were ready to engage rose from roughly 30% to 40%. The increases for the We the People students were larger than for the control group.



VOTING

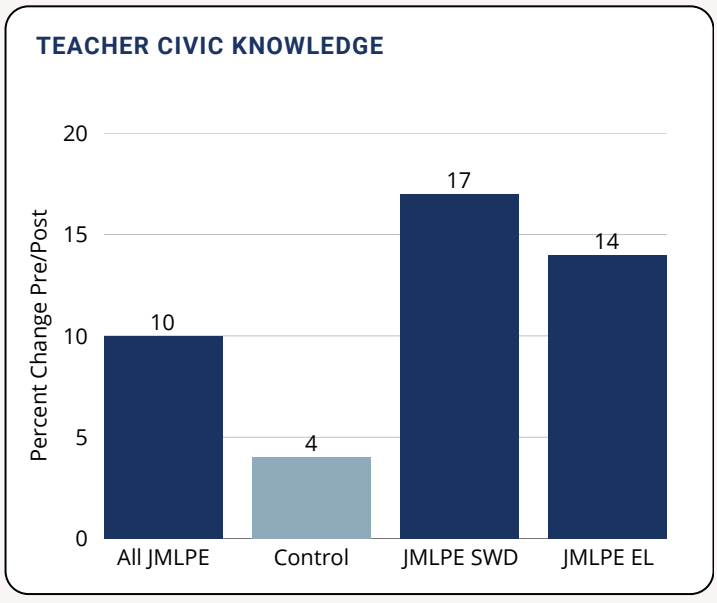
60% or more of We the People students planned on voting in elections after their class. The percentage was somewhat larger for high school students than middle schoolers given their greater proximity to voting age. We the People students were significantly more inclined to vote than the control group. The findings were consistent across the SWD and EL studies.





TEACHERS' CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

The civic content knowledge of JMLPE teachers in the study increased significantly from pretest to posttest. JMLPE teachers' knowledge increased by 10% compared to 4% for the control group. Gains were higher for teachers of SWDs at 17% and ELs at 14%.

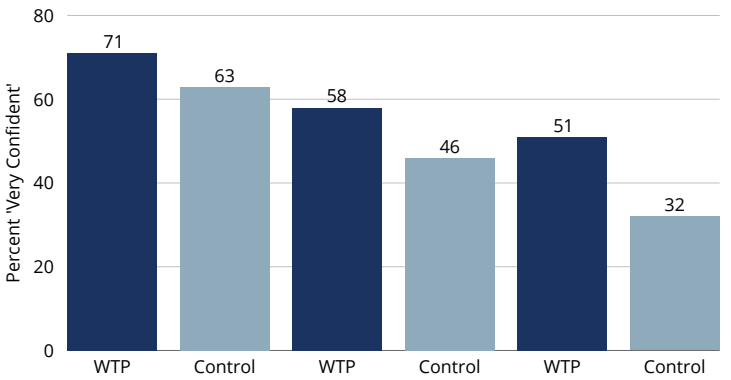


> JMLPE improved my content and pedagogical knowledge on civics; and helped me in making my lessons more engaging and meaningful to the students.
> - *JMLPE Teacher*

TEACHER CONFIDENCE

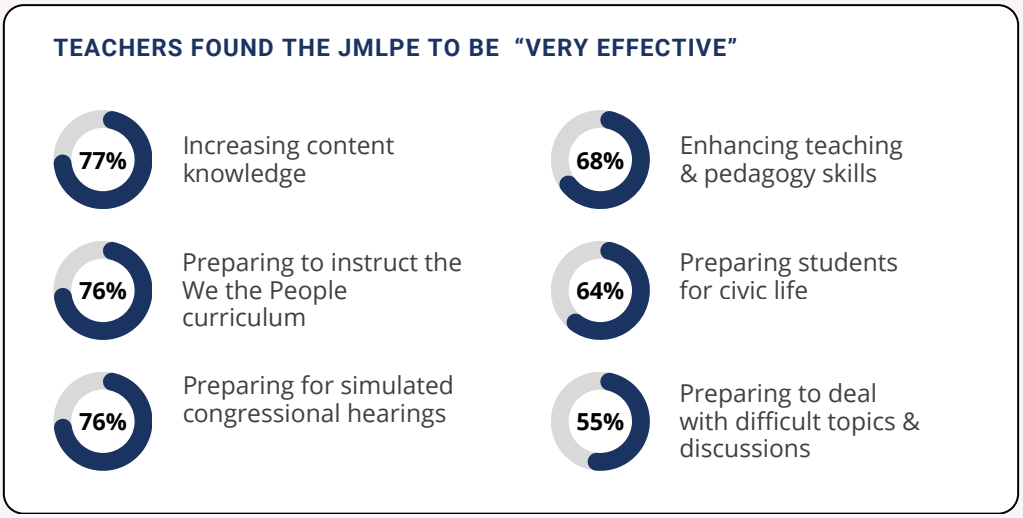
JMLPE prepared teachers to effectively instruct the WTP curriculum. JMLPE teachers were more confident in instilling civic knowledge, skills and dispositions in their students than control group teachers. On the posttest, 71% of JMLPE teachers were very confident in teaching civic knowledge, 58% for civic skills, and 51% for civic dispositions. In comparison, 63% of control group teachers were very confident in teaching civic knowledge, 46% for civic skills, and 32% for civic dispositions.

> The meetings with other teachers and mentors provided support and coaching in a directly applicable way to my teaching strategies. It encouraged me throughout the year to be pursuing these question-led lessons that push my students to deeper and more personalized understanding of civic engagement.
> - *JMLPE Teacher*



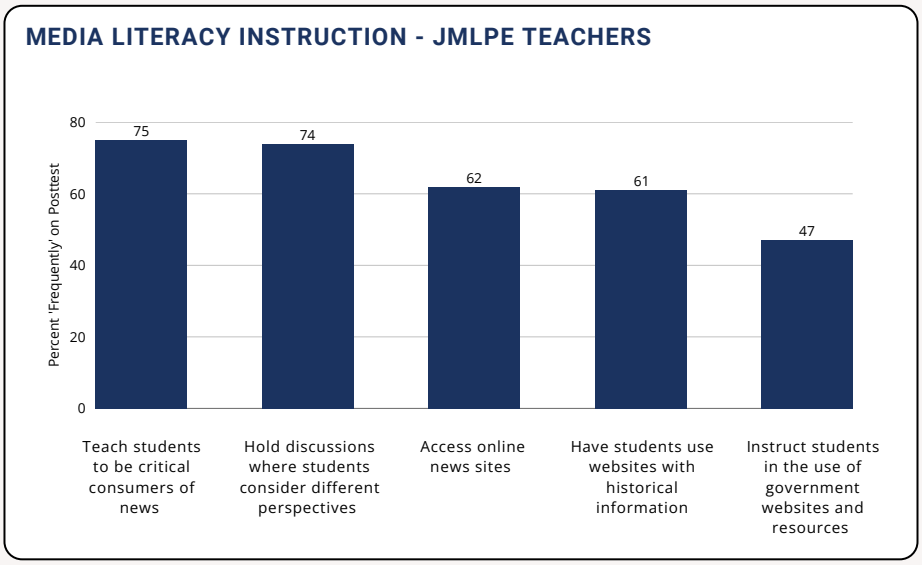
TEACHER EVALUATIONS OF THE JMLPE

Teachers found that the JMLPE was a very effective professional learning experience. It was highly successful in achieving the program's objectives of increasing content knowledge, preparing them to instruct We the People and the simulated congressional hearings, building their teaching and active pedagogy skills, and readying their students for civic life.

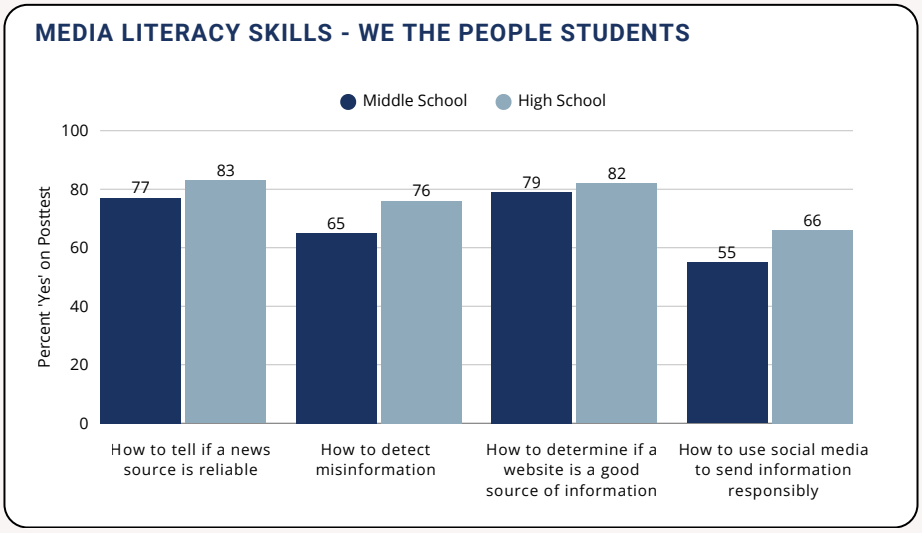


MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is embedded in JMLPE teachers' civics instruction. JMLPE teachers integrated literacy lessons students need to navigate today's complex media landscape and conduct research for their simulated congressional hearings into the We the People curriculum. On the posttest, 75% of JMLPE educators reported teaching students to be critical consumers of news, and 74% held discussions in which students considered multiple perspectives. Majorities also had students access online news sites and use websites with historical information. Nearly half instructed students in using government websites and public resources.



The vast majority of We the People students indicated that they had learned media literacy skills in their classes. High school students were somewhat more likely to have studied media literacy than middle school students. Most of the middle and high school We the People students were taught how to identify a reliable news source and detect misinformation. In the process of conducting research for the simulated congressional hearings, roughly 80% of students learned how to determine if a website is a good source of information. While students were able to gauge the quality of an information source, they were somewhat less certain about how to use media responsibly.



CIVIC EDUCATION RESEARCH LAB
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Principal Investigator
Dr. Diana Owen

CERL Research Team
Dr. Patrick McSweeney
Charlotte Kraenzle Peña
Naomi Rader

