

UNDERSTANDING THE CIVICS STANDARDS for teachers in grades K–3

The purpose of citizenship education is to contribute to the health of our **democracy**¹ and to empower students “to translate their beliefs into actions and their ideas into policies.” The primary goal of the Delaware Civics Standards is student understanding of the purpose and means of **authority**² and **freedom**³ and the relationship between them.

Civics directly addresses citizenship education within the context of political systems. Students study the assumptions upon which governments are founded, and the organizations and strategies governments employ to achieve their goals. With specific respect to the United States, students learn the underlying principles of representative democracy, the constitutional separation of powers, and the rule of law. They need to comprehend that an essential premise of representative democracy is the willingness of citizens to place a high premium on their own personal responsibility for participation in social decision-making. Students develop the skills which citizens must possess in order to discharge those responsibilities while protecting their rights and the rights of others. The study of civics prepares students to translate their beliefs into actions and their ideas into policies.

Governments exist and are instituted for specific purposes and employ a variety of organizational structures to pursue their objectives. Constitutional democracy attempts to balance individual freedom with the needs of the society as a whole. American citizens need a basic understanding of the structure of different forms of government and a detailed knowledge of a constitutional democracy.

¹ *Democracy* means government by the people, though in practice this means that the citizens of a democracy get to elect their leaders and hold them accountable. In its simplest form, democracy is “rule by the majority,” but in the modern sense democracy implies civil rights, legal equality and limited government as well.

² *Authority* has various meanings, though its simplest meaning in terms of general governmental authority is the right to rule. More specifically, authority refers to the recognized right to decide, adjudicate, and command. Authority also implies the obedience of those subject to it. In a democracy, authority is gained through democratic rules. Office holders must be elected; the authority of officials who implement laws (i.e., bureaucrats and police) derives from the authority of elected office holders and is granted in accordance with established laws and procedures.

³ *Freedom* is the primary principle of modern democracy, but it is a rather ambiguous concept. In America, we tend to view freedom as an absence of interference with our chosen objectives. A lack of government interference is essentially what we mean by *liberty*, often used as a synonym of freedom. Some stress that freedom is the ability to actually achieve what we want and believe the state is obligated to help provide the means (i.e., education, health care, jobs) to help us.

Students will learn the underlying principles of **representative democracy**,⁴ the constitutional **separation of powers**,⁵ and the **rule of law**,⁶ with specific respect to the United States. The American political system was intentionally created to rest on a foundation of individual liberty, freedom of religion, representative democracy, equal opportunity, and equal protection under the law. These principles and ideals are codified in the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and other significant documents. Understanding, achieving, and upholding these principles and ideals represent a major challenge to each succeeding generation of American citizens.

Students will develop the skills which citizens must possess in order to accept their responsibilities while protecting their rights and the rights of others. The political, religious, and economic freedoms provided to American citizens are accompanied by the responsibility of active civic participation at the individual, community, state, and national levels. Effective citizens need to understand the dedication and commitment necessary to safeguard those rights for themselves and future generations as well as the potential consequences of inaction. They should also be able to distinguish between rights and privileges.

Students will learn to translate their beliefs into actions and their ideas into policies. The intent to participate in the American political system must be matched with the specific skills necessary to be effective. Such skills include, but are not limited to, registering to vote, interacting successfully with government agencies, organizing and working in civic groups, researching and advocating a position, or serving in an office of public trust.

The Delaware Civics Standards call for understanding the **purposes**,⁷ **principles**,⁸ and **generalizations**⁹ that infuse the concepts in the standards with their contextual meaning.

been separated as a means to create checks and balances on those who wield such powers.

⁴ All modern democracies are representative democracies, at least on the national level. In representative democracies, citizens vote for people to represent them in legislatures, where the laws are made. This is different from *direct* democracies where citizens vote directly on the laws without an intermediary. Some states allow plebiscites where citizens can vote directly on propositions that, if successful, become law. But these are minor exceptions to the rule that almost all law is made by elected representatives.

⁵ Governments make laws, administer laws, and adjudicate laws. When the powers needed to serve these functions are given to separate institutions—i.e., legislative, executive, and judicial bodies—the powers of government have been separated as a means to create checks and balances on those who wield such powers.

⁶ The rule of law is contrary to the “rule of men” by insisting that those with governmental authority must abide by standing law in their decisions and actions. The rule of law is fundamental to democracy.

⁷ The purpose of something is its reason for existence, the end something is meant to serve. It answers the question “Why?” that is fundamental to understanding—and judging—government and all the issues surrounding it.

⁸ Principles are fundamental values that define social objectives and are used to guide the effort to achieve them. For example, freedom, equality, and rule of law are principles that represent what we value and hope to achieve. They also serve as a barometer for judging whether our actions, or the actions of government, are in keeping with our fundamental values or not.

⁹ Generalizations are what we propose as generally true. For example, if we say that stable democracy depends on a sizable middle class or that power corrupts or that people in cities are usually more liberal than people in rural areas, we are generalizing.

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**¹⁰ 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.

The key to understanding the purposes, principles, and generalizations called for in the standards is to begin with the question “Why?” For example, Standard One says, “Students will examine the structure and purposes of governments with specific emphasis on constitutional democracy.” The purposes of governments, of course, are the “why” of governments. Beginning with the question, “Why do we have government?” yields the question, “What needs does government address?” The answer to this question is the foundational understanding for the benchmarks of the standard. The structure of governments is determined in part by history and custom, but mostly they grow from what reason and experience have taught societies about the **organizational requirements for achieving the purposes of government**.¹¹

You can derive the basic purposes of government by imagining a community and questioning what needs of a community might require authority to address. In fact, most famous political philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, for example) have used the device of the imaginary community to explain their version of the purposes of the state in terms so simple that even grade school students can easily understand them. All governments invariably address basically the same needs: security, order, and the welfare of the commonwealth. They all make, enforce, and adjudicate law to meet the need for order, organize the common defense, and provide services to promote the welfare of the citizens. The structures of governments reflect the ways governments are organized to perform these functions.

The basic purposes and principles of government—including the responsibilities of **citizenship**¹² in a general sense—can be illuminated with the experiences of the students. Families meet needs of security, order, and welfare with the principle of authority, as do schools and communities. The themes of authority, obedience, responsibility—and the very important *constraints* on authority for the protection and freedom of the ruled—are found in the social context of every student. If students can learn how to see the purposes, principles, and generalizations suggested by the standard in their own experiences, they become easier to understand and retain and more relevant.

¹⁰ Constitutional democracy formally embraces the principle of rule of law by obligating the government to abide by the structures, powers, processes, and limits set forth in a constitution.

¹¹ Though the purposes of governments are essentially the same, all governments have peculiar organizational structures and processes. Modern governments are large, complex bureaucracies that evolved in response to peculiar needs and problems. Even when the structures of governments seem similar, one finds that they operate very differently. The government of Japan is a parliamentary system that is superficially similar to that of Great Britain, but the two systems are very different in how they function.

¹² Citizenship is a legal status where a person is vested with rights, privileges, and duties as a recognized member of a state. In modern democracies, citizens are considered free and equal participants in their own governance.

The emphasis on constitutional democracy called for in the standard reflects the enduring human struggle to find a way to protect ourselves from our protectors. The tension between the need for authority and the need to constrain authority is a prominent theme of history and is an inherent condition of life. The historically remarkable rise and spread of constitutional democracy evolved from both the **abuse of authority**¹³ and a rekindled belief in the desirability of **individual freedom**¹⁴. The embedded concepts of a **higher law**¹⁵ that constrains the makers and enforcers of law (constitutions), accountability of rulers (democratic processes), and **civil rights**¹⁶ arose from an abundantly justified distrust of power and a growing consensus that one of the purposes of the state is the protection and promotion of the freedom of its citizens. New structures of government were devised to better fulfill and secure this new purpose of government.

The need for authority and the need to constrain it is the foundational understanding called for by Civics Standard One. The structures of modern governments developed from the experiences of people trying to meet these twin needs.

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**.¹⁷ Elections help ensure 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**.¹⁸ The concept of

¹³ In a democracy, governmental authority is granted on the condition that it is exercised in service to the public rather than private interest, and in strict accordance with the law. When authority is used corruptly, as in taking bribes in return for influencing government decisions, or illegally, as in exercising powers not accorded to an office, it has been abused. Abuse of authority is a serious matter in a democracy for it violates vital constraints on authority and undermines public trust in government.

¹⁴ Unlike group, city, or corporate freedoms of past monarchies, freedom is explicitly granted to individual citizens in modern democracies. Experience has taught that individual freedom is the foundation of all freedom.

¹⁵ The concept of a “higher” law is usually applied to constitutions. Since governments make law, there is need for law that limits the lawmaking powers of government, which implies law beyond easy revision by legislatures. Constitutions address this need and provide law that governs governments.

¹⁶ Civil rights are essentially freedoms a government is legally obligated to respect such as freedom of expression and religion.

¹⁷ The phrase “rule for the people” expresses the idea that government exists only to serve the people.

¹⁸ A constituent is someone who authorizes a representative to act on his or her behalf. The voters of a state or

representation¹⁹ addresses the principle of **rule by and of the people**.²⁰ 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 do not agree. Students should understand why both roles are necessary.

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.

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 that 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?
4. Bob says being elected President of the Student Council at his school means he is the boss of the students. Is he right?
5. What does *represent* mean?

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 our wielders of authority to be respected as superiors in the way expected by aristocrats in the past. 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.

legislative district are the constituents of a state or district representative.

¹⁹ Although simple in theory, the meaning of representation is somewhat ambiguous in practice. In theory, a faithful representative would act according to the wishes of the majority of his or her constituents. Laws and policies are usually complex, however, and most voters are too uninformed and unconcerned to form a viewpoint. Aside from elections, there is no clear, democratically valid way for representatives to find out what the majority of their constituents want. Polls and constituent contact can be highly misleading. Also, constituents usually do not want their representative to be a weathervane in shifting political winds.

²⁰ “Rule by and of the people” expresses the idea of citizens both participating in and constituting government. In practice, citizens “constitute” government only in the sense that government is led by their elected representatives, though there are many ways that citizens can participate in their own governance. For example, voting, serving on juries, volunteering for public service, lobbying, contributing to parties, and running for office are among the ways to participate.

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. 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.

- 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?
- Why should people respect the police?
- Should students obey a teacher who tells them not to run and shout in the school hallway? Why or why not?

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.

Fundamental ideals are enumerated in the introduction to this standard—individual liberty, freedom of religion, representative democracy, equal opportunity, and equal protection under the law. This is not a complete list of the main ideals of American democracy, but they are umbrella concepts. For example, the principles of limited government and civil rights are means to achieve individual liberty.

As with the previous standard, understanding requires answers to the question, “Why?” Yet the standard calls for a more developed understanding of the meaning and issues involved with liberty and equality. An essential question for this standard as a whole might be, “Why should people be free?” Fundamental assumptions about the value and competence of human beings and the importance of freedom to human purpose underlie these ideals. These ideals also have a dark side and involve serious tradeoffs and costs. This deeper understanding of American ideals belongs to the free minds of a free people and is required by Civics Standard Two.

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?
- How do I show respect?

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**²¹, 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.

²¹ Though democracy involves public disagreement and debate, it requires tolerance and restraint to prevent the breakdown of the democratic process or even violence. Civility implies respectful behavior and politeness, though tolerance and fair play may be the most we can expect in the heat of political competition. At a minimum, civility requires we refrain from personal threats and insults.

The concept of **property**²² 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.

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

1. What would happen if the students made fun of each others opinions in a class discussion?
2. How does stealing make things worse for everybody?
3. Why is it bad to call other people names?

²² As many political philosophers have pointed out, property is a social and legal construct. The simplest concept of property is what someone claims a right to possess. Yet the concept of property has varied over time and between cultures and states. Every society honors claims to personal possessions and sanctions the stealing of such possessions, but the ownership of land and businesses is a matter of ideological and cultural dispute. Essentially, property is defined by the laws of a country and requires the protection of the state. Thus the political meaning of property is always subject to change.

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.

Once again, the *why* of responsibilities and rights, and the distinction between rights and privileges is central to understanding the standard. American citizens have the right to certain individual freedoms and liberties found in the U.S. Constitution. But, individual freedoms and liberties have limits imposed by the fact that others also have the same freedoms and liberties. Respect for the rights of others, for example, limits some individual actions. Suppose two neighbors are in dispute over a tree growing on one’s lawn that extends shade over the other’s lawn. The man who does not want the shade cannot cut down his neighbor’s tree, only that part of the tree that hangs over his property. His property rights end at the boundary of his property, and the boundary between the two neighbors extends to other rights as well.

American democracy imposes a cost on its citizens. For government to be effective, it must have an effective citizenry that understands what is required to maintain individual freedoms and liberties. Citizens have responsibilities that, if met, ensure the health of American democracy. Citizens should hold governmental officials accountable by:

- Voting and keeping informed;
- Contributing to the common defense through military service if necessary;
- Checking the judicial powers of government and safeguarding the rights of the accused by serving on juries;
- Contributing to public safety and order by obeying the law and reporting violations of the law; and
- Performing public service when the need arises.

Privileges may be defined by what they are not—they are not rights, and thus a citizen has to earn a privilege. For example, it is not a birthright to drive a car. Driving well benefits society and the driver, continues the privilege, and costs the driver and thus all other drivers less in insurance. Driving poorly or dangerously costs more insurance and may even cause loss of a driver’s license. A classroom discussion with students could elicit other examples.

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.

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

1. Why should American citizens have responsibilities?
2. Why is a license to drive a car a privilege and not a right?
3. Why is free speech a right and not a privilege?

Here is a released item from the Social Studies DSTP that illustrates the assessment of this benchmark. This test item asks students to explain why voting is a responsibility of citizenship. Students would then explain their reason.

Why is voting a responsibility of citizenship? Explain your answer.

Students should provide a valid reason that voting is a responsibility of citizenship. The item is open ended, which means that there is more than one way to answer this question correctly. A complete response would also include an accurate and relevant explanation of the reason given in the response. This explanation would demonstrate the depth of the student’s understanding of why voting is a responsibility of citizenship.

See the DSTP webpage for more items and sample, annotated student responses.

http://www.doe.k12.de.us/aab/social_studies/Social_Studies_item_samplers.shtml

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.

There is a change in focus from understanding to skills with the fourth standard, but understanding is necessary to show evidence of such skills on the test. *Why* is still important, but *how* and *what* have equal billing on this standard. Why does a citizen participate? How does a citizen participate in democracy? What does a citizen do?

Civics Standard Four requires students to demonstrate and use effectively the skills of a citizen. Such skills include, but are not limited to:

- Registering to vote;
- Interacting successfully with government agencies;
- Organizing and working in civic groups;
- Researching and advocating a position; or
- Serving in an office of public trust.

Teachers should use activities in the classroom which simulate or model the skills.

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:

- Is working in a group better than working alone?

The focus of this benchmark is clear: **participatory group skills**²³. 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?

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

1. You and four other students have been given the job of decorating the classroom for Thanksgiving. How do you decide what decorations to make?
2. Why is it important for the players on a sports team to cooperate?
3. You and 12 kids in your neighborhood get together to play baseball. How do you decide who plays what position?
4. What does it mean to “define an objective”?

²³ Groups of equals require procedures and skills to organize a common enterprise. Defining an objective, dividing responsibilities, and working cooperatively usually require leadership and procedures for collective decision-making. Participatory group skills include both leadership skills and the ability to follow as well as the everyday social skills necessary to coexistence.

Here is a released item from the Social Studies DSTP that illustrates the assessment of this benchmark. This test item focuses on one of the group skills of being able to work cooperatively as a part of a team. A student who examines the choices and selects the choice of “*I like working with others*” demonstrates an understanding that a positive attitude toward others is best when working as part of a team.

Which of these students has the best attitude to be part of a team?



Answer: C

See the DSTP webpage for more items and sample, annotated student responses.
http://www.doe.k12.de.us/aab/social_studies/Social_Studies_item_samplers.shtml

Participating in a Group, an instructional unit for the Delaware Recommended Curriculum that measures Civics Standard Four K-3a, can be found at
http://www.doe.k12.de.us/infosuites/staff/ci/content_areas/social_studies/standards/pilot.shtml.