

# Democracy and the Public School



A document created for members of the Horace Mann League of the USA.  
Researched by Jack McKay

Democracy and Education: The Crisis of Our Times .....	3
Definition of Democracy for a Public School .....	4
A K-12 Curriculum on Democracy .....	5
Lesson Plans and Assessments: K-12.....	7
Lesson Plans for Primary Grades (K -2 <sup>nd</sup> ) on Democracy.....	7
Kindergarten: “Fairness and Working Together” .....	7
First Grade: “Making Rules and Being Fair” .....	7
Second Grade: “Fairness in Decisions” .....	8
Assessment and Reflection for All Grades.....	9
Lesson Plans for Intermediate Grades (3 <sup>rd</sup> – 5 <sup>th</sup> ) on Democracy.....	10
Third Grade: “Leadership and Representation” .....	10
Fourth Grade: “Rights and Responsibilities” .....	10
Fifth Grade: “Democracy in Action” .....	11
Assessment and Reflection for All Grades.....	12
Lesson Plans for Middle Grades (6 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup> ) on Democracy .....	13
Sixth Grade: “Understanding Citizenship and Equality” .....	13
Seventh Grade: “Justice and Civic Institutions” .....	14
Eighth Grade: “Democracy in Action: Challenges and Opportunities” .....	14
Assessment and Reflection for All Grades.....	15
Lesson Plans for High School (Grades 9 <sup>th</sup> –12 <sup>th</sup> ) on Democracy.....	16
Grade 9: “Understanding the Foundations of Democracy” .....	16
Grade 10: “Ethical Leadership in Democracy” .....	16
Grade 11: “Contemporary Challenges to Democracy” .....	17
Grade 12: “Democracy in Action” .....	18
Assessment and Reflection for All Grades.....	18

# Democracy and Education: The Crisis of Our Times

by esteemed scholars David Berliner and Joel Westheimer on the HML Podcast series,

David Berliner and Joel Westheimer delve into the intricate relationship between public education and democratic society.

1. **Public Education as a Democratic Pillar:** Berliner and Westheimer emphasize that public education is a cornerstone of democracy, fostering informed citizenship and promoting social cohesion.
2. **Challenges to Educational Equity:** They highlight persistent disparities in educational access and quality, noting that such inequities undermine the democratic ideal of equal opportunity for all students.
3. **Impact of Socioeconomic Factors:** The discussion underscores how socioeconomic status significantly influences educational outcomes. Students from marginalized communities often face systemic barriers to success.
4. **Critique of Standardized Testing:** Both scholars critique the overreliance on standardized testing, arguing that it narrows curricula and stifles critical thinking, an essential component of democratic education.
5. **The Role of Teachers in Democracy:** They advocate for empowering educators to engage students in democratic practices within the classroom, fostering environments where critical discourse and civic engagement are integral to learning.
6. **Civic Education and Engagement:** The conversation highlights the necessity of integrating civic education into school curricula to prepare students for active participation in democratic processes.
7. **Privatization Concerns:** Berliner and Westheimer express concerns about the privatization of education, cautioning that it can lead to increased segregation and a focus on profit over the public good.
8. **Historical Context of Public Education:** They reflect on public schools' historical mission to serve as equalizers in society, a mission that is jeopardized by current policy trends and funding disparities.
9. **The Importance of Community Involvement:** The scholars stress the role of community engagement in supporting public schools, advocating for partnerships that enhance educational experiences, and upholding democratic values.
10. **Call to Action for Educational Reform:** In conclusion, Berliner and Westheimer call for comprehensive educational reforms that prioritize equity, critical thinking, and the preparation of students as active democratic citizens.

This dialogue serves as a compelling reminder of the intrinsic link between robust public education systems and the health of a democratic society

## Definition of Democracy for a Public School

This vision of democracy supports a public school's mission to educate and nurture informed, responsible, and engaged individuals who uphold democratic values in their lives and communities.

Democracy in a public school refers to the active practice of shared governance, inclusive decision-making, and equitable participation among students, educators, staff, parents, and the broader community. It is characterized by fostering a culture of respect, dialogue, and collaboration, where diverse voices are valued, and every individual can contribute to shaping policies, practices, and learning environments. Democracy in this context ensures:

1. **Equity:** Providing all students with equal access to quality education, regardless of their background, abilities, or circumstances.
2. **Inclusivity:** Encouraging the participation of diverse stakeholders, reflecting the school community's cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic diversity.
3. **Student Agency:** Empowering students to express their views, engage in decision-making, and take ownership of their learning experiences.
4. **Transparency:** Operating with openness and accountability in decision-making processes and resource allocation.
5. **Collaboration:** Building partnerships between the school and its community to address collective challenges and celebrate shared successes.
6. **Civic Responsibility:** Promoting critical thinking, ethical behavior, and active citizenship to prepare students to contribute meaningfully to society.

# A K-12 Curriculum on Democracy

Introducing the concepts of democracy in a K-12 curriculum requires a developmentally appropriate approach that aligns with students' cognitive, emotional, and social abilities at different grade levels.

This gradual progression ensures that students build a deep understanding of democracy over time, aligning with their developmental readiness and preparing them for active citizenship. Here's a suggested progression:

## 1. Early Elementary (Grades K–2)

- Key Concepts Introduced: Fairness, cooperation, and rules and responsibilities.
- Activities:
  - Classroom voting on simple decisions (e.g., what book to read or game to play).
  - Discussions about fairness and sharing.

Stories or activities that emphasize working together and respecting others' opinions.

## 2. Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5)

- Key Concepts Introduced: Leadership, representation, rights, and the importance of following rules for the common good.
- Activities:
  - Classroom "government" roles (e.g., student council or class jobs).
  - Exploring historical examples of democracy, such as the U.S. Constitution or voting rights.
  - Engaging in group discussions where students practice listening to diverse opinions and reaching consensus.

## 3. Middle School (Grades 6–8)

- Key Concepts Introduced: Citizenship, equality, justice, and the role of civic institutions.
- Activities:
  - Simulations like mock elections or debates on community issues.
  - Exploring civic responsibilities, such as voting and community service.
  - Introducing global perspectives on democracy, including its challenges and variations worldwide.

## 4. High School (Grades 9–12)

- Key Concepts Introduced: Critical analysis of democracy, ethical leadership, and the interplay between rights and responsibilities.
- Activities:
  - Advanced studies of government structures, constitutional law, and political philosophies.
  - Civic engagement projects include volunteering, community problem-solving, or advocating for local change.

- Encouraging discussions on contemporary challenges to democracy and fostering debates on societal issues.
- Practical applications, like encouraging students to pre-register to vote when eligible.

General Recommendations:

- **Embed Democracy in School Culture:** Reinforce democratic values across grades through inclusive school governance and student involvement in decision-making.
- **Integrate Across Disciplines:** Teach democracy in civics or social studies and through collaborative projects in subjects like English, science, and the arts.
- **Promote Lifelong Skills:** Focus on communication, collaboration, empathy, and critical thinking as foundational skills for participating in democratic processes.

# Lesson Plans and Assessments: K-12

## Lesson Plans for Primary Grades (K -2<sup>nd</sup>) on Democracy

**Key Concepts Introduced:** Fairness, cooperation, and rules and responsibilities.

**Goals:**

- Students will understand the importance of fairness and cooperation.
  - Students will practice making group decisions through voting.
  - Students will learn the value of listening to and respecting others' opinions.
- 

### Kindergarten: “Fairness and Working Together”

**Objective:** Introduce the concept of fairness and demonstrate the importance of cooperation in a fun and engaging way.

**Activity 1: Storytime on Fairness**

- Read: “*It’s Not Fair!*” by Amy Krouse Rosenthal.
- Discuss: Ask students how the characters felt when things weren’t fair. Explore ways to make situations fair.

**Activity 2: Sharing and Cooperation Game**

- Materials: Blocks or a toy set.
- Instructions: Divide students into small groups to build a structure together. Guide them to share materials fairly and work as a team.

**Activity 3: Class Vote on Playtime Activity**

- Options: (e.g., “Should we play with blocks or do a puzzle?”).
- Process: Explain voting simply (raising hands) and let them choose as a class.

**Reflection:** Discuss how voting made the decision fair and how they felt about the process.

### First Grade: “Making Rules and Being Fair”

**Objective:** Explore the importance of rules and responsibilities in creating fairness.

**Activity 1: Rules Discussion**

- Discuss: “Why do we have rules?” Use examples like traffic lights or classroom rules.

- Brainstorm: Create a list of fair rules for the classroom together.

### **Activity 2: Storytime on Cooperation**

- Read: “*The Little Red Hen*” (traditional story).
- Discuss: What happened when the animals didn’t help? How could they have worked together?

### **Activity 3: Classroom Voting on a Book**

- Process:
    - Present two book options for storytime.
    - Students vote using a simple ballot system or by raising hands.
  - Reflection: Discuss the importance of majority rule and respecting the class decision.
- 

## Second Grade: “Fairness in Decisions”

**Objective:** Deepen understanding of fairness and the role of rules in maintaining cooperation.

### **Activity 1: Group Game on Cooperation**

- Game: “Pass the Ball” Challenge.
  - Students form a circle and work together to pass a ball without dropping it.
  - Introduce rules (e.g., “No talking during the pass”).
- Discuss: How did rules help? What made it fair?

### **Activity 2: Storytime on Listening to Others**

- Read: “*We’re All Wonders*” by R.J. Palacio.
- Discuss: Highlight the importance of seeing others’ perspectives and respecting differences.

### **Activity 3: Class Vote on an Activity**

- Process: Students choose between two options (e.g., extra recess or an art project).
    - Introduce the idea of fairness by explaining that everyone’s voice matters but the majority decides.
  - Reflection: Ask students how they felt about the process and why it’s important to accept the outcome.
-



## Assessment and Reflection for All Grades

- **Teacher Observation:** Watch for student engagement during activities and their ability to share and cooperate.
- **Classroom Discussion:** End each lesson briefly reflecting on what they learned about fairness and working together.
- **Art Integration:** Have students draw pictures of people working together, voting, or following rules, and discuss their drawings.

These lessons lay a strong foundation for democratic values while engaging students in age-appropriate activities emphasizing fairness, cooperation, and shared responsibilities.

## Lesson Plans for Intermediate Grades (3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup>) on Democracy

**Key Concepts Introduced:** Leadership, representation, rights, and the importance of following rules for the common good.

**Goals:**

- Students will understand the principles of leadership, representation, and shared decision-making.
  - Students will explore historical examples of democracy and its evolution.
  - Students will practice group discussions, consensus-building, and active listening skills.
- 

### Third Grade: “Leadership and Representation”

**Objective:** Introduce students to the concept of representation and how leaders are chosen to serve the common good.

**Activity 1: Classroom Government Simulation**

- **Setup:** Create roles like Class President, Secretary, and Helpers.
- **Process:**
  - Nominate candidates and allow them to give brief “campaign speeches.”
  - Hold a class election using simple ballots.
- **Discussion:** Reflect on the importance of leaders listening to others and acting fairly for everyone’s benefit.

**Activity 2: Historical Example: The U.S. Constitution**

- **Storytime:** Read a simplified version of how the Constitution was created.
- **Activity:** Students create a “Class Constitution” outlining shared rules and responsibilities.

**Activity 3: Listening and Consensus Game**

- **Game:** "Consensus Circle"
    - Present a class problem (e.g., what reward to earn for a good week).
    - Students take turns sharing their ideas while practicing active listening.
    - The class votes on the final decision, emphasizing consensus-building.
- 

### Fourth Grade: “Rights and Responsibilities”

**Objective:** Deepen understanding of individual rights and how rules protect the common good.

### Activity 1: Role Play on Rights

- **Scenario:** Divide students into groups and assign roles (e.g., citizens, leaders, rule-makers).
- **Activity:** Discuss and role-play scenarios where rights are upheld or challenged (e.g., voting access, free speech).
- **Reflection:** Discuss how rules ensure fairness and protect everyone's rights.

### Activity 2: Exploring Voting Rights

- **Historical Exploration:** Discuss key milestones in voting rights (e.g., women's suffrage, Civil Rights Movement).
- **Activity:** Create a timeline of these events as a class.

### Activity 3: Listening and Group Decision-Making

- **Debate Topic:** "Should we have longer recess or extra art time?"
  - Students break into groups to discuss and present arguments.
  - Emphasize listening to opposing viewpoints and working toward a group decision.

---

## Fifth Grade: "Democracy in Action"

**Objective:** Examine democracy's role in history and encourage active student participation in decision-making.

### Activity 1: Create a Classroom Government

- **Process:**
  - Elect representatives for roles such as Speaker, Treasurer, and Historian.
  - Discuss responsibilities for each role and how they represent classmates' interests.
- **Ongoing Project:** Representatives collect and act on suggestions from classmates throughout the week.

### Activity 2: Historical Democracy Case Study

- **Example:** Explore Ancient Athens and compare it to modern democracy.
- **Activity:** Students draw Venn diagrams showing similarities and differences.

### Activity 3: Town Hall Simulation

- **Scenario:** "Our town has a budget of \$500. How should we spend it to help everyone?"

- Students propose and debate ideas (e.g., improving parks, funding libraries).
- Practice group discussion, listening, and reaching a final consensus through voting.

---

## Assessment and Reflection for All Grades

1. **Class Discussions:** Reflect on how leadership, representation, and rules affect the group.
2. **Student Self-Assessment:** Encourage students to write about what they learned regarding the importance of listening and participating in decision-making.
3. **Creative Expression:** Assign a project where students create posters or short essays about what democracy means to them.

By engaging students in hands-on activities and real-world connections, these lessons foster a deeper understanding of democratic principles and the skills needed to participate in a democratic society actively.

## Lesson Plans for Middle Grades (6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>) on Democracy

**Key Concepts Introduced:** Citizenship, equality, justice, and the role of civic institutions.

**Goals:**

- Students will understand the principles of citizenship and the role of civic responsibility.
  - Students will explore historical and global examples of democracy.
  - Students will practice real-world applications of democratic processes through simulations, debates, and group discussions.
- 

### Sixth Grade: “Understanding Citizenship and Equality”

**Objective:** Introduce the concepts of citizenship and equality, focusing on the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

**Activity 1: Mock Election**

- **Setup:** Create a mock election with student candidates running for classroom roles (e.g., class president, treasurer).
- **Process:**
  - Students create campaign speeches and posters.
  - Hold a secret ballot election.
- **Reflection:** Discuss how elections allow citizens to choose leaders and how fairness ensures equality in the process.

**Activity 2: Civic Responsibility Brainstorm**

- **Discussion:** What are ways citizens contribute to their communities (e.g., voting, volunteering)?
- **Activity:** Students create posters encouraging community involvement, such as recycling or helping neighbors.

**Activity 3: Historical Example of Equality**

- **Example:** Explore the 14th Amendment and its role in guaranteeing equal protection under the law.
  - **Discussion:** How does equality in democracy benefit everyone?
-

## Seventh Grade: “Justice and Civic Institutions”

**Objective:** Deepen understanding of justice and explore how civic institutions uphold democratic values.

### Activity 1: Mock Trial Simulation

- **Setup:** Use a classroom scenario (e.g., a debate over school rules). Assign roles: judge, jury, lawyers, and witnesses.
- **Process:** Students present arguments and evidence, and the jury deliberates on the decision.
- **Reflection:** Discuss how justice is served through fair trials and the role of civic institutions.

### Activity 2: Global Perspectives on Democracy

- **Discussion:** Compare democracy in the U.S. with democracies in other countries (e.g., parliamentary systems in the UK or proportional representation in Germany).
- **Activity:** Students create a comparison chart highlighting similarities and differences.

### Activity 3: Group Discussion on Justice

- **Scenario:** "Should students be required to participate in community service to graduate?"
- **Process:** Students discuss, present diverse opinions, and attempt to reach a consensus.

---

## Eighth Grade: “Democracy in Action: Challenges and Opportunities”

**Objective:** Explore challenges to democracy and engage students in understanding their role as active participants.

### Activity 1: Debate on Community Issues

- **Scenario:** Debate a local or school-related issue (e.g., “Should the school day start later?”).
- **Process:**
  - Divide students into teams for and against the issue.
  - Allow time for research and preparation.
  - Conduct the debate and have the class vote on the best arguments.
- **Reflection:** Discuss how debates are part of democratic decision-making.

### Activity 2: Civic Institution Spotlight

- **Example:** Explore the role of Congress, state legislatures, or local government.
- **Activity:** Students role-play as members of Congress, drafting and debating a “bill” on a school-related topic.

### **Activity 3: Global Challenges to Democracy**

- **Discussion:** Examine modern threats to democracy, such as misinformation or voter suppression.
- **Activity:** Students create informational campaigns (posters, videos, or brochures) to educate their peers about protecting democratic values.

---

### **Assessment and Reflection for All Grades**

1. **Class Discussions:** Encourage students to reflect on what they learned about citizenship, justice, and civic institutions.
2. **Student Projects:** Assign students to create essays, videos, or presentations about a democratic value or institution they studied.
3. **Group Activities:** Evaluate student participation in discussions, debates, and simulations.

---

These lessons incorporate historical, practical, and global perspectives, equipping middle school students with a deeper understanding of democracy and their role in shaping a just and equitable society.

## Lesson Plans for High School (Grades 9th–12th) on Democracy

**Key Concepts Introduced:** Critical analysis of democracy, ethical leadership, and the interplay between rights and responsibilities.

**Goals:**

- Students will critically examine the foundations and challenges of democracy.
  - Students will explore ethical leadership and how it impacts democratic governance.
  - Students will engage in civic activities to understand their role in sustaining democratic systems.
- 

### Grade 9: “Understanding the Foundations of Democracy”

**Objective:** Analyze the origins of democratic governance and its evolution through historical and philosophical perspectives.

**Activity 1: Comparative Study of Government Structures**

- **Discussion:** Explore different government systems (e.g., democracy, monarchy, autocracy) and their defining characteristics.
- **Activity:** Students create a presentation comparing two systems and their implications for citizens’ rights and responsibilities.

**Activity 2: The U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights**

- **Analysis:** Break down key amendments in the Bill of Rights. Discuss how they protect individual freedoms and balance them with societal responsibilities.
- **Debate:** "Should the First Amendment have limits in the age of social media?"

**Activity 3: Civic Engagement Basics**

- **Project:** Research and present on a local government role (e.g., mayor, city council, school board) and its impact on the community.
- 

### Grade 10: “Ethical Leadership in Democracy”

**Objective:** Examine the principles of ethical leadership and the role of accountability in democratic systems.

**Activity 1: Leadership Case Studies**



- **Study:** Analyze historical leaders (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Eleanor Roosevelt) and their contributions to democracy.
- **Discussion:** What qualities made them effective? How did they balance rights and responsibilities?

### **Activity 2: Ethical Dilemmas in Leadership**

- **Scenario:** Present ethical challenges (e.g., balancing national security and individual privacy).
- **Activity:** Students work in groups to propose solutions, then present and defend their decisions.

### **Activity 3: Community Service as Leadership**

- **Project:** Design a community service project addressing a local issue, such as homelessness or environmental conservation.
- **Reflection:** Write about how addressing community needs relates to democratic responsibilities.

---

## Grade 11: “Contemporary Challenges to Democracy”

**Objective:** Analyze modern threats to democracy and explore ways to address them through informed participation.

### **Activity 1: Debate on Societal Issues**

- **Topic Examples:**
  - "Should voter ID laws be mandatory?"
  - "Should campaign contributions have limits?"
- **Process:** Divide students into teams for research, debate preparation, and structured argument presentation.

### **Activity 2: Global Perspectives on Democracy**

- **Discussion:** Compare the strengths and weaknesses of democracies worldwide (e.g., U.S. vs. parliamentary systems).
- **Activity:** Students create a video or infographic on global trends in democratic participation.

### **Activity 3: Media Literacy and Misinformation**

- **Workshop:** Teach students how to identify bias and verify credible sources in news and social media.
- **Project:** Create a guide for peers on combating misinformation.

---

## Grade 12: “Democracy in Action”

**Objective:** Prepare students for active citizenship by engaging them in real-world democratic practices.

### Activity 1: Pre-Register to Vote

- **Workshop:** Educate students on voter registration processes and the importance of voting.
- **Activity:** Facilitate pre-registration for eligible students.

### Activity 2: Advocacy Campaign

- **Project:** Identify a local or national issue (e.g., climate change, education funding).
  - Students research the issue, draft a position statement, and create an advocacy campaign (letters to officials, social media posts).

### Activity 3: Mock Legislative Session

- **Simulation:** Students role-play as lawmakers to draft, debate, and vote on a bill addressing a current issue (e.g., gun control, healthcare access).
- **Reflection:** Discuss how compromise and negotiation are essential to the legislative process.

---

## Assessment and Reflection for All Grades

1. **Critical Essays:** Assign reflective essays on topics such as "The Role of Ethical Leadership in Democracy" or "The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizens in a Digital Age."
2. **Group Projects:** Evaluate teamwork, research, and presentation skills in projects like debates and advocacy campaigns.
3. **Civic Participation Log:** Encourage students to track and reflect on their participation in community service or civic engagement activities.

---

These lesson plans equip high school students with the knowledge, critical thinking skills, and hands-on experiences needed to actively contribute to and uphold democratic values in their communities and beyond.