

## USCIS Citizenship and Integration Grant Program

# Promising Practices

<b>Organization Name:</b>	Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts
<b>Location:</b>	Springfield, MA
<b>USCIS Grant Program:</b>	FY 2010 Citizenship and Integration National Capacity Building Grant Program

### Classroom Constitution

Many questions on the naturalization test ask applicants to demonstrate an understanding of the purpose, function, and history of the U.S. Constitution. As part of the fiscal year 2010 Citizenship and Integration Grant Program, Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts (JFSWM) designed an interactive classroom activity that introduces students to the U.S. Constitution. The activity encourages students to create their own classroom constitution. Participating in the creation and amendment of the classroom constitution encourages students to see the significance of democracy, voting, and civic participation.

*Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts program participants.*



### Purpose

JFSWM developed the classroom constitution activity in order to help English language learners (ELLs) better understand the U.S. Constitution and therefore, have a greater understanding of the concepts covered on the

naturalization test. This activity relates to naturalization test questions 1-7, 12, 48-50, 54, 55, 65 and 66. The classroom constitution activity also helps teachers establish formal rules of behavior in the classroom.

### Process

First, the instructor provides students with a historical overview of the U.S. Constitution. The instructor

explains the purpose of the U.S. Constitution, how it was created, and its role as the supreme law of the

land. ELLs may find it difficult to understand the U.S. Constitution if they are unfamiliar with the structure of the U.S. system of government. To give students a familiar context, the instructor compares the U.S. Constitution to classroom rules.

Next, students work collaboratively to create a document of classroom rules. Students propose rules such as “we will help each other learn,” or “one person speaks at a time.” Students also are encouraged to discuss unpopular rules such as “any student who is more than five minutes late cannot attend class.”

After all students have an opportunity to suggest and discuss a rule, the class votes on each proposed classroom rule. Voting allows students to reach an agreement on the rules that will apply to all classroom

members. The instructor encourages everyone to participate in the vote. After students finish voting, the instructor transcribes the final rules onto a classroom constitution document that begins with the phrase, “We the People...”

The instructor posts the classroom constitution in a visible place for the remainder of the course and refers to it whenever the lessons cover topics related to the U.S. Constitution. For example, during a lesson on constitutional amendments, students get an opportunity to amend their classroom constitution. From its initial development until the completion of the course, the classroom constitution serves as an effective tool for communicating the importance and purpose of the U.S. Constitution.

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## Challenges

The classroom constitution activity may be challenging for students with limited formal education or familiarity with the structure of the U.S. system of government. Students with low English language proficiency may

find it challenging to participate in class discussions about rules. ELLs may also find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts related to the U.S. Constitution.

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## Overcoming Obstacles

JFSWM instructors respond to these challenges by modifying the classroom constitution activity to suit each class of students. Instructors alter the complexity and length of rules to match student language proficiency levels. Instructors also strive to ensure that all students have an opportunity to propose or contest a rule, no matter their language level. Even students with minimal English language skills can

participate in the activity by raising their hand to vote in favor of a rule.

Finally, instructors refer to the classroom constitution throughout the course in order to reinforce abstract concepts related to the U.S. Constitution. Referencing the classroom constitution provides students with a context that helps them understand less familiar concepts.

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## Outcomes

The classroom constitution activity is a helpful and engaging way to teach ELLs about the U.S. Constitution. The classroom constitution activity gives ELLs the opportunity to participate in creating, passing, and amending a constitution. In the process, students get the opportunity to express their opinions, exercise

their English language skills, and learn more about the concepts on the naturalization test. The collaboration involved in the creation of the classroom constitution results in a cohesive and productive learning environment.

## Contact Information

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