

Southeast Portland's Franklin High achieves a first with district constitution team win

Published: Monday, January 16, 2012, 4:25 PM Updated: Monday, January 16, 2012, 6:41 PM



By **Steve Duin, The Oregonian**

As **Franklin High** senior Dylan Brown noted over the weekend, "It's not very often we get to see our teacher like that, jumping up and down, in tears. It was really cool."

"I did a lot of screaming," Portia Hall concedes, and the Quakers' Constitution Team coach had cause: Franklin's first-ever victory over Grant in the district "We the People" competition.

But if Franklin prevails in Saturday's state competition at Hatfield Federal Courthouse, the team's ongoing education into the character of American politics and democracy will be capped with this:



[View full size](#)

Thanks to the House Republicans' ban on earmarks, funding for the program has been cut, jeopardizing the champion's ability to reach the national finals in Washington, D.C.

Since the U.S. Bicentennial Commission on the Constitution and Bill of Rights **launched We the People in 1987**, Grant and Lincoln have dominated the Oregon hearings on the history, philosophy and legal framework of the Constitution.

Lincoln won the first 15 state titles, three times claiming the national championship. Grant had grabbed top honors in seven of the previous eight years.

Hall launched Franklin's team in 2005. She understands that **Grant** has significant advantages -- especially in team depth and the number of students whose parents are lawyers -- but she doesn't dwell on them: "I didn't tell my kids any of that stuff. I didn't want them to freak out."

Her devotion to the program is intense: "The kids get so much out of it. It brings everything to life: politics,

government and their own involvement as citizens. They know how to write papers, do research and work as a team. They develop such self-confidence."

Congress provided funds for We the People for 24 years. Just in time for its silver anniversary, funding for the Center for Civic Education -- money that is distributed to all 435 congressional districts -- was classified as an earmark and eliminated.

As a result, the **Classroom Law Project**, the nonprofit that runs both We the People and Mock Trial in Oregon, had its budget slashed by \$175,000. What's more, the **Center for Civic Education** will no longer provide airfare for the winning Oregon team to fly to the nation's capital in April.

"This is an earmark," said CLP's Barbara Rost, "but it's not a bridge to nowhere. It just got caught up in the earmark frenzy."

When the Center for Civic Education tried, unsuccessfully, to exempt We the People from that poisonous "earmark" designation, every member of the Oregon delegation signed on ... except the lone Republican, **Rep. Greg Walden**.

I suppose it's only sad coincidence that **Pendleton High** -- the champion in Walden's district -- is passing on the state competition in Portland.

In hearings that begin at 10 a.m. Saturday, teams from Franklin, Lincoln, Junction City, Lake Oswego and Grant, the wild-card entry, will compete before a select group of judges that include two Oregon Supreme Court justices and two members of the Court of Appeals.

The 21 scholars from Franklin, I understand, are psyched. They don't want last week's after-party at the International House of Pancakes on Southeast 82nd to be their last taste of the good life.

"You can't sleep on us," warns senior Mike Mengistu. "That's all I have to say."

-- **Steve Duin**

© 2012 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.