



Teaching and Commemorating the United States Declaration of Independence

1776-2026

Our Nation's Principles: Ideal v Reality

About these Lesson Plans

Lessons developed for our Teaching and Commemorating the U.S. Declaration of Independence project are sponsored in part by the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Mid-Atlantic and US Territories Region Program, located at the American Historical Association. Content created and featured in partnership with the TPS Mid-Atlantic and US Territories Region does not indicate an endorsement by the Library of Congress.

Our Declaration's Principles: Ideals v Reality

Suggested Time: 60 minutes.

Lesson Introduction: In this lesson, students will read brief excerpts from the Declaration of Independence to identify principles of the American political system. They will then consider key events or developments in American history and draw conclusions about the extent to which the American people have or have not lived up to these principles. Finally, students will be given an opportunity to set a goal that describes an action that they can take to narrow the gap between the principles and their fulfillment.

Suggested responses to questions posed in the lesson appear in blue font below.

Delaware Social Studies Standard(s):

- **Civics Standard 2b [Politics]:** Students will understand the principles and content of major American state papers such as the Declaration of Independence; United States Constitution (including the Bill of Rights); and the Federalist Papers.

Essential Question:

- To what extent has our nation lived up to the principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence?

Enduring Understanding: Students will understand that while our nation has made considerable progress in its efforts to live up to the principles found in our nation's founding document - the Declaration of Independence, history has shown that the goal of fully realizing those principles remains a work in progress.

Field Testing Note About Timing: The teachers who field tested this lesson recommended that it taught after students have been provided with an overview of the contents of the Declaration.

Preparation: See [Resource 2 - American History Event Cards](#). Students will work in small groups to sort the cards into one of two categories - honoring or not honoring our principles. Make enough copies of Resource 2 so that there is one set of the cards for each group.

Cut the different events into separate boxes, then shuffle them up so they sit in a pile of randomly sorted cards.

PROCEDURES

Warm-up:

1. Vocabulary Development: project the word “principle” for all to see. Explain that a principle is a fundamental belief that people have and that it is central to their belief systems.
2. Offer Examples: offer the following as examples of principles that people might have:
 - a. People deserve to be treated with respect.
 - b. Others should be treated the same as I would want to be treated.
3. Formative Check for Understanding: ask students to work in small groups to come up with other examples of principles.
4. Extend Learning: explain that countries, just like people, have principles to which their citizens commit. These principles are typically found in “state papers” or historic documents that either explain the reasons why a country was founded or describe the laws and government of a country. One of those state papers is The United States Declaration of Independence. You may suggest that it is our nation’s birth certificate dating back to 1776 and that some of the principles to which the American people have committed themselves are found in the Declaration.
5. Preview the Lesson: explain that, in this lesson, students will identify principles of the American political system found in our Declaration of

Independence, then draw conclusions about how well our country has lived up to those principles.

Activity 1: Identify Principles of the American Political System in the Declaration of Independence

1. See [Resource 1](#). Read the directions as students follow along. They are asked to read four excerpts of the Declaration of Independence and identify the principle embedded in each excerpt.
2. Invite students to share their findings and offer the information in the answer key below if they overlook anything. [A differentiation strategy suggested during field testing - give the students the 4 Principles listed in the "Answer Key" box below and have them match principles to the statements on Resource 1]

Answer Key - Resource 1

1. Excerpt 1: Equality - all people are created equal
2. Excerpt 2: **Natural** Rights - all people have rights to life, liberty, and property
3. Excerpt 3: Consent of the Governed - those serving in government get their authority from the people
4. Excerpt 4: **Right to Make Changes to Governments** - People have the right to alter or abolish the government if it fails to live up to its own principles. [Students should understand that altering government requires the consent of a majority of people and, barring extreme circumstances, any alterations must be done peacefully.]

Activity 2: Event Sorting/Categorizing

1. Have students work with a partner or in small groups.
2. See [Resource 2](#) - **American History Event Cards**. It features 16 event cards that briefly describe developments in American history. The students' task is to discuss each event and categorize them as evidence that the American people have – or have not – lived up to the principles found in the Declaration.

NOTE: Teachers should feel free to change or update the content of the cards to best fit the content that they teach. You can also invite students to contribute other events then place them under the headings of Have or Have Not.

3. Draw conclusions. After sorting the cards, invite students to use the information found in the cards to respond to the following question:
How well have the American people lived up to the principles of our country over the course of American history? Support your conclusion with information found in the event cards.

Activity 3: Goal Setting

1. Application to the Present: have students work in small groups to identify current examples in which Americans appear to be living or not living up to the principles found in our nation's Declaration of Independence.
2. Invite students to select one of the principles found in the Declaration of Independence and set a personal goal aimed at advancing progress toward fulfilling that principle. What might they do to narrow the gap between the ideal and the reality?

Check for Understanding - See [Resource 3](#).

Resource 1: Identifying National Principles Found in the Declaration of Independence

Directions: The Declaration of Independence describes some of the fundamental principles to which our country committed itself at the very moment of its birth back in July of 1776.

Read the following excerpts from the Declaration of Independence. For each excerpt, identify the principle of the American political system that is described in this section of the Declaration.

Excerpt 1: *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”*

*Which principle of the American political system is described here?

Excerpt 2: *“...that they [we] are endowed by their [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

*Which principle of the American political system is described here?

Excerpt 3: *“...to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,”*

*Which principle of the American political system is described here?

Excerpt 4: *“...all men...are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness... whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them [us] shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”*

*Which principle of the American political system is described here?

Resource 2: American History Event Cards

Examples of Americans Honoring Principles in the Declaration	Examples of Americans NOT Honoring Principles in the Declaration
The 19th Amendment, ratified or passed in 1920, gave women the right to vote.	In 1857, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in <i>Dred Scott v. Sandford</i> that African Americans were not citizens of the United States and, therefore, could not sue for their freedom in federal court.
In an effort to fix weaknesses in our country's first plan of government called the Articles of Confederation, representatives from 12 states met in Philadelphia in 1787 and created a new plan of government called the Constitution to replace the Articles.	During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln temporarily ended a law called <i>habeas corpus</i>. This meant the U.S. government could keep people in jail for a long period of time without giving them a trial or officially telling them what crime they were accused of.

The 17th Amendment to the United States Constitution, approved in 1913, changed how U.S. Senators were chosen. Before 1913, state lawmakers chose Senators, but after the amendment, the people got to vote for their Senators.	After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made a rule in 1942 that allowed our government to force Japanese people who lived in the United States to move from their homes and live in special camps called internment camps.
The legal voting age in the United States was lowered in 1971 from 21 to 18.	In the United States, capital punishment (also known as the death penalty) is legal and permitted in 27 states.
At the beginning of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an order stating that people who owned factories making supplies for the war could not treat workers unfairly because of their race.	The Equal Rights Amendment was introduced to ensure that women are treated equally to men. Congress set a deadline of 1982 for 38 states to approve the Amendment before it went into effect. Thirty-five met the deadline. In 2020 Virginia became the 38th state to approve the Amendment. But, the deadline had already passed.

The first ten Amendments to the Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, were added in 1791 to establish individual rights and protect citizens from potential abuse by our central government.	In 1927, our U.S. Supreme Court decided that the government could force people who they felt could not make intelligent decisions to have operations so that they could not have children — even if those people did not want the surgery. The Court has never formally overturned that decision.
In the 1950s and 1960s, many Americans protested against unfair treatment and segregation. Their actions helped lead to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 — a law that made it illegal to treat people unfairly because of their race, skin color, religion, gender, or where they were born.	In the past 25 years, two men became president after losing the popular vote, but winning the electoral college vote.
In 1975, Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide individuals with disabilities access to services that help prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.	In 1896, the US Supreme Court ruled that it is constitutional to segregate public places — such as schools, restaurants, theaters, and trains — based on a person's race, as long as the separate facilities are equal in quality.

Resource 3: Checks for Understanding Name _____

1 - Which of the following is one of the unalienable rights listed in the Declaration of Independence?

- A. Justice
- B. Liberty
- C. Property
- D. Security

2 - The Declaration of Independence argues that people have the right to change or abolish their government if the government fails to do which of the following?

- A. Treat all people equally
- B. Protect their rights
- C. Secure people's property
- D. Establish justice

3 - Which of the following is a principle of the American political system that is found in our Declaration of Independence?

- A. All states have an equal right to rule themselves
- B. States have the right to withdraw from being part of the United States
- C. People can give and take away powers from government
- D. The President is the highest legal authority in the United States

4 - (worth 2 points) Agree or Disagree with the following statement then describe an event or development from recent times that offers evidence to support your conclusion.

Statement: *"The American people have made significant progress in their effort to live up to the principles of the American political system found in the Declaration of Independence"*

Agree or Disagree (circle one)

Describe your evidence here:

About the Delaware Center for Civics Education

Since 1999, the Delaware Center for Civics Education (DCCE) has provided resources and support for teaching and learning aligned to Delaware's civics standards so that preservice and professional educators are well-equipped to prepare their students for college, career, and civic life. DCCE is an initiative of the Institute for Public Administration, a research and public service center at the University of Delaware's Joseph R. Biden, Jr. School of Public Policy and Administration. For more information about DCCE visit: <https://www.ipa.udel.edu/civics>