

Historical Information on Citizenship Schools

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee attracted thousands of students, regardless of race, who were motivated to learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens of the United States of America. The “citizenship classes” or “citizenship schools”—such as Highlander—served as vital training grounds for African American citizens to learn about constitutional democracy, to take literacy lessons so that they could qualify themselves to vote, and to become acquainted with methods of nonviolent civic activism that might empower them to tackle deep-rooted problems, such as segregation. The classes were also confidence builders for people like Rosa Parks, who learned to turn her convictions about her rights as a human being and citizen into action.

Citizenship schools were instrumental in countering attempts to exclude African Americans from exercising their right to vote. In many Southern states, a full two-thirds of African Americans were not registered to vote, often due to the use of various voting eligibility tests that were required for certain groups of people, namely African Americans, to qualify for voter registration. The voting tests generally included a literacy component that presented an obstacle to African Americans who had not had the opportunity to learn to read or write, or did not have the requisite knowledge about the United States government and the U. S. Constitution.

The co-founder of the Highlander Folk School, Myles Horton, recounted the role of citizenship schools in regard to helping African Americans tackle voting tests:

I'd say just about the most important thing we did in the movement was start the citizenship schools. In 1956 Septima Clark, our director of education, and Esau Jenkins, a bus driver on John's Island, near Charleston, South Carolina, started coming to Highlander and bringing some neighbors with them. It was a poor kind of place, most people earning their living by picking cabbage from morning to night. The people there wanted to vote — but they couldn't read and write. They asked Highlander to help them set up a school. We helped them raise the money, and gave whatever help we could, but everything about the school was up to the people. They found Bernice Robinson, a beautician, to teach. Bernice and her "students" worked out a curriculum. They had to teach it all in only two months, January and February, between the picking and the planting seasons. They started by learning to read and write their names, then the words to hymns they knew. They learned to hold a pencil and read and write stories about the work that they did; finally, they tackled the Constitution, and the actual registering to vote. That school went on year after year—I remember people like Bob Moses and Fannie Lou Hamer coming down to see it. And then they would go back to Mississippi and other places and start their own schools. Martin [Luther King] asked us to set up schools for them.

—Myles Horton, Highlander Center, from “Everybody Says Freedom” by Pete Seeger and Rob Reiser, p.6

In 1965, recognizing that voting and literacy tests effectively disenfranchised or removed the rights and privileges of citizenship, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. The act prohibited the states from imposing "voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure. . . to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color."

Today, citizenship schools have not lost their relevance and they can be found across the United States, as well as online, but their focus tends to be on helping immigrants prepare for the naturalization test, which must be passed in order to qualify for United States citizenship.