

CIVIC EDUCATION in Wyoming



How did you learn about the legislative process when you were young? Did someone go through the old “how a bill becomes a law” speech? Yawn. Did you learn about separation of powers? Check and balances? Were you intrigued or turned-off? For students to truly understand the negotiation, debate, and compromise involved in making public policy, nothing works like putting the students in the shoes of a legislator. Students learn best by doing. When legislators visit classrooms to talk about the legislative process, we have found that students are much more interested when legislators engage them in interactive activities in the classroom instead of standing in front of the class and giving a speech.

Wyoming participated in a study examining the impact of these efforts to improve the understanding and appreciation of representative democracy by Wyoming students. Evaluators tested middle school students in Louisiana and Wyoming and found that in both states, students who participated in the program scored significantly higher than control groups on concepts such as appreciation of the right of every citizen to be heard by his or her representatives; the procedures a state legislature uses to resolve differences about public policy; and an understanding that representative democracy is a system in which individuals elect legislators to represent the people.

Engaging students is easier said than done and teaching is not the primary vocation of most legislators. To encourage and support legislators in these efforts, legislative staff have developed lesson plans that members can take into the classroom that are easy to follow and complete in a class period. The lesson plans and key messages legislators should keep in mind when teaching students about the legislative process, are described below.

KEY MESSAGES TO SHARE WITH STUDENTS

Often when students learn about the Legislature, they learn procedural issues, such as how a bill becomes a law, rather than learning to embrace the core values of our representative democracy. Teaching students the rules of the game is futile if they aren’t sure they want to play in the first place. First, we need to convince young people that the game is worth playing. The primary focus of the lesson plans is not to teach students about the three branches of government or how a bill becomes a law, but rather to help students understand the pressures, conflicts and difficulties that legislators deal with in trying to solve public policy problems. Below is a summary of key message staff provide to legislators with lesson plans.

Politics is Messy

Politics is as messy as ice cream and just as good. Although appearance means a lot these days, to judge the merits of legislative institutions on appearance alone is misleading. The process is slow, it’s contentious, and boy, does it get frustrating. But, do you know what? That’s how it’s supposed to work. We need to embrace the messiness of politics. That reality doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t continually strive to improve our legislative institutions, but to assume that the system is not working because it is messy misses the point. It is a beautiful

process, not only in the abstract or in textbooks, but how it plays out in real life in our communities and capitols all over the country. Democracy is not always easy to appreciate. Nor should it be. It is extremely human and it is filled with conflict. Conflict is normal – and even desirable – in our political system. It’s not easy to settle differences in a diverse country, such as ours. As a result, you will not get 100 percent of what you want and you may walk away empty-handed. Sometimes form wins out over function, but our legislative institutions are remarkably functional ways to find common ground and win out over appearance any day.



You Can't Win 'Em All

Winning and competition are very important in America and winning certainly has its place.

We all want to do well in our society. However, somewhere along the line, we have gotten to a point where we believe that we need to win for our political system to work. Just because we don't win all of the time in politics, doesn't mean the system is broken. In baseball, "batting 300" is considered a remarkable batting average, even though it means failing 70 percent of the time. We can't – and shouldn't – win everything we want all of the time. The winner-takes-all attitude is simply not workable if we want to make sound public policy. Our founding fathers purposefully and painstakingly crafted our system of government to ensure that one group doesn't get everything they want and leave everyone else empty-handed. It's time to redefine what winning means in our representative democracy. True winning in our political system is achieved through compromise. The framers designed the system to implement the will of the majority, while protecting the rights of the minority. Compromise ensures the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

We Don't All Agree

We all know that disagreements are a natural part of life, both at home and in the legislature. Nevertheless, because we tend to spend time with people who think like we do, it's easy to forget that we don't all think alike. Sometimes it's hard to remember that most Americans disagree on issues and have different values, interests, and priorities. It's easy to agree when we speak in generalities. We all want good schools, low crime, and first-rate health care, but as the old saying goes, "the devil is in the details." Agreement is harder to maintain when we work on specific solutions to our problems. The more detailed the potential solution, the more we will differ on the best way to go about achieving general goals. Naturally, legislators cannot represent everyone's interests all of the time. As a result, some people will not be happy with some policy decisions and some will not agree with other decisions. It's the job of the legislature to help find common ground between these different ideas and to pass laws that work well and benefit the largest number of people possible. Compromise is necessary and beneficial in our society.



Change Takes Time

We have become an instant gratification society. Fast food isn't fast enough. Our Internet connections get faster and faster and yet we are more and more impatient with the time it takes to surf the Web. It's no wonder that people think the legislative process is too slow. But, we need to remember that the framers designed the system with specific "speed bumps" along the way. Our founders ensured that any changes to our laws would be carefully crafted and not subject to the passing whims and passions of the people. Although the checks and balances critical to our way of life may appear to be unnecessarily inefficient, they exist to protect all of us. People often say that they want action and not talk. However, patience and careful deliberation are the hallmarks of sound public policy. The process is designed to provide ample opportunity for debate, as legislators try to find common ground and areas of agreement to respond to the needs of different values and interest of the voters they represent. Like anything precious and lasting, finding that common ground takes time, but it's time well spent.

DUDE, CHECK OUT MY WHEELS LESSON PLAN

"The Dude, Check Out My Wheels" lesson plan is geared towards students in elementary school and this lesson requires pencil and paper. The purpose of the lesson plan is to suggest to students that in a diverse society such as ours, people have different and conflicting values, interests and priorities. The lesson plan also helps to develop students' familiarity with how legislatures try and settle conflicts over values, interests and priorities by means of deliberation, debate, negotiation, compromise, and majority votes. Lastly, it gets across the idea that the work of the legislature in trying to resolve differences of opinion in society is a difficult, but important task.

The legislator leading the lesson plan divides the students into four groups (or you can have each student do this exercise on their own and take majority votes). The students are given handouts and are asked to discuss and decide on a position to be reported back to the class about how they would classify each picture. Included in the handout are pictures of an in-line skate, non-motorized scooter, pocket bike, motorized scooter and a motorized skateboard. Students are asked to classify the pictures into the following three categories of similarity: bicycle, skateboard, or motorcycle. The purpose of this exercise is to develop classifications to then establish rules for each of the categories.

After about ten minutes, the legislator asks the students to present their lists and compiles all ideas about how the machines are similar to, or different from, each other. Once several students have shared their opinions the legislator calls for a vote. The students are asked, through a vote, to classify each of the five machines as most similar to a bicycle, skateboard or motorcycle. Then, the students decide how to regulate each category.

The goal of the lesson plan is for students to start to think about the level to which government should or should not regulate the activities of its citizens, the level of agreement and disagreement in society and the role of legislature to try and settle conflicts. The lesson plan should also get students asking questions like why we need government, why we have rules in our society, what role government should play, if any, in keeping people safe and the level to which society agrees on what government should do for its citizens.



MANDATORY DRESS CODE LESSON PLAN

This lesson plan turns the old “how a bill becomes a law” speech on its head and really gets students, and their teacher, involved in the process. Before the classroom visit, staff mails the participating legislator a box of props, which includes belts, hats, scarves, jewelry, slippers, sunglasses, ties, gloves, etc. No paper is needed for this activity. Legislators may also show up with their own “outfit.” For example, some legislators may want to come dressed as their non-legislative profession (e.g. nurse, rancher, etc.) The props are used by the students to create a mandatory dress code “bill.” The “bill” in question is the teacher dressed up in some of the props available, such as silly hats, ties, and scarves. The students get to amend the “bill” by adding, removing, or including different props to demonstrate how a bill can change over time and the importance of debate, negotiation and compromise along the way.

The goal of the lesson is for students to learn the legislative process by simulating the lifecycle of a bill, specifically debating the merits of a “mandatory dress code” using fun props in an interactive exercise. More importantly, the lesson demonstrates that in a diverse society such as ours, people have different and conflicting values, interests and priorities. Third, the lesson plan develops familiarity with how legislatures try to settle conflicts over values, interests and priorities by means of deliberation, debate, negotiation, compromise, and majority votes. Lastly, it gets across the idea that the work of the Legislature in trying to resolve differences of opinion in society is a difficult, but important task. This lesson plan is most appropriate for elementary and middle-school students.

