

# An Internet Guide to Teaching the Constitution

C. Frederick Risinger

**In 2004, Congress passed and** President Bush signed legislation designating every September 17 as Constitution Day and suggesting that all schools teach about the Constitution on that day. Since September 17 falls on a Saturday this year, Friday, September 16, will be the celebration date.

Writing a column on teaching the Constitution was quite a challenge. There are innumerable websites, countless lesson plans and a multitude of other teaching resources. Teachers tell me that they were inundated with brochures, catalogs, posters, and e-mails about teaching the Constitution this past spring. The problem is that most of these websites offering materials, lesson plans, primary documents, and similar information, are quite good. It was very difficult to differentiate or choose sites to highlight in this column. Moreover, nearly all the websites have myriad links to dozens of similar sites. So, if you look at one or two, you'll have links to all the others I've reviewed.

What I've decided to do is list the "home" website of some of the biggest and most comprehensive of those organizations, agencies, and businesses involved in teaching U.S. government/civics/citizenship. Several of these are well known to NCSS members and frequently play important roles at the NCSS annual meeting. Additionally, there are some relatively new governmental agencies or new initiatives within agencies that are excellent sources of information and instructional strategies. I'll give a brief description of the site's resources and I'll direct you to a specific

"One Country, One  
Constitution, One Destiny"  
—D. Webster, (1837)

document or lesson within some of the sites. But any teacher or student who uses e-mail can navigate around the site and find useful information. At the end of these listings, I'll provide a few more sites that take a different approach or deal with the topic in a unique way:

## Constitutional Rights Foundation

[www.crf-usa.org/](http://www.crf-usa.org/)

The Constitutional Rights Foundation is a non-partisan, non-profit, community-based organization dedicated to educating America's young people about the importance of civic participation in a democratic society. On their home page, a link to Constitution Day appears in the upper right corner. Click there to find free online lessons and other resources.

## Civics OnLine

[www.civics-online.org/](http://www.civics-online.org/)

This outstanding site is a partnership of several organizations working together with Michigan State University's School of Education and the local Okemos public schools. On the "Teachers" link from their home page, you'll find primary documents, classroom activities and lesson plans, and other resources. What I like about the teaching units and activities is their examination of core democratic values such as "Separation of Powers," "Civilian Control of the

Military," "Federalism," and 15 other foundation blocks for our Constitution. The activities are divided by grade level and keyed to the Michigan Curriculum Framework, one of the better state curriculum guidelines.

## The International Constitutional Law Project

[www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/info.html](http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/info.html)

Many social studies teachers try to expand their students' horizons by having them contrast and compare aspects of U.S. history and society with those of other nations or regions. The International Constitutional Law Project collects, translates, and indexes constitutions of dozens of other nations. The subject "keys" allow users to compare constitutions on topics such as elections, rights of citizens, and powers of branches of government. I found the current interim constitution of Iraq to be very interesting. You can see the struggle the Iraqis are having trying to create a constitution that provides democracy, yet maintaining Islam as "a source of legislation." Teachers and students can see the interim constitution at [www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/iz00000\\_.html](http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/iz00000_.html).

## GEM: The Gateway to Educational Materials

[thegateway.org/](http://thegateway.org/)

This is another amazing resource for teachers of all subject areas in the curriculum. This federally supported program contains detailed descriptions of more than 40,000 educational resources found on various federal,

state, university, non-profit, and commercial internet sites. On the home page, there's a "search" box. When I typed in "Constitution" and picked the "keywords" option, I received 286 hits. Many were instructional units that included documents, activities, and teacher resources that were outstanding. GEM is truly a gem and should be on your bookmarks/favorites list.



#### Constitution Resources from FREE

[www.ed.gov/free/constitution/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/free/constitution/index.html)

FREE (Federal Resources for Educational Excellence) is one of the better initiatives in recent years of the U.S. Department of Education. It combines the learning resources of more than 35 federal organizations ranging from the CIA and the FBI to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Park Service. This specific link leads to some wonderful resources on the Constitution, including the "Interactive Constitution," which allows students and teachers to search more than 300 topics related to constitutional history and interpretation.

#### The Avalon Project at Yale Law School

[www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/const-pap.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/const-pap.htm)

Here's another website that every social studies educator should be aware of and probably have on his or her bookmarks/favorites list. The Avalon Project has collected and digitalized thousands of documents related to law, history, economics, politics, diplomacy, and government. I can't begin to tell you of all the documents in

this collection. You'll have to check it out yourself. But if you go to the page listed above, you'll see their "American Constitution" collection. You'll have access to documents ranging from the Magna Carta to personal notes taken by Madison, Hamilton and other delegates, and various ratification documents from each state. The amendments and changes they recommend are particularly interesting.



#### Ben's Guide

[bensguide.gpo.gov/](http://bensguide.gpo.gov/)

Ben's Guide is part of the Government Printing Office and provides learning tools for K-12 students, parents, and teachers about how government works and the use of primary source materials to carry out civic responsibilities. Divided into grade levels from K-2 through 9-12 and a section for parents and teachers, the site features games and activities based on documents. For example, the grade 6-8 section on the U.S. Constitution has a "Preamble Scramble," a "Constitution Crossword," and a "Connect the Dots" Liberty Bell. From their home page, just type in a topic and the grade level.

#### Wikipedia-The Free Encyclopedia

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution)

Wikipedia is another "bookmarks/favorites" site. Teachers and students will find answers (and more questions) on just about any topic in the universe. Their encyclopedia entries have many links to related topics. Wikipedia also has a section about written vs. unwritten constitutions, a large list of other national constitutions, and even constitutions from former nations such as the

Soviet Union. Additionally, every U.S. state constitution is available.



#### The Iroquois Confederacy and the U.S. Constitution

[www.iroquoisdemocracy.pdx.edu/](http://www.iroquoisdemocracy.pdx.edu/)

This intriguing and well-designed instructional unit comes from the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University. It includes four lessons that examine "... the influence that one Native American culture had on the Founding Fathers' ideas about democracy." It also has an "assessment" section, the texts of the Constitution, and the Iroquois Great Law of Peace. While some historians dispute the contention that the Iroquois Great Law of Peace was very influential in the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention, many students and teachers will find this website quite interesting.

The websites discussed above are only a fraction of the websites that can help teachers and administrators comply with Congress's directive to teach about the Constitution in every subject area on September 16 this year. While I have misgivings about Congress telling us what to teach and when to do it, I still remember Illinois state law requiring me to teach "What You Should Know about Communism and Why" in the 1960s. Some things never change. ☹️

*C. Frederick Risinger retired last year as director of professional development and coordinator of social studies education at Indiana University, Bloomington. He currently is working on two social studies writing projects, is developing a new website, and works two shifts a week as a bartender at a local microbrewery.*