North Shore Hebrew Academy High School

COHORT 6

Dr. Victoria Allen,
Teacher

Dr. Jon Jucovy,
Director of Academic Mentoring

The North Shore Hebrew Academy High School has never had a student government. The student body has been represented by a group of students known as the Headmaster's Council, which meets periodically with the Head of School. The council is appointed, not elected. We proposed to the Administration that the students should elect delegates and hold a convention to draft a constitution for a Student Government. Once the constitution was approved by the student body and administration, it would go into effect and elections would take place to fill the positions of the newly formed government for next year.

The two of us had a number of civic education goals in developing the initiative. Probably the most important goal was to provide the students with an opportunity to have a formal role, through their student government, in proposing, developing, funding, planning, and implementing educational, social, and charitable activities. The student government would also encourage thoughtful discussion and debate on the school program. Students would also experience, during election campaigns, government meetings, or periodic reports by representatives with their constituencies, the challenges and opportunities of citizenship. We also wanted to ensure transparency since the Headmaster's Council was seen as an elite group of unelected students who didn't necessarily represent the interests of different constituencies at our school.

We adopted the process of having students hold a constitutional convention to provide them with the experience of civic engagement. Having students put their names forward to serve as delegates, prepare speeches to attract support, and learn the procedures of parliamentary debate and lawmaking all proved to be valuable experiences. The constitutional convention meetings also offered opportunities to teach civic history, by making comparisons to the 1787 convention. Students could also learn through real-life experience about essential questions about government and citizenship: what are the purposes of government, what is the "good," and how can corruption be minimized?

Once delegates were elected, we created a two-tiered meeting schedule– weekly meetings of delegates organized by grade and a monthly meeting of the entire convention. Each month, delegates worked on a specific task representing discrete sections of the constitution– goals and purpose of the government, structure of government, areas of responsibility (powers). The final draft of the constitution will be voted on by the full convention, with the ratification process yet to be determined.

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The students exceeded our expectations and showed us that the future is bright for democracy in America. They paid attention to every word they were using in the Constitution – being careful to be clear, not too vague, representative, and fair. They were ambitious, perhaps overly so, about what the government could accomplish and debated the feasibility of their proposals. Students were very concerned that the election could become a popularity contest and even debated the merits of limiting eligibility to these offices. Among the most interesting issues that came up was the possibility of having a student court, to have students become involved in their own behavioral expectations. The administration is very supportive of this, but students were leery. Probably most importantly, they learned that the process of crafting a constitution and subsequently legislating requires compromise.

Dr. Victoria Allen and I drew some important conclusions from the experience. The division of meetings by grades led to erratic drafting, with one group's efforts, the final group to meet, overriding previous groups. The varied levels of student commitment taught us the importance of making consequences well-defined in advance. We also learned to increasingly provide students with sample student constitutions or to write our own clear guidelines for the next steps. The parliamentary procedures tended to be only loosely adhered to and early on there was a tendency for some students to be confused about the distinction between drafting a constitution and being a government responsible for policy-making.

We are on the cusp of completing the process and will be having elections for our first Student Council in late May. We are most grateful to the team at Civic Spirit who trained us last summer and gave us the inspiration for this project. The program, and the coaching that we have been given throughout the year has enabled us to stay on track and help the students create a student government that has the potential of really making a difference.

To view Dr. Allen and Dr. Jucovy's Constitutional Convention Project outline, click here!