

K-3 Civics Clarifications

CIVICS STANDARD ONE: Students will examine the structure and purposes of governments with specific emphasis on constitutional democracy [Government].

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- Constitutional democracy as a structure of government developed from the tension between the need for authority and the need to constrain authority.
- Governments are structured to address the basic needs of the people in a society.

Civics Standard One K-3a: Students will understand that leaders are sometimes chosen by election, and that elected officials are expected to represent the interests of the people who elected them.

Essential Questions:

- Should leaders be elected?
- How should an elected official represent the interests of the people?

To simply know leaders are sometimes chosen by election and expected to represent the people does not reflect understanding. Understanding begins with discovering why. Elections are a means of democracy, thus they serve the purpose of democracy, which is to constrain government to serve the people.

There is more to the principle of elections than mere distrust of authority, of course. An embedded concept of democracy is “rule for the people.” Elections help insure that those who would lead us must first win the trust of a majority, and the continued prospect of elections keep the winners sensitive to the interests and views of their constituents. The concept of representation addresses the principle of “rule by and of the people.” At this grade level, students should not be expected to understand all the complexities and problems of representative democracy, but they should be introduced to the idea that representatives wear two hats. First, they are expected to vote the way the majority of their constituents want them to vote on an issue. The other hat often contradicts the first; they are expected to be leaders who vote for what they see as the best interest of their constituents even if a majority of them disagree. Both roles are necessary yet inherently in tension and the students should understand why.

Examples for teaching the above principles can come out of class or school elections. A teacher might use open-ended questions that have no definite right or wrong answers. Open-ended questions are best to invite the open debate and discussion that is most conducive to understanding. The example questions that follow here and for other benchmarks provide suggestions to spark classroom discussions:

- 1) Is it better for the students to elect a class president or the teacher to appoint one? Why?
- 2) What would you say to a class president who only helps her friends and ignores what everyone else in the class wants?

- 3) Jimmy is on the Student Council of his school. The students who elected him want him to vote to have candy machines in the halls, but he has heard too much candy is bad for people. How should he vote on the issue? Why?

Civics Standard One K-3b: Students will understand that positions of authority, whether elected, appointed, or familial, carry responsibilities and should be respected.

Essential Questions:

- Why is authority needed? What are the obligations of authority?
- Why is respect for authority conditional?

“Respect” is a loaded word when used in relation to authority in a democracy. We do not want people in positions of authority to be respected as superiors as was expected by aristocrats of a by-gone era. It is closer to the democratic meaning of the word to say that respect for those in positions of authority entails recognition of their right to make authoritative decisions consistent with the powers of their office. This implies recognition of the associated obligations of obedience and accommodation, which are, of course, limited in a democracy.

Understanding this benchmark requires knowing why such respect should be afforded those in positions of authority. Students should have had ample experience with the problems of disorder and indecision, so it should not be difficult to get them to understand the need. Understanding this benchmark calls for understanding the purpose of authority. Once the purpose of authority is understood, the need to respect it logically follows.

Examples can come out of the classroom. Which is better, a classroom where no one respects the teacher and ignores the teacher’s rules or a classroom where students respects the teacher by obeying the teacher’s rules? Why?

CIVICS STANDARD TWO: Students will understand the principles and ideals underlying the American political system [Politics].

Enduring Understanding

Students will understand that:

- The principles and ideals underlying American democracy are designed to promote the freedom of the American people.

Civics Standard Two K-3a: Students will understand that respect for others, their opinions, and their property is a foundation of civil society in the United States.

Essential Questions:

- Why should I respect others?
- What happens if there is no respect for property?

The understanding called for requires knowing *why* respect for others is a foundation of civil society. The answer involves the need for order, but also the need for tolerance and respect for laws if freedom and democracy are to prevail.

Philosophically, this benchmark points to what might be called the *Strategic Golden Rule*: Do unto others because it is the best way to get them to do unto you. It is the basic rule of reciprocity that makes society possible. The idea to be taught is that *your* freedom depends on the government and your fellow citizens respecting your dignity as a person, your right to express your opinions, and your right to own and control property. But the respect of others for you depends on showing the same respect for them. This is often called civility, which is depicted as a virtue of citizenship. The benchmark implies the need for tolerance of opinions, which means tolerance for the *expression* of opinions. The concept of property is simple in theory, but complex in practice due to competing claims and rights. At this grade level, it might be better to stress personal property.

How might respect be demonstrated in the classroom? Respect for others might be demonstrated by not butting up in the lunch line, by letting everyone have a chance to play in the playground, and by remaining quiet while others are trying to think or do their work. Respect for property might be demonstrated by not taking or damaging someone else's school supplies without permission. Respect for the opinions of others might be demonstrated by allowing others to voice their opinions and by not laughing at those opinions.

CIVICS STANDARD THREE: Students will understand the responsibilities, rights, and privileges of United States citizens [Citizenship].

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- Effective citizens are committed to protecting rights for themselves, other citizens, and future generations, by upholding their civic responsibilities and are aware of the potential consequences of inaction.
- Distinctions between a citizen's rights, responsibilities, and privileges help to define the requirements and limits of personal freedom.

Civics Standard Three K-3a: Students will understand that American citizens have distinct responsibilities (such as voting), rights (such as free speech and freedom of religion), and privileges (such as driving).

Essential Questions:

- What is the nature of a privilege? What do you have to do to earn or lose a privilege?
- What is the relationship between my rights and my responsibilities?

This benchmark stresses understanding the meaning of responsibilities, rights, and privileges and the distinctions between them. The benchmark also implies the students should be able to identify examples of these dimensions of citizenship. The students should also understand why these distinctions are necessary. It is a good foundation for understanding the ideal at the heart of our democracy. Citizenship might be viewed as an

office of government similar to any other office in that it involves responsibilities or duties that flow from the nature of the office.

At this grade level, teachers might develop classroom rules or patterns (with the help of the students) that involve a beginning awareness of the requirements and limits of freedom within the classroom. What must a student do? What is a student allowed to do, but might be taken away if he or she violates a rule? What can a student do to make the classroom learning environment function more smoothly for all?

At the K-3 level, the two requirements of freedom most applicable to a student are: contributing to public safety and order by obeying the law and reporting violations of the law; and, performing public services when the need arises. Teachers could find examples of these two requirements in daily classroom activities and have discussion with the students about why these two requirements are important.

CIVICS STANDARD FOUR: Students will develop and employ the civic skills necessary for effective, participatory citizenship [Participation].

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- Effective citizens can research issues, form reasoned opinions, support their positions, and engage in the political process.
- Effective governance requires responsible participation from diverse individuals who translate beliefs and ideas into lawful action and policy.

Civics Standard Four K-3a: Students will acquire the skills necessary for participating in a group, including defining an objective, dividing responsibilities, and working cooperatively.

Essential Question:

- How should people work in groups to get things done?
- Is working in a group better than working alone?

The focus of this benchmark is clear: participatory group skills. Though not inclusive, the benchmark enumerates the key skills as defining an objective, dividing responsibilities, and working cooperatively. Understanding these skills means understanding why they are necessary or effective and how they might be accomplished.

Teachers at this grade cluster who use a group setting in a classroom could ask students to define how best they might work together to achieve common goals. Are there other skills necessary besides those above? What characteristics do people who work cooperatively have in common?