What are American Civic Ideals?

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Grade Level: 6-8

New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (2020):

- 6.3.8.CivicsPR.2: Evaluate the effectiveness of the fundamental principles of the Constitution (i.e., consent of the governed, rule of law, federalism, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, and individual rights) in establishing a federal government that allows for growth and change over time.

Objectives: Students will be able to:
- differentiate between ideals and practices
- identify core values and principles of American government (American Civic Ideals) as enshrined in a founding document
- utilize the list of American civic ideals as a basis for analyzing the American experiment in constitutional democracy and for evaluating political candidates.

Background:
- American ideals are a source of unity for a diverse nation and provide an important context for civic education.
- Focusing on American ideals places valid parameters on classroom discussions, rather than opening classroom discussions to random statements potentially disruptive of the school climate.
- Basing instruction on American ideals in founding documents (especially the Constitution) provides a non-partisan basis for responding to any outside advocacy or pressure groups. **It is crucial that instruction be non-partisan.**
- American ideals can form the basis for inquiry-based lessons and provide a reference point for questions and discussions during the year that can be revisited. It can facilitate the infusion of civic education across the curriculum.
- This lesson can be used before teaching about controversial issues or before impending elections. It can also be used sometime during the first weeks to identify the American Ideals that will form the basis for ongoing inquiry questions used to focus and organize the content throughout the year.

Procedure:

First Inquiry: What are American Civic Ideals?
- Supporting Questions:
  - What is the difference between an ideal and a practice or institution?
  - Where in the nation’s founding documents are American ideals expressed?
• Guide the class to the inquiry and supporting questions regarding ideals.
  • Define what is meant by the word “ideals”. Students may confuse these with
    practices and policies.
  • Ideals may be defined as those values and principles that are the ultimate goal
    or aim of our founding documents and institutions and which define the best of
    America.
  • For example:
    • limited government is an ideal, checks and balances is the practice to
      help achieve limited government.
    • Democracy is an ideal, voting is a practice.
    • The rule of law is an ideal, establishing a system of courts is a practice.
  • Have students interpret documents (in this case, the Constitution) and locate
    ideals. Make sure the students actually examine the document. Focus students first on
    the Preamble. This is the easiest place to locate several ideals.
  • For teacher guidance: here are some of the ideals identified by one group that
    used this lesson:
    o Democracy
    o Liberty (negative definition)
    o Limited Government
    o Justice
    o Equality
      o Before the law
      o Of opportunity
    o Property Rights
    o This is just one possible list developed by participants at a workshop.
    Other possible ideals might include majority rule, domestic tranquility/security,
    popular sovereignty, rule of law, etc.
  • Once ideals are listed, and before narrowed down to the best or most important
    five or six, expect to dedicate class time to the precise definition of the terms (ex. What
    is really meant by “liberty”?)
  • Vocabulary: these are shortened definitions to help clarify the discussion. For
    more complete definitions and explorations of the terms, please see some of the other
    lessons in the curriculum guide.
    o Freedom/Liberty - the space or ability to act without undue restraint by
      government. This is the “negative” conception of freedom, defined in the
      negative as freedom from interference or restraint, and is the most commonly
      understood definition in the American context.
    o Individual or Human Rights - a moral or legal entitlement to have or do
      something.
    o Consent of the Governed - the idea that the legitimacy of a government
      rests upon the agreement of its citizens regarding its structure and functions.
    o Limited Government - a means of protecting individual liberty and rights
      by placing restraints on government institutions.
    o Justice - often equated with fairness, in terms of distribution of goods
      and burdens, due process, and corrective actions for offenses.
    o Rule of Law - the principle that the basis for government actions are
      laws that apply equally to all, and not the whims or interests of individuals in
      power. Laws must be fairly established.
Religious Tolerance - the principle that a society should allow citizens to freely pursue their conscience and spiritual beliefs without undue interference, provided they do not interfere with the equal rights of others.

Property Rights - the ability of citizens to be secure in their possessions and not subject to unreasonable seizures of their homes or property.

Domestic Tranquility - peace, security, and the orderly functioning of society according to previously established principles.

Popular sovereignty – political theory that government is created by and subject to the will of the people.

Majority rule - political principle that a majority usually constituted by fifty percent plus one of an organized group will have the power to make decisions binding upon the whole.

- Present, critique and defend conclusions on ideals, developing a class consensus.

Second Inquiry:

- If using the lesson for elections, consider the oath of office (which requires defending the Constitution) that the candidates who are running for an office are required to take:
  - How well do their statements and proposed policies support the American Ideals expressed in the Constitution?
  - Which candidate best articulates and supports the identified American ideals from the Constitution he/she will swear to uphold?
  - State and defend conclusions

- If using the lesson to discuss a controversial issue: skip the oath of office and construct an inquiry question evaluating the policies in question in terms of the identified American Ideals from the founding documents.
  - E.g., Should private businesses be able to refuse service to LBGQT patrons?
  - How well do the competing factions regarding this issue support (one or more identified American Ideals – in our example, possibly equality, justice, or freedom)?

- If you want to use the lesson as the basis for an ongoing investigation of American history regarding how well American Ideals were realized during different historical periods, ask “How well was the American Ideal of (list chosen ideal) realized during this era?” Additional material and suggestions may be found in Unit Three of the full year curriculum guide.

Suggested Assessments:

1. Classroom debate supported by individual argumentative essays regarding the most important five or six American Ideals.
2. Comparison chart comparing political candidate statements and actions to American Ideals (if using this lesson prior to teaching about an election).
3. Argumentative essay or presentation on how well a chosen ideal was realized (or not) during a particular era.
4. Mock trial of historical figure regarding how well he/she supported selected ideals and/or their oath of office to uphold the Constitution.

Materials/Resources:
- United States Constitution and/or Declaration of Independence
- Oaths of office for political office candidates are seeking.
  - Oath of Office: President of the United States
  - Oath of Office: United States Congress
  - Oath of Office: New Jersey Governor
  - Oath of Office: New Jersey Legislature
- American Ideals worksheet
OATHS OF OFFICE

- President: I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.

- Member of Congress: I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.

- New Jersey Governor: the governor takes an oath to support both the United States and New Jersey constitutions.

- New Jersey Legislature: Legislators must take the following oath of allegiance, prescribed by the New Jersey Constitution, before taking office: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of New Jersey, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of Senator (or member of the General Assembly) according to the best of my ability.” In addition, members must take an oath of office as follows: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully, impartially and justly perform all the duties of the office of———- to the best of my ability and understanding; that I will carefully preserve all records, papers, writings, or property entrusted to me for safekeeping by virtue of my office, and make such disposition of the same as may be required by law." The oaths have been combined and are administered at the first session of each newly elected House, and when necessary to seat a new member selected to fill a vacancy on an interim basis or elected to fill a vacancy on a permanent basis.
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