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Classroom Law Project Presents

**Slavery & the Constitution:**

**A New Constitutional Convention**

**Introduction:**

This constitutional convention simulation gives students the opportunity to critique the Constitution using the Preamble itself, and then take on the challenge of building consensus on an Amendment or Amendments to the Constitution that will help further build equality in the country. It is daunting to consider how to reverse the injustice of 350+ years of the effects of slavery and discrimination, but taking once piece: the Constitution itself, can give students an opportunity to explore the issue more deeply.

Students will use the essays of the 1619 Project to begin their investigation and research from there to inform themselves before making proposals to their simulated convention. Through the steps of this inquiry-based activity, students critically think through one of the most crucial topics in American history and contemporary American culture.

This method of active learning teaches students about civil discourse, respecting each other, and developing a deeper understanding of the issue. This simulation lesson plan provides all the components needed by students, as well as resources and materials for teachers that can help students build their critical thinking.

**Objectives of the Constitutional Convention Simulation:**

Students will:

* Analyze and articulate the impact of slavery on modern American laws and culture
* Develop and hone listening skills to better understand contradictory positions
* Collaborate and create consensus around constitutional ideas
* Demonstrate civic participation through proposing updates the US Constitution
* Understand that their voices matter

**Initial Teacher-Led Discussion:**

* Points to make before introducing activity:
  + Much of history is written by those in power at the time. The point of the 1619 Project is to bring forward voices and history from the perspective of the slaves and descendants of slaves who were critical participants in the founding of this nation
  + Remind students that this is not a forum for making personal or generalized opinions, but rather to build on what they learn
  + Coming to consensus is not easy, but they will be prepared for it when the convention takes place

**Simulated Constitutional Convention Process in Brief:**

1. **Start with Inquiry & exploration** (the following are scaffolded ideas to build up to a townhall simulation):   
   * Students read and analyze essays from the 1619 Project
   * What questions do you have about the topic? Where do you think exploration of this topic should go from here? What questions might you ask of other readers when you recommend this essay?
   * Read the sections of the Constitution that refer to Slavery - what questions do you have or want to explore?
   * Use the ***Critique the Constitution: Understanding the Goals of the Preamble*** worksheet to begin to analyze the six goals of the Preamble
   * Use the ***Critique the Constitution: Slavery*** worksheet to begin to critique one or more of the parts of the Constitution about slavery using the Preamble.
2. **Prepare for the townhall**
   * Explain students’ ultimate goal: in a simulated town hall, each student (or small group of students) will testify for 4 minutes about their proposal for a constitutional amendment that will address an issue of their choice regarding the legacy of slavery in the United States.
   * Divide students into small groups based on the topic area essays they read & analyzed (ie, civic participation, power, economics, music and arts, sports, sugar, wealth gap, etc.):

Each small group should work together (use the ***Considering a Constitutional Amendment:***

***Your Testimony Outline*** *t*o write a short testimonial that responds to this prompt:

***Write an Amendment to the Constitution that addresses a gap in equality created by slavery and which complies with at least 4 of the 6 goals of the Preamble.***

* + **Students should then write their Amendment and work on a 4-minute presentation that explains**:
    - The background of their amendment
    - Why their amendment is worded the way they chose
    - How the amendment complies with at least 4 of the 6 Preamble goals
    - Why they believe this amendment should be passed

1. **The Townhall Meeting**
   * Your “town council” can be made up of students and/or guests you bring into the classroom, or anyone you believe might make the simulation more authentic and relevant for your students. Your council should be prepared beforehand.
   * Set your town council up facing the students and set the “testimony table” facing the council. Each small group of students will sit at the testimony table to testify and answer questions.
   * Each group should have multiple people speak for the testimony
   * 4 Minute presentation from students on their proposed Amendment
   * 3-5 minutes of follow up questions from the “council” (prepare your “town council” to be ready to take some notes and ask some follow up question so that students can demonstrate their expertise on their topic).

**4. Debrief & Reflection**

Begin the class debrief by facilitating discussion on the town hall simulation itself. Ask question that address how each student felt while testifying (and/or being the council). Let the students express their thoughts and encourage them to ask each other question. Points of discussion may include topics such as:

* Challenge of persuading others to your position
* Process of town halls and giving testimony
* Whether the Constitution should actually be amended to address these issues
* Have their views or perspectives on the legacy of slavery changed or grown since beginning this activity

**Writing a reflection to conclude** the process is an important closing piece where students can express their individual thoughts and ideas without concern for group scrutiny. We strongly encourage concluding this activity with an individual writing reflection on the topic and experience.

***Note:*** *Town Hall lessons are extremely modifiable. Teacher should consider how to best use this framework with their students.*

Critiquing the Constitution:

Understanding the Goals of the Preamble

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **What does this mean to you?** | **Rephrase it:** |
| **Form a More Perfect Union** |  |  |
| **Establish Justice** |  |  |
| **Insure Domestic Tranquility** |  |  |
| **Provide for the Common Defense** |  |  |
| **Promote the General Welfare** |  |  |
| **Secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity** |  |  |

Critiquing the Constitution:

The Legacy of Slavery

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Write out the wording of the section of the Constitution you will critique:** |  | |
| *For each goal of the Constitution below:* | **How does this part of the Constitution fulfill or not fulfill this goal of the Preamble?** | **What remedy might make this section better fulfill this goal?** |
| **Form a More Perfect Union** |  |  |
| **Establish Justice** |  |  |
| **Insure Domestic Tranquility** |  |  |
|  | **How does this part of the Constitution fulfill or not fulfill this goal of the Preamble?** | **What remedy might make this section better fulfill this goal?** |
| **Provide for the Common Defense** |  |  |
| **Promote the General Welfare** |  |  |
| **Secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity** |  |  |

*Your reflection on what you just learned about critiquing this part of the Constitution:*

Name:

Considering a Constitutional Amendment:

Your Testimony Outline

Your Amendment’s Title:

What is the issue your Amendment addresses:

Why is it important to address this issue in the Constitution - why is it needed?

Which Goals of the Preamble does your Amendment fulfill and how?

How will you persuade your colleagues to pass this Amendment and that it is needed?