

Romanian Teachers Excel in Civics Training

“Even the best civics curriculum and textbooks lie dead without the right teachers and the right teaching methods,” remarked Annette Boyd Pitts, Executive Director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. Pitts was addressing Romanian civics teachers as part of a program sponsored by the United States Embassy. “It is clear to me that Romania definitely has the right civics teachers.” Pitts applauded the efforts of Romanian civics teachers who participated in two multi-day institutes focusing on innovative civic education teaching methodologies targeting middle and high school classrooms. Pitts worked with Romanian trainers Cecilia Deme and Ileana Iepure to share best practices in civic education and introduce Project Citizen, a civics project-based initiative. Teachers from throughout the country participated in the workshops which were held in Sinaia.



FLREA Executive Director, Annette Boyd Pitts (middle), with Cornelia Vlaicu of the US Embassy (right) and trainer Ileana Iepure (left).

Pitts was impressed with every detail of the program. “Everything about these trainings was first rate,” Pitts remarked. “From the planning to the on-site accommodations and logistics to the selection of participating

civics teachers, this was one of the best organized and implemented training programs I have ever participated in – in any



Romanian civics teacher participating in a debate simulation as part of a freedom of expression exercise.

country,” Pitts noted. Approximately fifty civics teachers participated in the multi-day training. A variety of civic education methods were demonstrated during the sessions including case studies, simulations, debates, cooperative groups, lyrical interpretations, role plays, moot court, carousel activities, jigsaws, and project-based learning, among others. “The civics teachers I worked with in Romania were of the highest quality,” Pitts remarked. “They were eager to explore new methods and to practice them throughout the week. They were articulate, creative, and committed to each and every exercise that was presented. I know these teachers can bring civics to life in Romanian classrooms throughout the country.”

The program began with an overview of research in the United States on best practices in civic education. Pitts provided background information on the status of civic education in the USA and Florida

specifically. Florida and Romania share many similarities in their requirements for civics in middle school. Legislation was passed in Florida in 2006 requiring middle school students to take a course in civics prior to advancing to high school. Romania requires civic education and civic culture in middle school as well. Following a brief theoretical foundation, an overview of the types of citizens and levels of civic engagement was also introduced. Using a civic engagement sharing strategy, teachers introduced themselves to each other and discussed their personal levels of civic engagement. In one group, every element of civic engagement had been experienced within the group. For example, several teachers in each group reported having participated in a protest, volunteering with an NGO, donating money to charity, or boycotting a product, among other indicators. “This was a very active group of civics teachers”, Pitts remarked.

As part of the workshop, teachers researched problems that could be resolved by public policy in their communities and prepared a portfolio in small groups to display their work. To begin the process of identifying problems and determining the appropriate level of government to address the problems, Pitts provided the lyrics and



Romanian civics teachers at Bucharest session.

music video of a song by the Black-Eyed Peas. Teachers reviewed and analyzed the



Project Citizen Portfolio created by a group of Romanian civics teachers to address a public policy issue in their community.

types of problems presented in the video and classified the problems by level of government. Problems identified ranged from graffiti to war to violent video games. This activity introduced teachers to a creative, interdisciplinary approach to engaging students in the identification of problems in their communities. A carousel activity was initiated to have teachers classify these and other problems by the appropriate level of government to address these problems. Then teachers worked in small groups to select a problem, identify public policy alternatives to resolve the problem, choose the best public policy resolution, and develop an action plan to implement the suggested policy. Each group presented an oral presentation highlighting each step of the project. Pitts introduced Project Citizen, a program adapted for use in over 80 countries and implemented in Romania by the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara. The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. has a new online version of the initiative, www.thepeopleunite.com which teachers were encouraged to utilize.

Teachers also were introduced to the case study method and the application of constitutional concepts through legal scenarios. Using freedom of speech and expression issues, Pitts provided sample cases and demonstrated the jigsaw method to allow every student to learn about at least five constitutional cases in one class period. The exercise also demonstrated the use of cooperative group work in the jigsaw which provided the opportunity for every student to present a case they had learned about to another group. This information was utilized to apply as precedent in a culminating case study activity. Teachers served as attorneys in the mock court simulation to defend their positions on whether or not a school had violated a students' freedom of speech rights when a principal suspended the student for a sign about drug use. "The teachers' arguments were constitutionally sound and well reasoned during the moot court simulation," Pitts reported. Pitts showed the teachers how to use cases from the European Court of Human Rights website to present case studies in their classrooms.

Teachers shared with Pitts a variety of challenges in implementing the new civics



Romanian teachers participating in the mock court simulation.

requirements in middle school. Of particular concern were the outdated materials and

textbooks available in Romania. One teacher brought the approved civics textbook which was published in 1996-97. Pitts indicated an interest in helping the



Romanian teachers researching for the case study using a jigsaw activity.

teachers develop a resource notebook with new lessons or a new textbook to provide more current materials for classroom use. In lieu of a new textbook for the moment, however, Pitts suggested that utilizing primary documents along with interactive, engaging teaching methods would provide a critical beginning until such materials could be developed. Activities such as a scavenger hunt using their Constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would provide students with the opportunity to concretely explore the documents and see how they are organized while realistically applying the content of the documents to their lives.

Written evaluations of the workshops were excellent. Many teachers stood to express their appreciation for the experience. Some went beyond the obvious civic education methods training and indicated broader lessons learned. One male participant remarked that he had a newfound respect for his female teacher counterparts. He indicated he had never been in training with

such strong, intelligent women and it had opened his eyes to realizing the contributions they make to this country's education system. He felt the women participants were superior in many ways to their male counterparts in the workshops. Plans call for a follow up training in the summer with select teachers assisting in the development of a new civics text or classroom materials. Additionally, a presentation to inspectors of curriculum throughout the country will be organized to provide an update on the status of civic education professional development opportunities and the need for more updated materials.

The trainings were held from January 31 – February 6, 2010 in Sinaia at the Hotel Andra. The event was funded through a grant from the US Embassy. Organizers of the event included Cornelia Vlaicu of the US Embassy and trainers Cecilia Deme and Ileana Iepure. Each session was designed



Sinaia, Romania

to allow participants to experience and practice the methods rather than just learn about them through lectures. Constitutional issues, human rights, and civic engagement were introduced through a variety of teaching methods. In addition to the workshops held in Sinaia, an awareness

session was held in Bucharest for local civics teachers. Calin Rus, Director of the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara assisted with the Bucharest meetings. IIT is



FLREA Executive Director, Annette Boyd Pitts (left), with the Director of the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara, Calin Rus (right).

partnered with the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. as part of the Civitas International Program. As part of the partnership, an online civic education initiative has been jointly developed based on the Project Citizen model.

For additional details on the training or civic education efforts in Romania, contact Annette Boyd Pitts, Executive Director, The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. at abpflreaed@aol.com or write to Pitts at 2874 Remington Green Circle, Suite A, Tallahassee, Florida 32308; phone 850-322-8223.