

A Global and Historical Context for the U.S. Prison System

Subjects: Government, Economics

Suggested Grade Levels: 9–12

Time Frame: 1–2 classes

Ryan Nase,

Tacony Academy Charter School

Overview

Through time, governmental systems have created numerous ways to handle offenders. Many times, community officials incarcerate these individuals or otherwise remove them from society. Society has differing beliefs regarding the proper treatment, confinement, and punishment for crimes. Because this lesson invites comparisons and contrasts across three different settings (Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, historical convict institutions in Australia, and Ocean County New Jersey Jail), students will be able to see a global and historical context for various prison settings in the United States. Teachers usually cover the United States criminal justice system in Government and Economics classes, so this lesson will assist teachers in this topic. In addition, students will have the opportunity to consider several current controversies over treatment of offenders in correctional facilities (such as the “school to prison pipeline” idea), as well as to see a concrete example of current separation of powers between the federal and state governments, and application of funding streams to these operations.

Connection to Philadelphia World Heritage Tool Kit’s Goal

This lesson connects directly to Philadelphia as a World Heritage city because students will consider the historical culture as it is tied to a major local landmark, Eastern State Penitentiary, and it introduces culture and global studies to the students. The lesson on Criminal Justice begins by taking a unique field trip to Eastern State Penitentiary in order to provide background knowledge on the history of prison systems, specifically the contributions of Quaker ideals and the use of solitary confinement throughout the history of prisons. Students may also study some of the key architectural features such as the purposeful physical design for prisoner confinement and central heating system. If such a trip is not possible, the penitentiary’s website offers a great deal of useful information.

- <http://www.easternstate.org/home>

Students will raise major questions about crime and punishment, which have been and still are major features of politics and culture in the United States and around the world.

Core Curriculum Standards

- 5.1.12.A: Analyze the sources, purposes, functions of law, and how the rule of law protects individual rights and promotes the common good.
- 5.3.12.C: Evaluate how government agencies create, amend, and enforce regulations.
- 6.3.12.A: Evaluate the costs and benefits of government decisions to provide public goods and services.

Objectives

Using primary and secondary sources students will compare and contrast the Quaker ideals used at Eastern State Penitentiary to the Australian convict system and practices from a similar time period (late 18th through the late 19th centuries). They may also investigate other convict systems that operated in the United States during this era. Students will move on to study 21st century prisons in the United States. To show their abilities to make comparisons and contrasts, students may create several Venn diagrams. Students will also use primary and secondary sources from magazines and the Pennsylvania and New Jersey state tax websites, the students will examine how the states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey bring in money and the resources made available from those funds in order to justify 2 points supporting or opposing government spending in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Using their Venn diagrams and notes from the previous day, the students will complete a “perfect paragraph,” justifying at least 3 changes that could be made that would enhance the current penal systems in these two states.

Essential Question

How have various nations housed prisoners and used their confinement, and how could American leaders make the American penal systems less necessary and more effective?

Materials Needed

Internet, projector/SmartBoard, speakers, loose-leaf paper, and pens

Procedure

Step One: Pose the question: Which is more important to maintain order in society a good school system or a good prison system? Students will discuss and share.

Step Two: Students will work in collaborative groups to read “General Overview” from Eastern State Penitentiary and identify what they believe are the 5 most important details. Groups will pick a representative to then share their details with the rest of the class.

- <http://www.easternstate.org/learn/research-library/history>

Students may also complete the same process with the material covering the historical Australian convict sites.

Step Three: Students will take virtual tour of Ocean County Jail. While viewing the virtual tour we will discuss some of the major differences, and the class will form a “Class List” which records what differences between they see on the virtual tour of Ocean County Jail and what they saw on their actual tour of Eastern State Penitentiary.

- <http://www.co.ocean.nj.us/corrections/VirtualTour.htm>

Step Four: Students will again work in groups to complete Venn diagrams comparing the similarities and differences between Eastern State Penitentiary and the Australian convict sites, and 21st century prisons such as Ocean County Jail.

Step Five: Students will begin Day 2 or continue to Phase 2 by examining two primary sources and using a method we use known as SOAPSTONE to describe what they see

- S = Subject O = Occasion A =Audience P =Purpose S = Speaker TONE.

Students will analyze the CNN.com infographic detailing prison spending state by state the United States. Students will reexamine “The Big Graph” from Eastern State and discuss their ideas about it.

- <http://www.money.cnn.com/infographic/economy/education-vs-prison-costs/>
- <http://www.easternstate.org/support/considering-mass-incarceration-2016-exhibit-foster-dialogue>

Step Six: Students will participate in Guided Reading Activity of the Forbes magazine’s discussion on education and prison spending in Philadelphia practicing the skill of identifying key information.

- <http://www.forbes.com/sites/mattstroud/2013/06/17/philadelphia-schools-closing-while-new-400-million-prison-under-construction/>

Students will then examine the ACLU definition of “school to prison pipeline,” education and prisons, and what it means and justify whether they believe more money spent on education could lead to the need for fewer prisons.

- <https://www.aclu.org/>

Step Seven: Students will watch and discuss the YouTube video about the Alternatives to Violence Project in the American prison system.

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oyh7jiY9Jk>

Outcome/Assessment

Create a 5–7 sentence paragraph that introduces the reader to the American prison system which has these features:

- Describes one difference between Eastern State Penitentiary and most American prisons of today
- Accounts for why, statistically, more Americans incarcerated than in other countries
- Suggests 2 changes that government officials could make to help make today’s American prisons better
- Explains what additional research can prove.

Special Education and English Language Learners Accommodations

ELL students will be paired with higher ability students to assist with work completion and translations. Objectives, Goals, and Instructions will be both visual and verbal. Special Ed and lower level students will be given scaffold instructions, Graphic Organizers, and guided notes to assist them in the completion of their work. Students with IEP’s will complete modified Exit Ticket.

Additional Resources

Web:

- <http://www.easternstate.org/history-eastern-state>
- <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1306>
- <http://www.co.ocean.nj.us/CorrectionsWebSite/>