Franklin Delano Roosevelt—First President with a Disability

Subject: US History from 1865 to the Present
Virginia and United States History
Grade Level: Middle and High School

Virginia Standards of Learning:
History:
USII.6—The student will demonstrate knowledge of the social, economic, and technological changes of the early twentieth century by:
   d) identifying the causes of the Great Depression, its impact on Americans, and the major features of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.

USII.8—The student will demonstrate knowledge of the economic, social, and political transformation of the United States and the world between the end of World War II and the present by
   c) identifying . . . the rise of new challenges.

VUS.13—The student will demonstrate knowledge of economic, social, cultural, and political developments in recent decades and today by
   c) explaining the media influence on contemporary American culture and how scientific and technological advances affect the workplace, health care, and education.

Lesson Objectives:
Content—The student will:
  1. Recognize that communities are made up of people of various backgrounds and abilities.
  2. Describe accommodations Franklin Roosevelt and others made to help him live with his disability.
  3. Describe Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to find a cure for Polio.

Materials:
Photo # 1—Franklin Roosevelt with his mother, Sara Roosevelt.
Handout # 1—“Physical Challenge and the Road Ahead”
Photo # 2—Franklin Roosevelt with his granddaughter shown seated in a wheelchair.

Summary: Franklin Roosevelt is consistently rated by historians as one of the ten most influential presidents. He orchestrated the New Deal to help end the Great Depression and he was Commander-in-Chief of the military during World War II. Yet, during his entire life he lived with the long-term effects of Polio.

Evaluation/Assessment: The student will be:
  1. Assessed on the completeness and accuracy of an essay reflecting on the impact of accommodations for Franklin Roosevelt’s disability.

Lesson Procedure:
Background Knowledge and Purpose Setting:
  1. Explain to students that class will begin today with a “history mystery.” You will give a series of clues and students will try to name the individual. Ask students to raise their hand when they know the person’s name and to keep them up until all of the clues are read. [Note how many additional hands are raised with each clue.]
     a. This person was a candidate for Vice President in 1920.
     b. In 1938 he founded the organization that is known as the March of Dimes today.
     c. He contracted polio at age 39 and was partially paralyzed for the rest of his life.
d. He was Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces during World War II.
e. He was America’s first president with a disability.
f. He was elected to more terms than any other president.
g. His name is Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

2. Ask students if they are surprised to learn he had a disability. Explain that during his presidency the general public did not know the true extent of his disability.

Reading/Note-Taking

3. Distribute handout # 1—“Physical Challenge and the Road Ahead.” Read the first paragraph aloud to students and discuss the contents. Answer questions students have regarding the election in 1920 and Polio.

4. Ask students to complete the reading and think about the listed questions:
   a. The advantages of wealth and social position could not protect Roosevelt from illness or physical disability. In what ways do you think Roosevelt's private life changed after his limited recovery from polio?
   b. In what ways do you think his public life changed? Why?
   c. Describe how you might feel if such a thing happened to you. In what ways might your daily life and routine change?

Processing Information

5. Explain that the decision to run for Governor of New York was a life changing decision. Rather than focus on his health and rehabilitation he dedicated himself to elected office. He served:

   As Governor of New York twice — 1928, 1930 and was elected President of the United States for four terms— 1932, 1936, 1940, 1944

6. Explain that the fact that Roosevelt had Polio was well known. However, few outside of his inner circle knew the difficulty he had walking and standing. In most pictures, newsreels and movies of the time he was shown already seated or standing. On those occasions that he planned to speak from a podium he arrived long before the event. He wanted to avoid the press and to make sure he could hold himself up using heavy leg braces and his strong arms.

7. Display Photo # 1 — Franklin Roosevelt with his mother, Sara Roosevelt. Ask students to note how he is standing. Ask them to describe how this helped him to stand. Explain that this is an accommodation he made because of his disability.

8. Display Photo # 2—Franklin Roosevelt with his granddaughter shown seated in a wheelchair. Explain that this is one of the few photos showing him in his wheelchair. Lead a discussion on the following topics:
   a. Would Roosevelt have been elected if the public knew the extent of his disability?
   b. Would a person be elected today who uses a wheelchair?
   c. Did Franklin Roosevelt’s disability keep him from success as a president?

9. Another well known American with a disability at this time was Helen Keller. She said:

   “A person who is severely impaired never knows his hidden sources of strength until he is treated like a normal human being and encouraged to shape his own life.”
10. Ask students to write a short essay reflecting on Helen Keller’s belief as it relates to Franklin Roosevelt.

Closure:
11. Explain that today the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) requires that housing, workplaces and transportation systems, etc. make accommodations to assist the disabled. Remind students that FDR had a support system in place that allowed him to do what he needed to do as President of the United States.
12. Lead a discussion on the value of this law. Explain that 2010 is the 20th anniversary of the ADA.

Additional Resources:

Web-based:
- [http://www.childrensdisabilities.info/books/index.html](http://www.childrensdisabilities.info/books/index.html). This site has a list of trade books and resource books for children of all ages.
- The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library and Museum, [http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/). The site contains a link to hundreds of photos and other resources on FDR.
- *Disability is Natural* by Kathie Snow. [http://www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com). This site provides resources on ways of thinking and talking about people with disabilities.

Print Sources:
Franklin Roosevelt with his Mother
FDR at Hyde Park with his Granddaughter