THE PEOPLE WHO KEEP THE RECORD

The Bucks County Prothonotary — K–12 Lesson Unit

AT A GLANCE

Grade Band	Lesson Title
K–2	What's Worth Keeping? The County's Memory Box
3–5	The Most Useful Document You'll Ever Own — A Passport
6–8	How to Change Your Name in Pennsylvania
9–12	Public Records, Public Power: Searching the Civil Docket

Before You Teach: What Is a Prothonotary?

A two-minute briefing so you can speak with confidence at any grade band.

The Short Answer
The Prothonotary is the Clerk of the Civil Division of the Bucks County Court of Common Pleas. The office keeps the official paper (and digital) record of every civil and family court case in Bucks County. “Civil” means non-criminal: divorces, custody, name changes, lawsuits over money, eviction appeals, protection-from-abuse orders. The office also processes U.S. passport applications and serves as the public access point for court records. The Prothonotarian

The Word Itself
“Prothonotary” (proh-THON-uh-tair-ee) comes from the Greek for “first notary.” The title goes back to the Byzantine Empire and survives in Pennsylvania, where it has been a county office since colonial times. Only a handful of U.S. states still use the title — most call this office “Clerk of the Civil Court.” The unusual word is a teachable hook at every grade band.

Why It’s a Civics Powerhouse

- It’s an elected office — a chance to teach what “row officers” are and why some county jobs are voted on while others are hired.
- It’s the public’s door to court records — the practical embodiment of Pennsylvania’s Right-to-Know Law and the Unified Judicial System’s Public Access Policy.
- It touches real moments in life that students will recognize — getting a passport, changing a name, ending a marriage, fighting an eviction — making the abstract “court system” concrete and human.

Right Now in Bucks County (as of 2026)
Donna Petrecco was sworn in as Bucks County Prothonotary in January 2026 after winning election in November 2025. This is a newsworthy local fact every grade band can use: “We have a brand-new Prothonotary. She just started her job.” The office is at the Bucks County Justice Center, 100 N. Main Street, Doylestown. Phone: 215-348-6191.

K–2 Lesson Plan: What's Worth Keeping? The County's Memory Box

Topic: Why we keep important papers safe — at home and at the county courthouse.
Essential Question: Why do we save certain papers and not others?
Enduring Understanding: Some papers are too important to lose. Families keep important papers safe at home. Our county has a special office that keeps important papers safe for everyone in Bucks County. That office is called the Prothonotary.
Lesson Length: 45–50 minutes

Objectives ("I Can" Statements)

- Civics: I can name a person or place in Bucks County that keeps important papers safe. (PA Standard 5.2.K.C)
- Civics: I can tell why some rules and papers matter to a whole community. (PA Standard 5.3.K.D)
- ELA: I can sort objects into groups and explain my thinking.

Materials (Standard Classroom Items)

- A real or pretend shoebox decorated as a "memory box" (label it "IMPORTANT")
- Two sets of paper picture cards (provided below) — print, cut apart, and shuffle
- Chart paper or a pocket chart labeled "KEEP SAFE" and "THROW AWAY"
- Index cards, one per student
- Crayons or markers

Print-and-Cut Picture Cards
Make one large picture card per item below. The teacher can draw simple icons or print the word in large letters — either works.

KEEP SAFE pile (these are the "prothonotary papers"):
• Birth certificate • Passport • Adoption papers
• A "new name" certificate • House papers • Marriage papers

THROW AWAY pile (everyday paper):
• Grocery list • Junk mail • An old coloring page
• Used napkin • Yesterday's newspaper • A doodle

Lesson Design
(8 min) Hook — What's in the Box?
Hold up your decorated "IMPORTANT" box. Tell students: "In this box, I keep papers that I never, ever want to lose. If I lost them, it would take a long time and a lot of trouble to get them back." Reach in and pull out one pretend item (a paper labeled "Birth Certificate"). Say: "This paper says when I was born and who my parents are. It's how the world knows I am who I say I am." Ask students: "Does your family have a box like this at home? What's in it?" Let several share.

THE PEOPLE WHO KEEP THE RECORD

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(15 min) Sorting Game — Keep Safe or Throw Away?
Shuffle the picture cards and place them face-down on the rug. Bring up one student at a time. Each student picks a card, shows the class, and decides: does this go in the KEEP SAFE column or the THROW AWAY column? Tape it to the chart. Class can give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

As you sort, narrate gently. When something important comes up, say: “This one is so important that there’s a special office in Bucks County that keeps a copy. It’s called the Prothonotary.” (Practice the word together: “proh-THON-uh-tair-ee.” Make it fun.) When a junk item comes up, say: “Nobody needs to keep this. Not at home, not at the county.”

(10 min) Meet the County’s Memory Box
Tell students the story in simple words:

> “In Doylestown, there is a big building called the Justice Center. Inside, there is an office with a big shiny name: The Prothonotary. Their whole job is to keep important papers safe for everybody in Bucks County. If you ever need a copy of a paper that matters — like proof of when you were born or where you live — they can find it for you. Even if it’s a hundred years old, they still have it.”

Ask: “Why is it good that a paper from a long, long time ago can still be found?”
Take answers.
Affirm: it helps families remember, it proves things are true, it keeps history.

(10 min) Make Our Class Memory Box (Culminating Task)
Give each student an index card. Tell them: “You are going to add something to our class memory box. Draw or write one thing about YOU that is important enough to keep forever.” Examples: your name and birthday, a picture of your family, the name of your school, your favorite thing about being you.
Students complete their cards. Place them in the memory box. Display the box in the classroom for the rest of the year. (Optional: at the end of the year, send them home as keepsakes.)

(5 min) Exit Ticket
On a sticky note, each student finishes this sentence out loud (teacher can scribe for non-writers): “The Prothonotary keeps ____ safe.” Acceptable answers: papers, records, names, dates, important papers. The point is that they remember the office’s job.

Formative Assessment
Watch the sorting game: do students intuitively distinguish a one-of-a-kind important paper from disposable everyday paper? The exit-ticket sentence will reveal whether the word “Prothonotary” became associated with “keeping papers safe.” Mastery isn’t pronouncing the word — it’s the concept.

Enrichment

- Read aloud Saturday at the New You by Barbara E. Barber, or Carmen Lomas Garza's Family Pictures — either supports the idea that families keep things that matter.
- Take a virtual peek at the Prothonotary's page on the Bucks County website. Even just seeing the office name and the address makes it real for young learners.
- Field trip: the Bucks County Justice Center has a public lobby that an arranged class visit can see briefly. Call the office at 215-348-6191 to arrange.

Grades 3–5 Lesson Plan; The Most Useful Document You'll Ever Own — A Passport

Topic: How a U.S. passport works, who issues it in Bucks County, and what it takes to get one.
Essential Question: What makes a document powerful enough to let you cross a border?
Enduring Understanding: A passport is a contract between a citizen and the U.S. government. Getting one is a real civic process — with forms, fees, proof of identity, and someone who confirms who you are. In Bucks County,the Prothonotary is the authorized acceptance agent for the US Department of State.
Lesson Length: 55–60 minutes

Objectives ("I Can" Statements)

- Civics: I can describe how a county office helps residents access a federal service. (PA Standard 5.3.5.G)
- Civics: I can explain the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship. (PA Standard 5.1.5.B)
- ELA: I can read an informational document carefully and pull out specific details to answer questions.

Materials

- Printed copies of the Bucks County Prothonotary Passports page and the What to Bring page (one set per pair)
- Mock passport application packet (provided below — print one per student or pair)
- Pencils, optional clipboards
- A real passport, if the teacher has one, to pass around — enormously powerful, but optional

Lesson Design

(8 min) Hook — The Door That Only Opens for You

Ask students: "If you wanted to fly to another country tomorrow, what would you need?"
Take answers. Hold up a real or imagined passport.
Say: "This little blue book is the only thing in the world that proves you are an American citizen at the airport. It's a contract between you and your country. Your country says: this person belongs to us, and we vouch for them."

Then drop the surprise: "In Bucks County, the person who helps you get one is not at the airport. She works downtown. Her title is Prothonotary. We just elected a new one — her name is Donna Petrecco. Today we're going to walk through exactly what it takes."

(12 min) Read the Real Page

Hand each pair a printed copy of the Prothonotary's Passports page and the What to Bring page.
Tell them they're going to read like investigators. They have four questions to answer using only the page:

- Where can you apply for a passport in Bucks County? (List all locations.)
- What proof of citizenship do you need to bring?
- What proof of identity do you need to bring?
- How much does an adult passport book cost, and how is the fee paid?

Give pairs 10 minutes. Then discuss as a class. Affirm the work of pulling answers directly from the document — this is a real-world reading skill.

(25 min) Mock Application (Culminating Task)
Each student receives the mock passport application packet (below). They will fill it out for a fictional applicant: themselves at age 18, planning a trip to study abroad. The packet has four parts:

- Part 1: Personal information (name, birth date, parents' names)
- Part 2: Documents I would bring (checklist they fill in based on their reading)
- Part 3: The math (look up two fees, add them, write the total)
- Part 4: One question for the Prothonotary (write a real question they would want to ask)

MOCK PASSPORT APPLICATION PACKET
Part 1 — About Me at 18
Full legal name: _____
Date of birth: _____ Place of birth: _____
Eye color: _____ Hair color: _____ Height: _____
Parent or guardian names: _____
Part 2 — Documents I Would Bring (check each)
[ ] Proof of U.S. citizenship: _____
[ ] Proof of identity: _____
[ ] Passport photo (color, recent, 2 x 2 inches)
[ ] Completed application form DS-11
Part 3 — The Math
Adult passport book fee (paid to U.S. State Department): $_____
Acceptance/execution fee (paid to the Prothonotary): $_____
TOTAL I will need on the day I apply: $_____
Part 4 — One Question for the Prothonotary
_____

Teacher tip: current passport fees change — always pull the live numbers from the U.S. State Department website (travel.state.gov) the morning of class and write them on the board for students to use in Part 3. The teaching point is the math and the concept of two separate fees going to two different governments.

(7 min) Share & Take-Home Plan
Two or three students share one document they would bring and the question they wrote. Tell the class their finished packet is a real take-home tool: they can walk a parent through it tonight. A parent who has never applied for a passport will learn something.

Formative Assessment
Check Part 2 (documents) and Part 3 (math) for accuracy — these are objective and easy to score. Part 4 (the question) is a window into student thinking: a strong question shows the student understood enough of the process to spot what they're unsure of. Sample strong questions: "What if I lost my birth certificate?" "Can I apply on a Saturday?" "What if my parents have different last names than me?"

Enrichment

- Compare with Minor Passports. What's different when the applicant is under 16? (Both parents must consent.) Why does that rule exist?
- Explore Expedited & Emergency Passport Service. When would someone need a passport in less than two weeks?
- Geography integration: each student picks a country, finds it on a map, identifies what continent it's on, and adds a sentence about one thing they'd want to see if they used their passport to go.
- Optional guest: the Prothonotary's office offers community presentations — call 215-348-6191 to inquire.

Grades 6–8 Lesson Plan: How to Change Your Name in Pennsylvania

Topic: The legal process for changing one's name in Pennsylvania — a real procedural workflow that begins and ends at the Bucks County Prothonotary.
Essential Question: How does an ordinary person ask the court to change something official about who they are?
Enduring Understanding: Pennsylvania law gives every adult the right to legally change their name, but that right requires following a specific process: a petition, a court hearing, a public notice, and a judge's order. Understanding that process is a window into how civil law actually works.
Lesson Length: 60 minutes

Objectives ("I Can" Statements)

- Civics: I can describe a procedure used by the Civil Division of the Court of Common Pleas. (PA Standard 5.3.8.G)
- Civics: I can explain why some changes to personal identity require court approval and public notice. (PA Standard 5.1.8.B)
- ELA: I can read a procedural document and reconstruct the sequence of steps in my own words. (CCSS RI.6–8.3)
- ELA: I can produce clear, organized informational writing for a specific audience.

Materials

- Printed copies of How To Change A Name (Bucks County Prothonotary) (one per pair)
- Chart paper or whiteboard for the class flowchart
- The four scenario cards in this lesson
- Plain paper or a digital template for the student-built infographic

Lesson Design
(8 min) Hook — Why Would Someone Change Their Name?
Open with a quick brainstorm. Ask: "Why might a grown-up legally change their name?" Take all answers. Likely responses: marriage, divorce, returning to a family name, simplifying a hard-to-spell name, religious conversion, naturalization. Affirm every legitimate reason. Then say: "Whatever the reason, in Pennsylvania, you can't just decide. You have to ask a judge. And the office that walks you through it is the Bucks County Prothonotary."

(12 min) Read & Build the Flowchart
Hand each pair the printed How To Change A Name page. Give them 8 minutes to read it together. While they read, the teacher draws an empty 7-step flowchart on the board. After reading, call the class back and fill in the flowchart together. The general steps are:

- 1. File a Petition for Change of Name with the Prothonotary (with the filing fee)
- 2. The court schedules a hearing date
- 3. Publish notice of the hearing in two local newspapers (legal notice + general circulation)
- 4. Get fingerprinted and a criminal background check
- 5. File proof of publication and the background check with the Prothonotary
- 6. Attend the hearing in front of a judge
- 7. Bring various certified documents to the Court

- 8. If the judge signs the order, file the certified order with the Prothonotary — then update all your other IDs

Discussion question: "Why do you think the law requires you to publish your name change in the newspaper? Why not just have the judge do it privately?" Guide students to: public notice gives anyone who has a legal claim or concern (a creditor, a parent, etc.) a chance to object. Transparency is the price of an official change.

(15 min) Scenario Cards — Predict the Path
In groups of 3–4, distribute the four scenarios. For each scenario, the group decides: (a) which step in the flowchart will be hardest for this person, and (b) what advice they would give the petitioner. Each group reports out on one scenario.

SCENARIO 1
Maya, 19, is a college student at Bucks County Community College. After her parents' divorce, she wants to legally take her mother's last name. Her father will not object, but she has not spoken to him in three years. She has a part-time job at a coffee shop and lives in a small apartment in Doylestown.

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Robert, 67, came to the U.S. from Romania as a child. His birth name is Radu Petrescu. He has gone by Robert Peters for fifty years on every job, lease, and tax return — but never legally changed it. Now retiring, he wants the legal record to match the name everyone has called him for half a century.

SCENARIO 3
Jordan, 24, has always gone by their middle name, Jordan, rather than their first name on every document, school record, and pay stub. They live in Quakertown, work full-time, and have booked an international trip in eight months. They want their passport to be issued in the name they actually use — which means the legal name change must be completed before they apply for the passport.

SCENARIO 4
Patricia, 38, is finalizing her divorce. She wants to return to her birth name, Patricia Donovan. The divorce decree she received does not automatically restore her former name.

(20 min) Build the "Name Change in Bucks County" Guide (Culminating Task)
Each pair builds a one-page illustrated guide that explains the name-change process to a real audience: someone who has decided to change their name but has no idea where to start. The guide must include:

- A clear title
- All seven steps in order, in plain language
- A visual element for each step (icon, arrow, or small drawing)

- The Prothonotary's address and phone number
- One "watch out for this" tip for the petitioner (drawn from the scenarios)

(5 min) Gallery & Exit
Post the guides around the room. Students walk for two minutes and place a sticky note on the clearest one. Exit ticket on the way out: "Name one step in the process you didn't know existed before today."

Formative Assessment
Score the guide on a 4-point rubric: (1) all seven steps present and in order, (2) language is clear enough for a real adult reader, (3) contact information is accurate, (4) the "watch out" tip shows genuine analysis of the process. The exit ticket reveals whether the student internalized at least one new fact about how civil law operates.

Enrichment

- Compare with name-change processes in two other states. Why does PA require newspaper publication while some other states don't? Research using the National Center for State Courts at ncsc.org.
- Read the Bucks County Self Help Center page. This is for people who cannot afford a lawyer and must represent themselves — a profound civics topic. Discuss: is the legal system fair if you can't afford a lawyer?
- Connect to local history: students can research a real Bucks County name change from the historical archives — immigrants who Anglicized names in the early 1900s. The Prothonotary keeps these records going back over a century.
- Optional guest: contact the Prothonotary's office at 215-348-6191 to inquire about classroom speakers.

Grades 9–12 Lesson Plan- Public Records, Public Power: Searching the Civil Docket

Topic: How public access to civil court records works in Pennsylvania, why it matters, and how to actually read what you find.
Essential Question: If court records are public, why doesn't the public use them — and what changes when they do?
Enduring Understanding: The right of the public to access court records is a core feature of American democracy. In Pennsylvania, that right is exercised through the offices of elected row officers like the Prothonotary, who balance open access with the privacy protections required by the Public Access Policy. Knowing how to use these tools is a form of civic power.
Lesson Length: 60 minutes — or two 45-minute periods for the full extension

Objectives ("I Can" Statements)

- Civics: I can evaluate the role of elected county row officers in maintaining public access to government records. (PA Standard 5.3.12.D)
- Civics: I can analyze the tension between transparency and privacy in public records law. (PA Standard 5.1.12.C)
- ELA / History: I can locate, interpret, and cite information from a primary source database. (CCSS RH.11–12.7)

Materials

- Laptops, tablets, or phones with internet access (one per student or pair)
- The Bucks County Web Viewer (no login required for search; document downloads cost $0.10 per page — students will not need to purchase documents for this lesson)
- Printed excerpt from the Public Access Policy of the Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania (the one-page summary is sufficient)
- The Civic Inquiry packet (provided below)

Lesson Design

(8 min) Hook — What Counts as Public?
Open with a series of rapid-fire questions. Students put thumbs up if they think it's public record in PA, thumbs down if they think it's not. (Then reveal answers.)

- A divorce filing in Bucks County? (Public, with redactions for minor children)
- A lawsuit by your neighbor against their roofer? (Public)
- A protection-from-abuse order? (Limited public access for safety reasons)
- A juvenile criminal case? (Not public)
- Your high school grades? (Not public; FERPA-protected)
- A custody filing? (Restricted)

Then tell them: "Today you become real users of the Bucks County civil court database. You'll search the public docket the same way a reporter, an attorney, or a curious neighbor would."

(10 min) Why "Elected" Matters

Project a quick organizational picture: nine elected Bucks County row officers (Clerk of Courts, Controller, Coroner, District Attorney, Prothonotary, Recorder of Deeds, Register of Wills, Sheriff, Treasurer) versus

the county departments where directors are hired. Ask students: "Why are these particular jobs elected? Why not just have the Commissioners hire someone to run the records office?" Guide the discussion to:

- Direct accountability to voters — if records access becomes hard or politicized, voters can replace the officer.
- Independence from the executive branch — a Commissioner cannot tell the Prothonotary to hide a record.
- Historical reasons — these offices predate the modern county manager structure in PA.

Mention the current officeholder: "Bucks County's new Prothonotary, Donna Petrecco, was sworn in in January 2026. The office turned over in last November's election. Whatever you find in the database today, she's now the elected custodian of it."

(25 min) The Civic Inquiry (Culminating Task)
Each student or pair receives the Civic Inquiry packet. They will conduct a real search of the Bucks County civil docket and answer four questions. The packet:

CIVIC INQUIRY: SEARCHING THE BUCKS COUNTY CIVIL DOCKET
Go to: propublic.buckscountyonline.org/PSI/v/search/case
Use the Case Party Search. Type a common Bucks County last name (your teacher will assign one — examples: Smith, Johnson, Williams, Brown). Browse the results. Pick ONE civil case to analyze.
Q1. THE BASICS — List the following:
Case number: _____
Date filed: _____
Type of case (judgment, complaint, etc.): _____
Status: _____
Q2. WHAT HAPPENED — In 2–3 sentences, describe what the case appears to be about based on the docket entries.
_____
Q3. WHO WAS INVOLVED — Who filed against whom? (Note: do not identify any minor child by name in your answer; that's the Public Access Policy in action.)
_____
Q4. THE CIVICS ANALYSIS — In a short paragraph, answer: Why does the public have a right to see this kind of information? Who might use it, and for what legitimate reasons? What's a possible misuse, and why does it matter that the misuser could be identified?
_____

Teacher notes for running the search:

- Browse-only — students do not need to download any document (downloads cost money). Docket entries themselves are free to view.
- Assign common last names — they'll surface plenty of cases. Avoid asking students to search their own family names; that can surface uncomfortable information.
- Set a firm boundary in advance: students do not share the names of parties they find aloud or with peers. The point is the system, not the individuals.
- If your school blocks the Web Viewer URL, consider asking IT to allow it; or use the lesson with students working from a printed mock docket the teacher generated in advance.

(12 min) The Transparency-Privacy Trade-Off
Hand out the Public Access Policy summary. Lead a Socratic discussion using these questions:

- Why are some types of records (juvenile cases, certain custody filings) restricted even though they're in the court system?
- The Public Access Policy redacts Social Security numbers, financial account numbers, and minors' names. What's the principle behind those specific redactions?
- If a reporter, an investigator, and a stalker can all access the same docket, what protects against the third use? Who is responsible for that protection — the Prothonotary, the courts, or the user?
- Pennsylvania's Right-to-Know Law and the Unified Judicial System's Public Access Policy are different. Why have two systems? (Answer: separation of powers — the courts set their own access rules under the Constitution, separate from the executive RTK process.)

(5 min) Exit Ticket
On the way out, each student answers: "Name one civic use of court records that requires citizens to know they exist." Expected answers include: investigative journalism, due-diligence before a business deal, looking up landlords or contractors before signing a contract, family genealogy, accountability for public officials, finding out if an institution has been sued repeatedly.

Formative Assessment
The Civic Inquiry packet is the primary assessment. Score on a 4-point rubric: (1) accurate retrieval of case data from the database, (2) accurate narrative summary of the case, (3) appropriate handling of names and restricted categories, (4) thoughtful civics analysis in Q4. The discussion responses reveal whether students can hold the transparency-privacy tension without collapsing into either "all records should be public" or "all records should be private."

Enrichment

- Compare Pennsylvania's Public Access Policy with the federal PACER system at pacer.uscourts.gov. What's charged, what's free, what's restricted? Which system serves the public better?
- Investigate the role of Bucks County's Self Help Center for unrepresented (pro se) litigants. Write a position essay: is access to legal forms and procedural help enough to make the civil court system fair without a right to counsel?
- File a real Right-to-Know request as a class project. The Bucks County Right to Know Request form is public. Request something a high-school journalism class would actually want — e.g., the operating budget for a specific row office — and analyze the response (or lack of response).
- Civic-action option: students attend a public Bucks County Court of Common Pleas civil docket call (open to the public). They will see in real time the documents they have searched online.
- Optional guest: contact the Prothonotary's office at 215-348-6191 to inquire about classroom speakers on public records.

Teacher Quick Reference — All Grade Bands

Bucks County Prothonotary — Contact
Donna Petrecco, Prothonotary (sworn in January 2026)
Bucks County Justice Center, 100 N. Main Street, Doylestown, PA 18901
Civil Division & Passports: 215-348-6191
Family Division (Divorce, Custody, PFA): 215-348-6822
Office Hours: Monday–Friday, 8:00 AM – 4:15 PM (3rd Wednesday of each month: late hours until 7:30 PM in Doylestown)
Satellite Offices (Passports)
Both satellite offices accept passport applications — useful detail for the 3–5 lesson:

- Levittown Satellite Office
- Quakertown Satellite Office (open Wednesdays only)

All Source Materials in One Place

- Prothonotary main page
- E-Filing and Web Viewer
- Bucks County Web Viewer (live civil docket search)
- Prothonotary Forms
- How To Change A Name
- Passports
- Minor Passports
- Passport Renewal
- What to Bring (Passports)
- Where to Apply for a Passport
- Expedited & Emergency Passport Service
- Protection From Abuse
- Self Help Center
- Landlord Tenant Appeals
- Genealogical & Historical Archives
- History of the Prothonotary's Office
- Right to Know Request
- Public Access Policy of the PA Unified Judicial System

Pronunciation Note
Prothonotary: “proh-THON-uh-tair-ee.” Stress on the second syllable. Many adults have never said this word aloud, including most teachers. Saying it confidently in front of students is part of demystifying local government.