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## Dear Senator: Young Citizens Explore Civics through Literacy

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In order to align with the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (CCSS ELA), elementary school teachers have enhanced and expanded upon an integrated approach to social studies instruction and literacy studies. Among the many changes accompanying the transition to the Common Core State Standards is a shift toward having students read increasingly complex nonfiction or informational material to “build knowledge, enlarge experience, and broaden worldviews” (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 3). Before the Common Core State Standards, more than 75 percent of reading in school’s early grades was fiction (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). As a result, students in the intermediate and middle grades may have less well-developed schema for different topics because they have had limited exposure to social studies content during elementary school.

In the Common Core State Standards, there are ten reading informational text standards for K-5 which fall under four different organizing elements: Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, and Level of Text Complexity (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2010). These ten standards represent end of grade level expectations of what students should know and be able to do.

In the elementary grades, the Common Core State Standards describe literacy content and strategies that are easily applied in social studies but provide no social studies specific curriculum. Therefore, state social studies standards remain relevant in describing what students should know and be able to do by the end of a grade. For example, in Florida, elementary social studies teachers must refer to both the Florida Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS) and CCSS for ELA when planning instruction. Another important instructional mandate in many states focuses on civic education (Godsay, Henderson, Levine, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2012). Florida specifically requires the teaching of civics as part of the reading curriculum. The Sandra Day O’Connor legislation states that the reading portion of the language arts curriculum shall include civics education content for all grade levels (Florida House of Representatives, 2010).



The integration of social studies into literacy instruction has highlighted the importance of multiple sources that provide the necessary perspective for young students to understand an event or a person's life (Halvorsen, Alleman, & Brugar, 2013; Halvorsen et al., 2012). Linking diverse informational texts, including primary and secondary sources, into classroom learning experiences may build young children's understanding of cultural, historical, and socio-political phenomenon.

Primary sources provide the "raw materials of history" and offer "unfiltered access" to the past (Library of Congress, n.d.). They include text (i.e., letters, manuscripts, diaries, and speeches), audio recordings (including music), and visual sources (i.e., maps, photographs, drawings) that offer a firsthand account or representation of an event that was "created at the time under study" (Library of Congress, n.d.). Social scientists have found these resources provide invaluable evidence for historical inquiry (Waring & Torrez, 2010) by offering unique insight to an event or memory through the perspective of an individual who directly experienced the historical event. Although primary source documents have been embedded into middle school and secondary classrooms, use in primary grades is less common (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012).

Thoughtful use of primary sources may facilitate young students' exploration of informational text that stimulates their curiosity, provokes questions, and supplies evidence for historical accounts (Barton, 2005). By introducing primary sources in the early years, young learners may incrementally acquire skills and abilities in historical inquiry (Fillpot, 2009). However, the construction of historical understanding in the early years requires a systematic and intentional instructional approach that applies developmentally appropriate practice to the study of social studies. This approach familiarizes students with historic primary source images, children's literature, and other information sources with scaffolded instruction on how to observe change over time, analyze sources, and synthesize information.

Conversely, secondary sources are those created afterwards or by people who were not present. Examples include newspaper articles, textbooks, documentaries, some paintings and some photographs. Any source material that is used will only provide a small portion of the total story, therefore, one source is never enough. Also all authors or creators of source material have some bias, or may only have a portion of the information themselves. Moreover, textbooks are often void of details and tend to summarize information.

To foster powerful and purposeful pedagogy, we have instructed our teachers and preservice educators on best practice strategies for integration of literacy and social studies. This article reviews the components of an integration model and provides an example of each component with a lesson written for first grade. The gradual release model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) and research-informed literacy practices are embedded in the delivery of instruction. It includes multiple sources of information that students read and analyze, and they engage in writing activities in response to what is read.



## How a Law is Made (Grade 1)

### Part 1 / Launch (Teacher Directed)

The lesson begins with a launch. During the launch, teachers and students build interest in the topic by making connections with prior knowledge. The launch also leads into a statement of the purpose for learning.

We launch this lesson by asking students to write about a problem they recently had and the solution they used to solve that problem. To help guide their thinking, we provide an example:

This morning I woke up 20 minutes late. For some reason my alarm clock did not go off. That was a problem for me since I have many things to do before coming to school on time each day. I walk my dog, I take a shower, I pack my lunch and I drive to work. My solution was to take 5 minutes off my dog's walk, and I did not make and pack my lunch. Instead I will pay for and eat what is available in the lunchroom today.

Students then turn and talk with their neighbor about the problem and solution they proposed. One or two students share their problem and solution with the class.

In a recent class discussion, first graders shared the following problems and solutions with their partners:

During carpet time, Daniel always kicks me, and he won't stop even when I ask. So I told the teacher, and she moved Daniel's card.

Sometimes I forget my lunch at home, but the lady in the cafeteria let's me get one and I tell my Momma.

Some students included fantastical elements in their identification of problems:

Yesterday my pet dinosaurs were making a lot of noise, so I made them sit under my chair during class and told them to be quiet.

Others struggled to identify a problem or mimicked the problem of their peer, so additional scaffolding was provided:

Child: I don't know a problem.

Teacher: Tell James about what happened on the playground when the ball got stuck in the hoop.



Child: Oh yeah. We were playing basketball and I threw the ball, but it got stuck in the hoop. I took another ball and kept throwing it up until it hit the ball, and they both came down on my head.

### **Part 2 / Develop Purpose (Teacher Directed)**

In this part of the lesson the purpose is explicitly stated. The teacher selects the purpose from the state social studies standards and the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts. During this time, the teacher also facilitates students' reflection on the launch activity. Students need to know where the learning is headed and how it connects to what occurred previously.

The purpose of this lesson is for students to use primary and secondary sources to learn how a law is made. The four standards addressed in this lesson include two state social studies standards and two CCSS for ELA, one for reading and one for writing.

SS.1.C.1.1 Explain the purpose of rules and laws in the school and community.

SS.1.C.1.2 Give examples of people who have the power and authority to make and enforce rules and laws in the school and community.

C.C.S.S.RI.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science and technical texts.

C.C.S.S.W.12 Write informative/explanatory texts in which they name a topic, supply some facts about the topic and provide some sense of closure.

### **Part 3 / Gather Information (Teacher Directed and/or Shared Experience)**

Gathering information is a critical part of the inquiry process, and involves the analysis and synthesis of information from a variety of sources. It is important that multiple primary and secondary sources are used to represent diverse perspectives. Often teachers engage students in reading to build background knowledge; however, other activities are important to include. The Common Core and the close reading model promote the practice of providing students with rich text combined with instructional practices that promote deep comprehension by drawing from textual evidence. Some literacy experts contend that this process excises the process of activating students' prior knowledge before encountering the text. However, in the social studies, the text is entrenched in content, and reading a portion or a single text without knowledge of the time period or other events that took place might reinforce incorrect content information and misperceptions.

A knowledgeable reader needs only to update his or her preexisting situation model with new information presented in the text, while a reader who lacks background knowledge on



the topic of the text is less able to build an accurate representation of what the text means. (Brown & Kappes, 2012, p. 3)

Therefore, teachers must initially ensure that students have sufficient background knowledge to access the text, but also introduce foundational literacy skills to facilitate students' close reading strategies. This component of the lesson introduces graphic organizers and other strategies for note taking or recording important information to help students learn to process and manage increasingly complex information.

In this lesson we explain to students that people encounter problems every day. Some problems affect just one person or a small group of people, and the people involved may be able to come up with their own solutions or get help from someone they know. Other problems affect many people and may take a long time to solve. One way to help prevent problems or to solve problems is to make a rule or create a law. The first place students gather information about how a law is made is from reading the social studies textbook, a secondary source. The teacher writes the terms *rule* and *law* on chart paper. As the text is read, students capture key characteristics of those terms on the chart. For example:

Rules – tell us what we can and cannot do, help keep order, help keep us safe. Anyone, even kids, can make rules. We have rules for games, rules at home, and rules at school. Our parents, teachers, and coaches help make sure that we follow the rules and decide what happens if we break a rule.

Laws – special kind of rule, leaders make laws, everyone must follow laws, help keep order, help keep us safe, government leaders make laws. The police, judges, and other government leaders make sure that people follow the laws.

Afterwards, the teacher uses information on the chart to write a definition for the word rule and the word law on the chart paper. Subsequently, the students draft a definition for the words on their graphic organizer.

A second source used in this lesson to learn about how a law is made is a picture book. We let the students know that we will read only selected pages from *My Senator and Me* by Edward M. Kennedy. We explain that the story is about a real senator who worked for many years in Washington D.C. to help make laws. His name was Senator Edward Kennedy, and his dog Splash tells the story of a major law that Senator Kennedy helped make. Before reading the picture book we discuss the vocabulary words *bill*, *committee*, and *senator*. During the reading we stop and think aloud at six key points, using the chart below as a guide. Think-alouds demonstrate how expert readers interact with text to build comprehension. The teacher verbally models the thought process while reading a selection. This may include visualizing, defining unfamiliar words, decoding, and asking questions of the text. Students are able to witness the thoughts of an expert reader and apply this process to their reading (Moore & Lyon, 2005).

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Page	Think Aloud
2	So, Congress's job is to help make rules and laws for America.
14	Congress meets at the Capital building in Washington D.C. to make laws for America.
21	The book just told me that a bill is an idea for a law. Did it say that two different groups came up with similar ideas but can't agree? I wonder how these two groups will come up with a solution.
38	Oh, it is at a committee meeting that people from both groups (the Senate and the House of Representatives) talk about the idea for a new law and try to make it better. I have the same question as Splash; I wonder if they will ever be able to agree.
42	Just like we do sometimes, these lawmakers cooperated. They worked out a bill that they could all agree on. The next step will be to take a vote but it sounds like the President has the final say. Let's read to see what happens.
46	The vote for this bill passed 95 to 5. I wonder if the President agreed and signed this bill into law or if he denied the bill and it went away. What do you think?

We provide the following simulation for students to help them gather more information about the process of how a law is made. The identified problems for this activity may also be replaced with authentic local issues that are relevant to the students. We post four charts around the room that are titled with the topic and problems shown below.

Topic	Problem
Play Time	Not Enough Play Time
Buses	Not Listening to the Bus Driver or Patrols
Wildlife	Birds Nest with Babies is Being Disturbed
Lunchroom	Noisy Students

We ask students to individually write an idea for a solution to one of the problems. Once all students have an idea for a solution, we have them move to the corner where their problem chart is located and ensure students bring their written solutions. Students share their ideas for solutions with the group of children gathered. The group votes for the solution they think is best. The student whose solution receives the most votes then explains his/her idea for a solution to the



entire class and walks their written response over to a box labeled with the word, “Hopper.” The “hopper” is the container in which lawmakers in the U.S. Congress place their bills. Originally the bin was referred to as a basket (Mann, 1921), but many of the House members began calling it the hopper (Blanton, 1924), a term used to describe the storage bins for grain or coal (History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, 2014). Modeling the process and using the terminology of Congress, the student then drops his/her written idea for a solution into the Hopper.

Once all four groups have completed this process we divide students randomly into four committees and place the appropriate committee name above the coordinating chart. The Committee on Health discusses the play time problem. The Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation discusses the bus problem. The Committee on Environment and Public Works discusses the wildlife problem. The Committee on Agriculture and Nutrition discusses the lunchroom problem.

Next, students move to a work area and meet with their committee to review the proposed solution that was placed in the Hopper. This idea represents a bill. The teacher takes the ideas or bills from the Hopper and sends the bills to the appropriate committees. The job of the committee is to read the idea or bill, describe more thoroughly the idea, and add to or modify what was originally written.

Next a member of the Committee writes the modified bill or idea on the chart paper, and a spokesperson from each Committee reads the bill aloud to the class. After each bill is presented, the entire class votes on whether the bill should be sent to the principal for approval, the bill should go back to committee for further work, or the bill should be thrown out completely. We repeat this process for all four bills. Committee members also take their poster to the principal’s office. We explain to the students that the principal may decide to accept their bill, send it back to the committee for further work, or reject or veto the bill. After review, the principal signs the bills that she approves. We request the principal to veto at least one of the bills and send one back for further work.

Now that students have had many opportunities to learn about key vocabulary terms, we have them record the definitions to important terms listed on the How a Law is Made Vocabulary Chart. All of the terms were previously discussed and appeared in the other text. Students use these words in the production portion of the lesson.

#### **Part 4 / Production** (Guided or Independent)

During production, students apply what they have learned. It is a time to synthesize, analyze, and evaluate information they have gathered to create a product that includes a written response. Both cooperative learning projects and individual work is appropriate.





In this lesson, the product students create is a letter to a Senator or Congressman/Congresswoman that not only shares their idea for a law but also includes information about the process of how an idea becomes a law (bill, hopper, committee, vote, veto). The teacher models the writing process and provides a rubric with criteria that must be included in the letter. A sample letter is provided with the lesson materials with options of how to scaffold the process so students can accomplish the task. The blanks are for students to complete on their own, and the underlined words may be removed for students to fill in like a closed passage.

Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_,

I have an idea for a law to share with you. My idea is \_\_\_\_\_.

In school we are learning about how a law is made. I know that a law begins with an idea called a bill. It is created by a Senator or Congressman and is put into a box called the Hopper. Then the idea or bill is sent to a committee where other people can add to the bill or make it better. Sometimes a bill does not leave a committee and is thrown away. After the committee fixes or changes the bill, Senators and Congressmen vote on it. If it passes the vote it is sent to the President for his signature. I also learned that if the President does not agree with the bill that he can veto or throw it out too. I hope you will like my idea and turn it into a bill because \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

### Part 5 / Closure (Teacher Facilitated)

Closure occurs in a variety of ways, but it is the time to share work with an authentic, purposeful audience, reflect on the learning, restate the purpose, and debrief with students. We have students read to the class the letters they wrote. Then we mail the letters to a Congressman/Congresswoman. As an extension, teachers might have students discuss the process with a family member or track a bill that was recently proposed. Teachers may also extend the lesson by introducing an interactive picture of the House Chamber to explore the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives (Office of the Clerk U.S. Capital, n.d.).

Throughout the learning experience students use informational texts to develop social studies vocabulary, explore civics concepts, and engage in discussion focused on the content in the text. Students may acquire skills in supporting their conclusions with information drawn from a variety books and represent the knowledge they have gained through writing activities. This developmental approach harnesses evidence-based strategies that optimize the capabilities of young learners to closely read and deeply reflect upon informational text. The students' resulting work highlights the capabilities of first graders to problem solve and articulate their ideas if provided with the resources and strategies to acquire knowledge and express themselves.



### How a Law is Made – Vocabulary Chart

Vocabulary	Definition
Rule	
Law	
Bill	
Committee	
Senator	
Hopper	
Veto	



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