

THE 1965 ALABAMA LITERACY TEST

The Reluctant Extension of the Franchise

KIDS VOTING USA

This lesson examines the 1965 Alabama Literacy Test on the U.S. Constitution as an example of devices used to disenfranchise the African-American population. This exercise comprises lesson 4 of the 22 Kids Voting USA high school core activities (see "Kids Voting USA: From Classroom to Dinner Table to the Polls" immediately following this article).

Objective

Students take and score the 68 items of the 1965 Alabama Literacy Test to experience in a small way the frustration and injustice this kind of test produced. (45 minutes)

Get Ready

Duplicate the required number of blank tests.

Note: this test should be administered after students have studied both the Constitution and the obstruction of African-American voting. They should be aware, for instance, that white voters did not have to take these tests because of "Grandfather Clauses."

Give the Test

Say: "The U.S. Constitution is so important to citizenship that you should know it perfectly without needing previous study time. No textbooks may be consulted."

Social Education and Kids Voting USA thank Alan Veeh, government teacher at McClintock HS, Tempe, AZ, who received this lesson from Dr. Robert Marion, University of Redlands, CA, in 1969. Dr. Marion, now deceased, obtained it during his involvement with the civil rights movement.

Provide serious, uninterrupted and monitored test time (25 minutes).

Students will trade papers and score the tests as you read each item with its full correct response (10 minutes).

Predictably, no student will get fewer than 7 items incorrect (= 90%). Say: "You just took the 1965 Alabama Literacy Test to determine whether you were qualified to vote. If you missed more than 7 answers, the registrars would have refused you."

Ask Questions

"You were very upset when you thought this test might harm your grade. How would you feel if it robbed you of your right to vote?"

"Why did Southerners want to keep African Americans away from the polls? What were they afraid of?" Make connections to racism - political power - economics.

"What are the only requirements today for registration and voting in any region of the United States?"

More!

Students can write a short story about a character who took a literacy test in the South, and failed it (or passed it). What happened next?

Students can research the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. What other obstructions to voting were operating at this time, especially in the South? What was the political history of the bill?

Students can write a paragraph or essay in response to this quote by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." ■

Answers to Alabama Literacy Test

1. Trial by jury only
2. False (every 10 years)
3. Habeas Corpus (immediate presentation of charges); lawyer; speedy trial
4. January 3
5. January 20
6. Proposed change, as in a Constitution
7. Life (with good behavior)
8. Nine
9. Yes
10. Affirm
11. 35
12. In God We Trust
13. False
14. U.S. Constitution
15. The governor
16. Six
17. Two
18. Executive
19. Congress
20. Population (as determined by census) less untaxed Indians
21. Cruel and unusual
22. True
23. State and local
24. Russia
25. Criminal
26. False
27. Militia
28. House of Representatives, Senate
29. House of Representatives
30. Virginia
31. Legislative
32. True
33. The Vice President
34. True
35. The Supreme Court
36. Coappellate
37. Trial by Jury
38. True
39. Congress and the legislatures of both states
40. the Senate
41. 10 miles square
42. Congress: state legislatures
43. Constitution
44. Judicial
45. True
46. Coin money; make treaties
47. The Vice President, until the House acts
48. 26
49. 9
50. Murder
51. False
52. (Preamble statements) "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."
53. House of Representatives and Senate
54. Congress
55. 10
56. The Senate
57. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court
58. The Senate
59. The U. S. Congress
60. Electors
61. Pass laws, coin money, declare war
62. The Governor
63. The President
64. The President
65. They can vote for different people.
66. Vice President (President of the Senate)
67. Congress
68. The states; the people