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Virginia Sends Two Schools to National Student Constitutional Competition
Maggie L. Walker Governor's School and Glen Allen High School to Compete in the "We the People" National Finals

Orange, VA– Virginia may be the state that produced the most presidents, but is it also the state that produces the brightest constitutional scholars? These Richmond-area high schoolers think so.

In January 2021, high schools and middle schools from around the Commonwealth competed in the Virginia We the People State Finals, a competition based on the acclaimed We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution curriculum, administered nationally by the Center for Civic Education and run in Virginia by Virginia Civics. Maggie L. Walker Governor's School in Richmond, coached by Mr. Samuel Ulmschneider, claimed the title of State Champion, while Glen Allen High School in Glen Allen, coached by Delegate Schuyler VanValkenburg and Mr. Ryan Conway, grabbed the second spot, earning both teams a berth at the We the People National Finals, taking place virtually over April 24–26, 2021.

The teams will compete against 46 other teams from across the country on a range of constitutional topics. What issues led to the original formation of political parties? How effectively do you believe Congress has used its investigatory power? How have courts balanced religious beliefs with other rights? To what extent should there be an international U.S. military presence? These are just a few of the questions these students are wrestling with. And the preparation for the competition will have lasting effects.

"We the People really opened my eyes to how big of a role people play in securing their own rights, especially in exercising the first amendment and the tangible impacts of different movements and protests," said Chloe Wright, Glen Allen Class of 2021. "It also helped demystify a lot of the processes of our government, and it was very exciting to not only understand the political things I was reading in the news, but also to be able to have educated conversations and be able to form my own opinion based on question research."

According to Adam Huffman from Glen Allen High School, "We the People gave me the opportunity to discuss the foundations of our democracy with others and examine the progress of the U.S. over time. I gained insight on the structure of government, utilizing historical resources and legislation to craft an informed opinion in a politically motivated climate. I

thoroughly enjoyed the cooperation with my peers to unpack the decisions of the past and how they impact our future. We the People is a deeply relevant project that prepared me for being a well-informed citizen.”

Virginia schools have historically performed very well at We the People National Finals. Maggie Walker Governor’s School has earned the National Championship three times over its long involvement with the program, and Virginia schools consistently make the “top 10” every year.

J.T. Henley Middle School in Crozet took top honors in the state middle school competition and have chosen to compete at the 2021 We the People National Invitational, May 1–3, 2021. They’ll be facing 13 other teams, studying topics that most adults would have a hard time discussing, from the arguments of the Federalists and Anti-Federalists to today’s immigration policies.

We the People is an award-winning, nonpartisan curriculum that helps students understand the history and principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. During the competition, students present a prepared mock congressional testimony and answer follow-up questions about historical, political, and constitutional issues. The competition judges, consisting of attorneys, politicians, professors, and community leaders, assess the initial testimony of the students and probe their knowledge during the question-and-answer period, judging them on everything from constitutional understanding to supporting evidence to reasoning.

Teams first compete in in-school and regional competitions to qualify for the state competition, and if they take top honors, they may elect to dive even deeper into constitutional topics to compete in the National Finals. Virginia Civics co-Executive Director Jen Patja Howell said, “With all competitions and even some classrooms being all virtual this year, We the People students have demonstrated extraordinary dedication to learning about the Constitution and the rule of law through preparing for this competition. Our country needs these kinds of leaders now more than ever.”

Virginia Civics

Virginia Civics sponsors the We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution program in Virginia. Virginia Civics is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes constitutional literacy, critical thinking, and civic engagement, empowering the next generation of leaders in Virginia.

In supporting the program, Virginia Civics provides professional development opportunities for teachers based on the We the People curriculum, teaching resources, classroom support, and runs the annual regional and state We the People competitions. To learn more, visit vacivics.org.

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