

Nevada Students Haul Home Hardware:

Reno High School, Reed High School and Faith Lutheran Middle School Students Power Through “We The People” National Competition

BY KEVIN C. SPEED, ESQ.

Last spring, students from two northern Nevada high schools and one southern Nevada middle school represented the Silver State in the metro Washington, D.C., area at the national “We The People” competition finals. From April 22- 24, teams from schools all over America had the amazing opportunity to explore our historic nation’s capital; meet with elected officials, community leaders, and other dignitaries; and learn about our government by seeing the inner-workings of the legislative, judicial and executive branches from, fittingly, “... the room(s) where it happens.”¹



Faith Lutheran’s “We The People” team



This year’s national finals was the first time that the competitors and their teacher/coaches were able to visit Washington, D.C., since 2019, and Nevada’s kids gave their all.

Reno High emerged from the preliminary rounds as “Division C” champions and finished 14th overall. Reed High finished atop “Division D” and came away as the 16th place team overall. Youngest, but certainly not least, a special congratulations goes to the Level 2 (middle school) third place national finishers at Faith Lutheran Middle School in Las Vegas, who equaled Reno High’s third overall finish in 2021 as the best showing in history for a Nevada “We The People” program at any level.

Why should attorneys with trial dates set and billable hours to obsess over be concerned with what students participating in a school competition are up to? Because for at least the past two decades, while we were busy

advocating for our clients, we’ve been woefully derelict in our responsibility to teach our fellow citizens and young people about how our government works and what is expected from good citizens.

... Don’t believe it?

The American Bar Association’s 2023 Survey of Civic Literacy² revealed that 44 percent of respondents – *in the United States* – incorrectly believed that the very words “We the People” were the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, instead of the beginning of the Constitution’s preamble.

... Still think we’re doing OK and this isn’t a big deal?

Last year, the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Constitution Day Civics Survey³ found that a mere 47 percent of its respondents (1,113 U.S. adults) could name all three branches of government;



Reed High School's "We The People" team

representing Nevada in April 2023 will be the senators, congress members, agency heads, military officers, cabinet members, and judges who will be determining the destiny of the entire nation. Make no mistake, this was a big deal, and these youngsters deserve our praise.

and Churchill counties who select the accompanying course and compete on their school's team receive credits toward graduation and an experience that keeps many participants coming back to lend a hand as volunteer assistants, alumni boosters, and coaches long after their own competition days are over.

The teams deliver prepared opening statements and then engage in timed Q&A sessions with the judges, where they are tested on their ability to apply constitutional principles in combination with their knowledge covering the "We The People" program's six units:



Reno High School's "We The People" team

- 1) What are the philosophical and historical foundations of the American political system?
- 2) How did the framers create the Constitution?
- 3) How has the Constitution been changed to further the ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence?
- 4) How have the values and principles embodied in the Constitution shaped American institutions and practices?
- 5) What rights do the Bill of Rights protect?
- 6) What challenges might face American constitutional democracy in the 21st century?

but what was truly heartbreaking was the news that 25 percent could not name any.

... Take a beat and read that last statistic again.

Finally, according to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study results released in May, only 13 percent of eighth-grade American students scored proficient in history, and only 22 percent scored proficient in civics.⁴ Forty percent scored "... below basic" in history, which means that an unbelievably large segment of our student-aged population "cannot talk [intelligently] about U.S. government functions."

A typical eighth grader is between 13 and 14 years old. Many of these young Americans will be of voting age by the 2026 midterms. That is why we should be concerned about what our kids know about good government, citizenship, and the foundations of our country. Sooner than we think, some of the same teenagers who were in Washington, D.C.,

About the Competition

The "We The People" competition takes the form of simulated congressional hearings before a panel of volunteer judges. The non-partisan Center for Civic Education, which began its existence as a State Bar of California program in the late 1960s, has worked with the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Information Agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and others to offer middle and high school students the chance to not only learn about their country's history within the framework of the American constitutional experiment, but to do so in a way that also encourages and develops highly valued 21st-century workplace skills, such as working cooperatively as a team, public speaking, managing conflict, and reaching consensus.

The Nevada Center for Civic Engagement sponsors the program and the state-level tournaments in Nevada under the watchful eye of Executive Director Kathleen Dickinson.⁵ High school students in Clark, Washoe,

This material is not provided to the students in simple tri-fold pamphlets, nor is it sung to them in catchy rhymes like in the old "School House Rock" cartoons from Saturday mornings years ago. The intellectual concepts covered throughout the 368-page Level 3 (high school) textbook are formidable enough to cause even 1-L Con Law students more than a few sleepless evenings.

Richard Clark, Reno High social studies teacher and longtime "We The People" coach, said that the experience for his students was "awesome!" He added: "[They] got to meet with Reno native

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Machalagh Carr, who serves as chief counsel for Speaker Kevin McCarthy; Sean Newell, the deputy attorney general for cybersecurity; and Reno High School alumni McKenna LeVitt, who is a policy aide for Sen. Jacky Rosen. In addition, they competed and saw the sights in and around the D.C. area.”

Reed High student Aaron Varela said, “I became so close with this competitive team. For the rest of my life, I have a powerful, helpful friend group I can lean on.”

Varela’s coach is Reed teacher Mark Towell, who added, “The students presented with passion, demonstrating great evidence, reasoning, teamwork, constitutional application, and responsiveness. Several of my students have expressed interest in pursuing careers in political science and law, as well as helping future ‘We The People’ classes through the journey.”

And this, from Faith Lutheran eighth grader, Brianna Lee:

“We The People has developed my debating skills and helped me to find my voice even when my opinion was different from others. At the beginning of this year, I felt like my opinions were wrong because everyone seemed to not see the world through my perspective. After my experience in my We The People class [...] with Mrs. Carroll], I no longer feel like I am in the wrong and I am able to back up my opinions with evidence and make more persuasive arguments. Though the school year is almost over, the knowledge this class has given me will stay with me forever.”

The students who represented Nevada at the “We The People” national finals competition learned lessons that will prove priceless as they prepare to take over the reins of leadership from their parents and teachers.

ENDNOTES:

1. *Hamilton*, Act II, Lin-Manuel Miranda 2015
2. 2023 ABA Survey of Civic Literacy (americanbar.org)
3. <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-civics-knowledge-drops-on-first-amendment-and-branches-of-government/>
4. Latest national test results underscore declining knowledge of U.S. history and civics | EdSource
5. [Support Civic Engagement — Nevada Center for Civic Engagement \(nvccce.org\)](https://www.nvccce.org)



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