Part I: Introduction

“Know Your Role” is a fifth grade curriculum to be taught during December 2016 following the November 2016 elections. This course will take place before the new president takes office in January 2017. Under the Connecticut Curriculum Framework, it is recommended that fifth grade students take a course on early American History. As a supplement, we propose “Know Your Role”. This course will be more relevant for the 88% of Hartford minority students as well as the 39% of Hartford students who do not speak English at home. “Know Your Role” will be unbiased and informed, and will not lend itself to patriotism or nationalism. It is our hope that “Know Your Role” will primarily provide students with the basic vocabulary for understanding media and government literature.

Although students will chiefly gain a basic comprehension of government and media literature, “Know Your Role” will also provide students with the skills necessary to formulate individual viewpoints. Students will be able to take other opinions into consideration, and will be able to respectfully challenge these opinions. A field trip to the Connecticut State Capitol will help students make connections between their lives and the local government.

This curriculum will take place over a span of five days beginning on Wednesday, breaking for the weekend, and ending on the following Tuesday. The following lesson plans are centered around the assumptions that each class period is 50 minutes with a class size of 20 students.

Part II: Lesson Plans
On Wednesday, students will begin the first 25-30 minutes of class by voting with their feet. The instructor will use table tents to designate each side of an issue along with verbally presenting the problem or concept. The objective of this activity is that students will discover similarities and differences they have with each other. Emphasis will be placed on individual thinking. After each question, the instructor will call on one student from each group to explain why they voted for their side. The instructor will pose the following scenarios: if you like or dislike recess, if you desire or do not desire to learn a second language, if students should be allowed to wear whatever they want to school, if all school announcements should take place in the morning or the afternoon, if the school should have half-days on Wednesday or Friday.

Following the activity, students will return to their seats for a group reflection. The instructor will write all responses on a large sheet of poster paper so as to visually demonstrate the students’ comprehension. The instructor will ask: *When do we vote and what do we vote for in school? Why is voting useful? Why is voting important? What do you know about voting in the United States? What do you wonder about voting?*

The last 20 minutes of Wednesday’s class will be devoted to an introduction to the Bill of Rights. The instructor will present a video linked below on the works cited page. Following the video, the instructor will split the class into five groups of four following mixed ability, gender, and race. Each group will receive one amendment pulled from “The Bill of Rights Chart: Elementary Version” and students will be asked to create a skit that illustrates a situation in which their amendment applies. Students will receive a slip of paper with instructions for the activity that explains what is expected and may ask the instructor for help with defining their amend-
ment. Students will work together to write scripts for their skits to be performed the following day.

Thursday’s class period will begin with students preparing to perform their amendment skits. 20 minutes will be allotted for performances. Skits will be evaluated loosely, specifically if a group does not take the activity seriously and will be graded using the Participation Rubric attached. After all skits have been performed, students will receive a handout of an elementary version of the Bill of Rights, also attached. The instructor will introduce the first research skill of the unit: the importance of annotating a text. The text will be read out loud by the instructor. Each student will be supplied with a highlighter and will be instructed to highlight the words they do not know independently. Following, students will split up into their skit groups and will work together to define the words they highlighted from the text using a dictionary and context clues. After they are confident in their defined words, each group will approach the blackboard and write their definitions. After all the definitions are on the board and legible, students will analyze and critique each other’s definitions. Instructor will facilitate the discussion and correct any incorrect definitions. Students will copy all their defined words onto the vocabulary sheet attached.

On Friday, students will travel to the Connecticut State Capitol in Hartford for a field trip. This visit will teach students about local government and encourage them to make connections between Hartford and their global perspective. Students will complete a homework assignment of a one paragraph reflection piece about the trip that will be graded using the Writing Rubric.

After the weekend, on Monday, Students will share their reflection pieces with a partner. They will be paired using a deck of cards, randomly selecting one card, noting the number, and
locating the student with the same number. The instructor will introduce the second research skill of the unit: peer editing. Students will use the designated writing rubric to critique their partner’s reflection piece.

After peer edit, students will participate in Vocabulary Blast. They will be split into five groups of four by the instructor based on mixed ability, race, and gender. Students will choose a team name and will be supplied with dictionaries, whiteboards, and whiteboard markers. Instructor will call out a word while also holding up a large flashcard with the word written on it. Students will race to define the word based on their own understanding of it and not just copying from the dictionary. Emphasis will be placed on students using their own words to define each term. Words to be defined include: ballot, candidate, election, bias, amendment, veto, debate, polls. At the end of the class, students will add these words and the definitions to their vocabulary lists.

For the entirety of Tuesday’s class, students will participate in a Socratic Circle. This activity will be introduced as a “Town Hall Meeting”. The instructor will facilitate the discussion with a series of questions, but it will be the students’ responsibility to control the productivity of the class period. The objective of this activity is that students will be able to take other opinions into consideration and respectfully challenge these opinions. There will be times when the class discusses a question as a whole and times when they will turn to the student next to them and discuss the question as a pair. The instructor will pose the following questions to the group: What skills did you use to work with your group when creating a skit? What about during Vocabulary Blast? Were there times when your group did not work well together? What did you do to solve this problem?
This discussion will encourage students to think critically about group work and what they can do to improve their teamwork skills. The instructor will then pose: What was your favorite part of the field trip? What do you still wonder about the local Hartford government? What kinds of stories do you hear on the news? Can you remember any that you have heard recently? Are there any words from Vocabulary Blast that you still do not understand? As pairs, students will discuss: What surprised you about the Bill of Rights? What would you change about the Bill of Rights? If you could add an amendment to the Bill of Rights, what would it be?

Part III: Justifications

The activities described above were designed carefully in order to fulfill the objectives specific to the unit. The activities and objectives were conceptualized using learning theories and research by several learning theorists. From the first day of the course, there is an emphasis placed on students forming individual viewpoints. The Common Core standards for English and Language Arts (ELA) place a large emphasis of the importance of opinions in the learning of students. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.5.4. states that students should be able to “…present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace” (Common Core Standards Initiative 2016). With this standard in mind, there are many activities that correspond with the formulation of individual viewpoints.

On the first day, students are asked to present their individual opinions through the “Vote with Your Feet” activity. In this activity, students ideally should move individually corresponding to their opinion only. Additionally, the skill of expressing an opinion will be further tested as individual students are asked to explain logically why they voted for the side
that they did. This portion of the activity will aid students in the maturation of their ability to explain and reason. Individual viewpoints and the standard above will be further gained through several other portions of the unit. For example, the reflection piece following the field trip and the final “Town Hall Meeting” assessment will give students a chance to practice establishing an opinion with the help of a set of guided questions created by the instructor. The guiding questions will help students navigate the sometimes difficult trek of understanding how to express opinions respectfully and in a way that is clear. Furthermore, encouraging independent thinking will be improved because students will be asked to maturely lead the meeting themselves. Although guidance and supervision will be closely monitored throughout in order for respect between students to be maintained, this will help fulfill the respectful engagement in discussions that the literacy Common Core standards emphasize.

Respectfully challenging viewpoints will be further tested in the peer editing portion of the reflection pieces following the field trip. Students will work on giving constructive criticism and will express areas of concern in a paper without being too harsh or too sensitive. Additionally, the differing of viewpoints concerning writing is a good starting point for the practice of respectfully challenging viewpoints, because it is a fairly “low-stakes” conversation—it should not get overly competitive.

Pieces of the curriculum were also designed with the Connecticut Framework for social studies in mind. Fifth grade social studies courses are recommended to focus mainly on early American history. An emphasis on Early American history will take place through the Bill of Rights activities, where students will go in depth on several amendments to the bill
and will be able to consider it in the context of when it was created with the help of an informative and historically accurate video that engages and excites the students.

Besides connecting the curriculum with the standards and initiatives above, there are many learning theorists that were considered while creating the curriculum. Hartford is such a racially diverse city with an incredibly high rate of poverty and it is particularly crucial that the school systems, particularly elementary and middle schools—where kids can be considered the most impressionable—recognize and understand the importance of multiculturalism in the classroom. The importance of representation and role models is absolutely crucial in a learning environment. James Banks writes that “a curriculum that focuses on the experiences of mainstream Americans and largely ignores the experiences, cultures, and histories of other ethnic, racial, cultural, language, and religious groups has negative consequences for both mainstream students and students of color” (Banks 242). Thus, the importance of multicultural representation is highlighted explicitly. The multicultural aspects of this course are concentrated mainly in the field trip, as students will gain exposure to role models of color and will be able to conceptualize first hand representation in politics and general lawmaking. A white-washed history of the United States and its general voting and law-making policy will be avoided at all costs in this portion of the activity. Particular emphasis will be focused on city officials of color on the field trip.

Several other Common Core standards are reflected in “Know Your Role”. CC-SS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2.C states that students should be able to “Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic” (Common Core Standards Initiative 2016). This standard will be tested and worked upon in the learning of vo-
vocabulary, specifically during Vocabulary Blast. They will be able to see the language in real life settings during the visit to the Connecticut State Capitol building and their ability to use the language will be tested in their reflection pieces after the field trip. The instructor will pay close attention to the use of learned vocabulary in the grading of the reflections, as noted in the Writing Rubric. This will guarantee that students will have been effectively taught and tested on vocabulary important to the curriculum.

The Amendment Activity will help the students utilize their deductive skills and use context in order to determine the meaning behind words that they may not be familiar with. CC-SS.ELA-LITERACY.L.5.4.A states that students should be able to “use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.” The activity will help students with contextualization of words in determining meaning.

Additionally, group work throughout the project will be completely mixed and small group work will be done in detracked groups. The importance of detracking groups at a young age has been emphasized in the works of many learning theorists. For example, Jeanne Oakes found in her research that students in different tracks had remarkably different access to information (Oakes 67). Although this curriculum is designed for a class with all different abilities in one classroom, Oakes finds that low track and high track students have very different opinions of how much they have learned—an inequality that will be avoided by keeping all ability levels together in small group work and large group work.

Many resources were consulted in the making of the above curriculum, and it is evident that simply one method or theory of learning can not necessarily account and reflect a certain curriculum. “Know Your Role” will give students the necessary means to form indi-
vidual opinions, critique with respect, and understand media literature. These are fundamen-
al and basic skills that will prepare students for future years of schooling. It is our hope that
ELL students will relay their learned skills and information to their families in order to edu-
cate the disadvantaged in the field of local and national government.
Works Cited


Bill of Rights Introductory Video, TED-Ed, Belinda Stutzman: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYEfLm5dLMQ

Writing Rubric: https://www.teachervision.com/writing/printable/6313.html

Participation Rubric: http://www.dailyteachingtools.com/cooperative-learning-evaluate.html#6