



Shortridge's new mission: Produce engaged citizens

BRANDON COSBY LEARNED ABOUT A program called We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, when he was an Evansville teacher running a nationally recognized speech-and-debate program. The We the People teacher would ask him to help his students prepare for their competitive hearings.

So, when he was approached by Dr. Eugene White, superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools, to be the principal of a newly recreated Shortridge High School – and learned that school would not only utilize, but revolve around, the We the People program, Cosby jumped at the chance.

Cosby is excited, because he sees the new school as a perfect fit for “my own personal passion and commitment to social justice issues. I think We the People is not only important because of how it helps our young people develop a deeper understanding of the democratic process,” he continued, “but I think it’s even more important that our kids actually put the democratic process to practice and not just study it. We The People provides our kids the opportunity to do that.”

Shortridge, a middle school since 1981, will add a freshman class this fall to begin its four-year journey to becoming a school serving grades 6 through 12. That fact may be news enough to many people – but the more remarkable element of the new Shortridge school will be the fact that We the People, and its sister program, Project Citizen, will be fully embedded in all social studies and language arts programs.

For Cosby, the project means that Shortridge’s success will not be judged by test scores or letter grades, “but by the number of voters we produce.”

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, was launched in 1987 as the educational component of the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. After the five-year celebration ended, We the People had been so successful that it has continued to be funded by the U.S. Department of Education.



▲ Shortridge hasn't held high school students since 1980.

The Indiana program, one of the most successful in the nation, is boosted by strong support from the Indiana Bar Foundation the Indiana State Bar Association, the Indiana Judges Association, and numerous philanthropic organizations.

Classrooms involved in We the People study in-depth the development of the Constitution, its core principles, and how it has been interpreted and re-interpreted over the past 222 years. For many students, the semester-long program ends with a competitive phase that involves mock congressional hearings at the district level and then, for district winners, at the state level. A state winner goes on to a national competition in Washington, D.C.

When it was developed, We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution was for high school students, usually seniors. Over the years, programs for middle school and elementary school students have been added.

In 1996, a sister program was born – We the People: Project Citizen. That curriculum, originally for middle schools but now

also used in high schools and college, is designed to teach students how to be involved in public policy. Classrooms select a problem of public concern, research alternative solutions to the problem, select what they believe is the best solution, and then determine to which public agency they would take those concerns, and develop an argument for adopting their proposed solution.

The strategy intrigues Cosby, who envisions teaching Shortridge students how to take their concerns to the school board or the city-county council or the state legislature. "I'm excited about the idea," he said, "of having twelve hundred, fourteen hundred political activists."

One Woodruff Place couple – Matthew Gutwein and Jane Henegar – are more than familiar with the We the People and Project Citizen programs. Gutwein has judged at the elite national competition, and for several years as chair of the Indiana State Bar Association's Citizenship Education Committee, when that group oversaw the state program. He now helps instruct teachers in We the People across the country, and coaches classes here in Indiana. His wife, also a frequent judge at district and state-level competitions, has served the past two years as state coordinator for Project Citizen.

"We are big fans of the programs and what they can do for students," Henegar said, calling We the People and Project Citizen "two of the best educational programs available in America." Henegar said that through the programs students come to understand their Constitution, their government, and their society better than most adults.

"Students, as a natural consequence of studying the constitution and difficult public policy problems, sharpen their analytical skills and develop their language skills," Henegar added. "They become poised public speakers. Shortridge students using these programs will be very fortunate. They will gain a sense of themselves and the power they can wield in the world."

Cosby is working with Erin Braun and Kyle Burson of the Indiana Bar Foundation. Both are alumnae of the We the People program, having been members of a Castle (Boonville) High School class that won a state championship and finished in the Top Ten of the national competition. Braun is director of the Indiana civic education program, and also director of the We the People program; Burson is program coordinator for the We the People program.

"What Shortridge is trying to do could not be more important," Braun said. "Despite the fact that most schools have citizenship education in their mission statements, I know of very few schools where that actually shows up in their curriculum. Most students receive one semester of government, right before they graduate – and it's often far too little, far too late."

Braun said she believes that embedding citizenship education into the very climate of the school will allow Shortridge to produce 21st century citizens. She added that she sees in Brandon Cosby what she found in her own We the People teacher in high school – "someone who deeply respects children and their capacity to learn. For that reason, along with many others, I can't wait to watch Shortridge grow."

Braun said she didn't expect Shortridge high schoolers to be involved in competitive hearings until the school adds its senior class in 2012-13. But eighth-grade social studies students could, indeed, take part in the competitive phase on the middle school level. In doing so, they might be involved in the same competition as students from the nearby St. Richard's School, where teacher Andrea Neal has used We the People for several years.

Cosby pointed out that the We the People curriculum will be more than a class at the new Shortridge Middle and High School. "As the kids become young constitutional scholars," he said, "they will choose issues of importance to them, then embed that focus into all other subject areas of the curriculum."

Shortridge working with Butler to offer college credits, too

THE WE THE PEOPLE PROGRAM isn't the only unique aspect of the curriculum being developed for Shortridge as it begins to phase back into its role as a city high school.

Shortridge will offer an early college program as well, partnering with Butler University to provide students the chance – by the time they graduate – to have as many as 30 college credits under their belts.

"That's \$30,000 worth of education, free," said Mark Cosand, Shortridge liaison for the Butler University College of Education. He explained that sophomores will be taking college-level classes at Shortridge, while juniors and seniors will take classes on the Butler campus. "We see ourselves not only as an education partner," Cosand said, "but as a good community partner."

Shortridge Principal Brandon Cosby is in strong support of the program, which he said fits into the new high school's rigorous curriculum. "If we want to say that all kids can learn, we need to provide programs in which they can learn," he said. "So far, we have set the bar pretty low, so it's time to do something different."

The new Shortridge program will be a magnet – thereby open to all Indianapolis Public Schools students. In addition to immersion in the We the People programs and the early college program, Shortridge students will also take Latin, as a foundation for more learning, not to satisfy a foreign language requirement.

Cosby believes the higher standards fit the Shortridge tradition, which date to its founding as Indianapolis High School in 1853. It was the city's only high school until 1897, when Emmerich Manual High School was built on the Southside. That year, its name was changed to Shortridge in honor of longtime school Superintendent Abraham C. Shortridge.

For most of the 20th Century, Shortridge was the city's designated "academic" high school. In 1957, Shortridge was recognized by Newsweek and Time magazines as one of the 38 best schools in the nation. Its alumni have included famed writer Kurt Vonnegut, who never failed to extol the virtues of his Shortridge education; writer Dan Wakefield; "I Love Lucy" writer Madelyn Pugh; Indianapolis Indians President Max Schumaker; and U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar. ■

'We the People' produces citizens

A FEW YEARS BACK, I ASKED A PARENT OF A high school senior how her daughter's participation in a particular citizenship education program had affected their family. "Six months ago," the mom said, "my daughter wouldn't look an adult in the eye to ask if he wanted fries with their burger. Now, she's arguing points of Constitutional law with college professors and federal court judges."

The topic in question was We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, a program which was launched in 1987 as the educational component of the five-year Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. I became involved in We the People just a year later, when I was asked to help judge a We the People competition, a mock congressional hearing in which students are challenged on their knowledge of the Constitution and its unique history in America.

I am writing about We the People in this publication because the program has entered a new realm – serving as the very foundation for the educational program at the new Shortridge High School. There's a story on page 26 to that effect. This essay was sparked by the thought that – without further explanation – most people would not understand what a truly remarkable event the Shortridge experiment is.

I understand, because of my years as a judge at the district and state level of We the People competition, and because for 10 years I produced a newsletter for the program. As We the People's newsletter editor, I not only observed the program first-hand, but also talked to people such as the aforementioned mom who was so proud of her daughter's development.

What I have also come to realize over those many years is that describing We the People to someone totally unfamiliar with the program can be a daunting task. The program isn't about facts and figures. It's not about how many judges sit on the Supreme Court, or how many desks there are in the U.S. House of Representatives. It's not about what year the Bill of Rights was ratified into the Constitution, nor about what year the Constitutional Convention was convened.

No, We the People is about the core principles of the Constitution, about how those principles have evolved through the nation's history. It's about ways the Constitution has been changed to further the ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence. It's about how the values and principles embodied in the Constitution have shaped American institutions and practices. Students learn what rights the Bill of Rights protect, and they learn about and talk about challenges facing the American constitutional democracy in the 21st Century.

They learn how the Founding Fathers were influenced by their Judeo-Christian heritage, what role the ancient Greeks played, and how Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu laid the foundation for the great American experiment. They learn how the 14th Amendment is viewed by many as the most important, most



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about life downtown
(or just about anything else
he wants to write about.)*

By Bill Brooks

influential amendment of all – about how it not only greatly expanded the impact the Bill of Rights has on all of us, but also gave us the idea of "equal protection."

Doctrines and also *Brown v. Board of Education*. If the question is about the creation of the Constitution itself, they might talk about the New Jersey Plan, the Virginia Plan, the Three-Fifths Compromise, bills of attainder, or the Supremacy Clause.

How We the People teaches students is the key to its success, and a key to its longevity well beyond the original five-year plan. It is a key to the fact that Indiana has been at the forefront of the national effort ever since, largely because the Indiana State Bar Association recognized its worth early on and backed up that support with dollars to ensure that classes involved in the program don't have to fund-raise to take part in the competitions. Since then, other groups such as the Indiana Judge's Association and the Indiana Bar Foundation have gotten on board, and today it is the Bar Foundation which is chief steward of the program.

Because of those organizations' commitment, Indiana has led the way in many aspects of We the People, including creating the first summer institute for teachers. I remember one such teacher, who after learning what he did during the week-long intensive training offered this comment: "I want to go home and call every student I ever had – and apologize."

Students have remarkable observations themselves. One Lawrence Central student said she had gained a newfound love of the nation's governmental system and couldn't wait for her younger sister to take the class. "You're not just learning the material," she said. "You see how it works in everyday life. You see that it is real people who run this government. You think, 'If they can do it, I can do it.'"

The biggest problem with We the People, however, is that the program is not in nearly enough schools. (It is taught at the ele-

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mentary and middle school levels, as well.) Teachers, perhaps intimidated by the material or unwilling to go outside their long-standing lesson plans, are generally not eager to recognize its proven worth. Fortunately, some teachers have been willing to meet the challenge, such as the late Karl Schneider, who took an Arsenal Technical High School class to third-place in the national competition at Washington, D.C., in the earlier days of the program. Or Toby Elmore, who continued the We the People tradition at Tech. Or teachers at Lawrence Central and Hamilton Southeastern, who have won state titles to earn that coveted and challenging trip to D.C.

Consider this comment from a Hamilton Southeastern student: “All high school students should be learning what we do,” he said. “This really opened my eyes to the importance of each individual being a participant in government.”

I have talked to many students who call We the People “the best class” they’ve had in their four years of high school. I’ve talked to others who were surprised they were willing to work as hard as they did, because they enjoyed the subject matter so much. I’ve talked to students who said they improved their writing skills and their researching skills, and learned how to work in teams. Said one: “We put in a lot of hours – but the things we are getting out of it are just priceless.”

In the end, each student takes away from the We the People class what they put into it. But if we are to have low expectations (and, in education, don’t we always?), let the low expectation be this: That students learn the fallacy of what many citizens believe, that our nation is where “majority rules.” No, it is not. James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, worried in The Federalist Papers about the tyranny of the majority – and crafted a system of government that worked to ensure that minority factions could thrive.

Fortunately, We the People isn’t a low-expectation sort of program. Students learn to go well beyond the bumper stickers, well beyond the sound bites, well beyond petty ill-informed arguments. They learn the merits of civic virtue. They learn that civic virtue is essential to the success of our democracy. They walk out the door as better citizens than many of us will ever dream of being.

As a result, the hallowed doors of Shortridge High School just got taller. ■