

## **Justification for Human Rights Education**

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*The information below comes from Adam Stone and Rosemary Blanchard, coordinators of the HRE USA Network's Policy and Advocacy Working Group. The Policy and Advocacy Working Group provided this important justification for including human rights education in school curricula, especially within the United States' education system.*

HRE has been defined as "a lifelong process of teaching and learning that helps individuals develop the knowledge, skills, and values to fully exercise and protect the human rights of them and others; to fulfill their responsibilities in the context of internationally agreed upon human rights principles; and to achieve justice and peace in our world." HRE as a public education thread involves not only educational explorations of universal principles of human rights, but also education on the principles of international humanitarian law, which the United States and virtually all other nations today have recognized and ratified. HRE is an integral part of any civics-based education, for an education in "civics" that does not address universal standards of human rights and humanitarian law is incomplete and does not adequately prepare young citizens of the United States for their responsibilities at home and in the larger world. We believe that HRE is most effective when it is incorporated into the existing curriculum and encountered by all students in their regular education.

The United States has a rich history of support for fundamental human rights and freedoms and the adherence to humanitarian principles even in time of war. At the battle of Trenton, General George Washington insisted that Hessian mercenaries captured by his troops be treated humanely, despite the fact that General Washington had witnessed atrocities committed against captured Americans by British troops. Likewise, on April 24, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln approved General Orders No. 100 of the Union Army, now known as the Lieber Code, which is one of the first recognized codifications of the laws of war, and which provided protections for noncombatants, and for the humane treatment of captured combatants. Clara Barton, the "Angel of the Battlefield," was also the angel of humanitarian law, successfully advocating for the United States' ratification of the First Geneva Convention in 1882. Justice Robert Jackson, as the Chief Prosecutor for the Allies at the Nuremberg Tribunal, established principles for humanitarian conduct in peace and war which guide the world's approach to conflict situations to this day. Eleanor Roosevelt, as a U.S. delegate to the United Nations, played a pivotal role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The American delegation to the Diplomatic Conference of Geneva in 1949 played a major role in crafting the language and principles of the revised Geneva Conventions adopted by that body and ratified by the United States Senate in 1955. Indeed, the United States has ratified many treaties that affirm our commitment to human rights and humanitarian law.

Students of all ages deserve to learn about our nation's history of leadership on human rights and humanitarian law issues, as well as about the occasions on which nations of the world, including our own, have fallen short with regard to human rights. Without such education and experience, our youth will be ill-prepared to carry forward the American tradition of global leadership on issues of human rights, wherever in the world those issues arise.