



## FIELD WORKBOOK LEAFLET

A service of the Young Yorker Program. Young Yorkers are junior members of the New York State Historical Association.

TEACHER EDITION

New York State Historical Association.

Post Office Box 800, Cooperstown, New York 13326

(607) 547-2534

©2001 New York State Historical Association

# Town Meetings Teach the Bill of Rights

by Maryanne Malecki

**T**own Meetings are a simple way to involve even very young children in the democratic process. Town Meetings are particularly attractive to educators because they are non-competitive, and allow each individual to express an opinion. Town Meetings can also utilize cooperative learning techniques during the Break-out Session; this can reinforce activities already in place in the classroom.

While Town Meetings can be held to resolve or discuss a variety of issues or problems, this project outline will focus on the Rights of the Individual as a member of a social community. For the purpose of this project, "social community" is defined as family, neighborhood, classroom, school, town or city, state and nation. Using the Bill of Rights as the starting point, young people will determine how the Constitution affects them in their daily lives through discussion in a series of Town Meetings.

## Objectives:

- To develop an awareness in young people (Grades 1 through 6) of the importance of the Bill of Rights in their lives.
- To conduct a series of Town Meetings with students in various grade levels or classes to discuss what rights they see as important.
- To provide students with participatory experience in the representative democratic process.
- To reinforce social studies concepts of citizenship, justice, human rights, choice and the political system in the New York State syllabi.

## Personnel and Materials

Town Meetings can be conducted with one class, a group of classes, or an entire school. The process remains the same.

Each Town Meeting needs a Leader. In the classroom version, this person would most commonly be the teacher, although any other adult—administrator, colleague, student teacher—may take on this role.

Participants are the students. In the classroom version, the class should be divided into working groups of 6-8 students, with one student appointed the role of Facilitator. This cooperative learning technique works best with students in grades 4 and above, who will have the necessary skills to record from

dictation the group ideas. This technique can also be employed in larger Town Meetings (two or more classes), again with older students.

Facilitators are needed during the Break-out Session to keep the working groups of student participants on task, and record the groups' responses. One Facilitator is assigned to each group. In large Town Meetings, classroom teachers may take on this responsibility with their respective classes; as noted above, older students may be divided into cooperative learning groups during this session. The Facilitators may also be assigned to read their group's report during the Plenary Session.

Necessary materials are those found in any school: paper and pencils, pens or magic markers. Large sheets of newsprint may also be used to record young children's responses.

## Preparatory Activities

Teachers may wish to review various concepts with the group prior to the actual Town Meeting. The sophistication and maturity level of the students will determine the extent to which the concepts are discussed; however, even very young students are able to express opinions if given the opportunity.

Concepts and topics for discussion could include, but not be limited to, the following:

- What is a community? What kinds of communities do we have (school, neighborhood, family, town, city, state, country, world?)
- What is a law? Why do we have laws? Do we need them? (this discussion may relate to classroom or family rules)
- How are laws made? Who should decide what laws we have?
- What is a right? Who has them? (this discussion could include news items about civil rights, animal rights, human rights)
- What is a responsibility? How do responsibilities relate to rights?
- From an historic perspective: who made laws for the colonists before the American Revolution? What changes took place after the Revolution?
- What types of government did the people hope to have, or hope to avoid?

- What is a constitution? Why do we need one?
- What is a bill of rights and why do we have one? What was New York's role in the development of the United States' Bill of Rights?

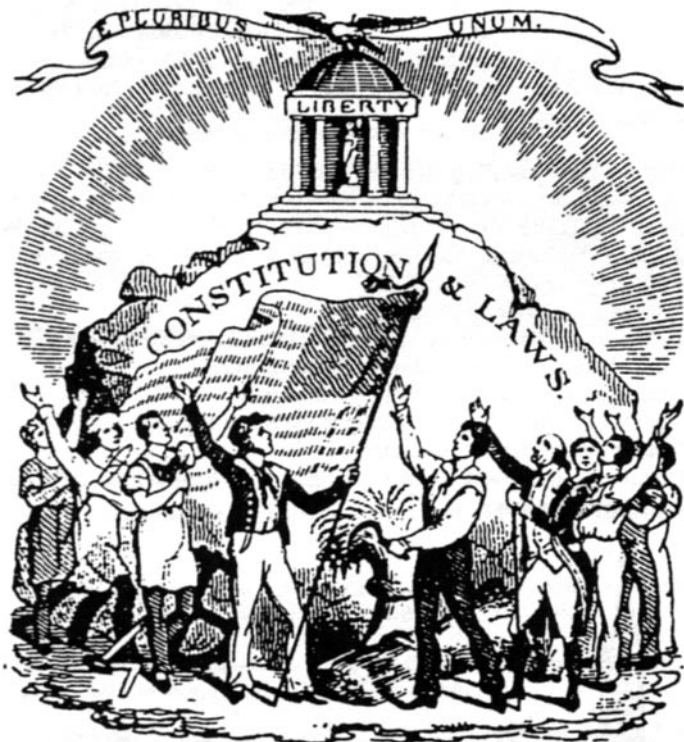
In addition to these issues, teachers should review ground rules for participating in group discussions, emphasizing that each student should be able to comfortably express an opinion or idea. All ideas will be accepted during the brainstorm session of the Town Meeting. They may be refined later in classroom discussions.

**General Session (Big Group)** 15 to 20 minutes

All sessions or classes participating in the Town Meeting attend the General Session. The Leader of the meeting may choose to discuss any of the concepts listed in the Preparatory Activities; however, to insure group cohesiveness, the following concepts are advised:

- What is a law? (rule, regulation)
- How were laws made in the American colonies before the Revolution?
- What changes took place following the Revolution?
- What is the Constitution and why is it important?
- New York's role in the development of the Bill of Rights
- What is a right and who has them?
- Groups who are in the news related to rights issues (citizen's rights, human rights, animal rights)

After a brief (15 minutes or so) discussion of the above, the Leader informs the General Session that they are going to participate in small group discussions regarding their rights as



young people in their social community (defined above). The Meeting will disperse into the pre-determined groups with a Facilitator (most generally the class with its teacher).

**Break-out Groups (Little Groups)**

15 to 20 minutes

The individual groups with their Facilitators will develop a list of rights by brainstorming. Ground rules should be established so that each student feels comfortable expressing ideas. The Facilitator may wish to use the following rules as a guideline:

- one person may speak at a time
- questions may be asked for clarification of an idea after the speaker has completed his or her thought
- ridicule is not allowed
- all ideas are considered; they may be dismissed later, after the brainstorming session

The Facilitator's job is to record responses and keep the group on task. After the allotted time, the Facilitator will bring the small group back into the Plenary Session.

**Plenary Session (Big Group)** 15 to 20 minutes

All groups will re-assemble in the Town Meeting area. Each group will present the list of rights as developed by the small group to the Meeting Leader. The Leader will read the list aloud to the group. Older students may elect a representative to report the group's list to the Plenary Session, then present the list to the Leader. Each group will be identified and recognized with a round of applause. Similarities among lists may be pointed out and discussed. Questions may arise with older participants, and can be used as a basis for brief discussion, if time and facilities allow.

It is important to keep within the specified time limits, especially with very young students.

The Plenary Session may end with the singing of "America," "My Country 'Tis of Thee," or another appropriate song familiar to the participants.

In the sidebar on the next page is an example of the work of one fourth grade class.

**Subsequent Activities**

- Each participant receives a certificate acknowledging participation. The certificate may simply state: Congratulations! You have participated in a Town Meeting at (name of school) to discuss Student Rights. There should be space left for the participant's signature and the date.
- You may wish to have a small group of students design a certificate that can be reproduced for all to use.
- Each participant signs the Document of Participation. The size of the participating group determines the document size; large roles of craft paper can be used to create a document 3' x 6' to accommodate an entire school or several classes. Suggested wording for the document: "We the People of (name of group, school, class) held a Town Meeting to celebrate the

Bicentennial of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights during the week of \_\_\_\_\_." OR  
 "We the People of had a Town Meeting on (date) \_\_\_\_\_.  
 We discussed student rights."

• The leader is responsible for compiling all lists of rights presented at the Plenary Session. Duplicate or similar ideas are re composed into one sentence, maintaining the integrity of the originals. Completed copies will be made available to Facilitators, who will distribute them to each participant. A copy will also be available for display in the classroom.

### Select Bibliography

*Shh! We're Writing the Constitution*, by Jean Fritz, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1987.

*The Reluctant Pillar, New York and the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, ed. by Stephen Schedter, Russell Sage College, Troy, N.Y., 1985.

*The Machine That Would Go of Itself, The Constitution in American Culture*, by Michael Kammen, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., 1986.

*New York and the Union: Contributions to the American Constitutional Experience*, ed. by Stephen L. Schechter & Richard B. Bernstein, New York State Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, Albany' N.Y., 1990.

*An Introduction to Local Government in New York State*, New York State Department of State, Albany, N.Y., 1985.

*A Look at Our Town, Village, City, County Government*, by Emily C. Neville & Marianna Pluchino, Stout, N.Y. State Education Department, Albany, N.Y., 1983.

*Teacher's Note: A coloring book about the Bill of Rights is available from the American Legion. Order from: The American Legion, National Emblem Sales, P.O. Box 1050, Indianapolis, Indiana 46206. Stock No.75201 \$15.00 per 100.*

## BILL OF RIGHTS

Lisha Kill Middle School, Grade 4

**We the people of the Fourth Grade at Lisha Kill Middle School have the right:**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| to have homework in order to learn more                     | to go into Lisha Kill woods with an adult supervising    |
| to decide whether to wear a jacket or not on the playground | to say no to drugs                                       |
| to decide about the snack machines installed in our school  | to own a pet   |
| to be rewarded for good behavior                            | to move to any state                                     |
| to see all of our classmates follow rules                   | to ride your bicycle                                     |
| to work in a quiet room                                     | to remind teacher when we go somewhere                   |
| to talk about what you want if the time is right            | to be innocent until proven guilty                       |
| to be ourselves   | to spend money on what we want                           |
| to tell teachers if they are wrong (with proper respect)    | to select our own friends                                |
| to sit wherever we want                                     | to travel  |
| to eat what we like   | to share our thoughts                                    |
| to have recess  | to do what we want to our own property                   |
| to dress as you feel you want to (within reason)            | to watch T.V.  |
| to be able to walk the halls without fear of bodily harm    | to vote in school elections                              |
| to play instruments   | to go to school  |
| to choose what you want to play on the playground           | to speak to the school administration about our problems |
| to learn  | to equal opportunities                                   |
| to associate with whom you please                           | to be able to express our feelings                       |
| to hear your teacher in the classroom                       | to make our own decisions                                |
| to be sick without getting into trouble                     | to have school equipment                                 |
| to participate in extracurricular activities – sports, etc. | to get paid for work                                     |
| to be loyal   | to keep things from being destroyed                      |
| to be safe  | to go to assemblies to listen, learn and participate     |
| to have litter-free streets                                 | to be who we are without peer pressure                   |
| to dignity  | to be a good student, helper and friend                  |
| to speak  | to visit with our friends at lunch                       |
| to peace  | to buy juice and drink it                                |
| to a safe environment                                       | to use library with respect for people and equipment     |
| to sit next to friends                                      | to go to church  |
| to play Nintendo and other games                            | to have field trips                                      |
| to use public facilities (bathrooms)                        | to have nurses in school                                 |
|   | to make mistakes   |
|   | to have parents  |
|   | to go to a good college                                  |
|   | to have holidays   |
|   | to celebrate   |
|   | to share   |



**Congratulations!**

**You took part in the**

**Town Meeting  
at**

---

---

**Town Meeting Leader**

# Young Yorker Activities

**Discuss particular Constitutional Amendments** which assure students of the rights they listed in their Town Meetings. Individually list each of the first ten amendments on large sheets of paper. Under each amendment, write the student right that corresponds. Determine how the other rights are protected. (Students and teachers may wish to review the Charter of the United Nations.)

**Discuss national governments** that do not provide these rights for their citizens. Locate these nations on world maps or globes. Discuss different political or economic systems, including the difference between direct democracy and representative democracy. Which form would the students prefer to use? What are the advantages and disadvantages of various systems?

**Citizen rights are coupled with citizen responsibilities.** Based on the students' list of rights, what responsibilities do they have to make certain their rights continue? Post this list in the classroom alongside the list of rights.

**Discussion Issues** (teachers should re-word questions to accommodate their students):

- What happens when the rights of a group infringe on the rights of the individual?
- What about when individual rights affect the group (i.e. smoking policy in public places)?
- Does the free enterprise system and technological progress supersede the rights of individuals and/or groups? Examples: acid rain; nuclear energy and waste disposal; off-shore oil drilling; strip mining; fishing rights and international waters.
- How have computers and technological developments affected the individual's right to privacy? What is the balance between the right to privacy and the right to know?

**Using the Bill of Rights or the students' list,** design a Quilt of Rights out of construction paper or fabric. Display.

**If several Town Meetings are conducted,** representatives from individual classes may be elected to attend a "Constitutional Convention" in which one list of rights is ultimately developed. Representatives could use the individual lists created within the various Town Meetings as their base of constituency information.

## The U.S. Bill of Rights

For two hundred years the American Constitution has served as a beacon to other nations seeking a model for a political system that effectively guarantees the rights of the individual. Many of the Framers of our original Constitution, however, saw no need to include a "Bill of Rights." They regarded the Constitution, itself, as a sufficient guarantee of the rights of the governed in asserting the sovereign power of the people and in granting to government only certain powers. They also pointed to other institutional assurances of liberty: the Constitution's separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial parts; the division of power between national and state governments in our system of federalism; the bills of rights existing in the respective states; the many specific rights already mentioned in the Constitution, including prohibition of bills of attainder, ex post facto laws, and the suspension of habeas corpus. The critics of a national Bill of Rights argued that such a statement might be too limiting, carrying with it the implication that any right not so specified did not exist.

These arguments did not convince those opponents of the original Constitution who feared the heavy hand of government and who appealed to a tradition of fundamental rights that reached back to Magna Carta. The Constitution was ratified in several states only upon assurances from its supporters that a national Bill of Rights would follow. Behind the leadership of James Madison, the First Congress under the new Constitution introduced a Bill of Rights in 1789, which Congress approved in September of that year and passed on to the states for ratification. The first ten Amendments to the

Constitution were eventually ratified with the approval of the eleventh state, Virginia, on December 15th, 1791.

This extraordinary document enshrines a number of historic rights. The 1st Amendment defines the essence of liberty by guaranteeing freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition. The 2nd Amendment also asserts the ideal of liberty against an old nemesis, the tyranny of large standing armies, by providing for the maintenance of a citizens' militia through the right to own and bear arms. The 3rd Amendment echoes the concerns of the 2nd by placing limits on the quartering of military forces in the homes of citizens.

The ideal of justice is captured in the amendments that follow. The 4th Amendment safeguards our homes and businesses against unreasonable searches and seizures. The 5th Amendment protects our life, liberty, and property with the shield of due process of law, and it outlaws torture in providing that no person could be compelled to confess. The 6th Amendment provides the criteria for a fair trial. The 7th Amendment provides for the right of trial by jury, and the 8th Amendment condemns cruel and unusual punishment as well as excessive fines and bail.

The 9th Amendment responds to one of the principal criticisms of a national Bill of Rights by providing that the enumeration of rights in the Constitution should not "deny or disparage" any other rights not expressed. The 10th Amendment asserts the ideal of federalism in securing the rights of the individual states.



NEW YORK STATE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Post Office Box 800, Cooperstown, New York 13326

(607) 547-2534

[www.nysha.org](http://www.nysha.org)

©2001 New York State Historical Association