



# CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

## Illinois Open Meetings Act

### LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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**Grade Level: 9,10,11,12**

**Subject(s):**

- Social Studies: United States Government, State Government, Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, Research.

**Duration:** 2 class sessions

**Description:** This lesson teaches students to use the Illinois Open Meetings Act in a practical manner as well as imparts an appreciation and understanding of the importance of citizen participation and open government as essential to democracy.

**Goals:**

Illinois Learning Standards

**A. Social Science:** 14A, 14B, 14C, 14D, 16A, 16B, 16D; and

**B. English/Language Arts:** 1B, 1C, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A, 4B, 5A.

**Objectives:**

1. Understand what the Open Meetings Act is and the importance it plays in accessing government.
2. Understand the language and practical uses for the Illinois Meetings Act.
3. Perform at least one public comment on a topic of the students' choosing at a public meeting.
4. Actively engage in government life.

**Materials:**

1. Dictionary
2. Citizen Advocacy Center's Guide to the Open Meetings Act, available at [www.citizenadvocacycenter.org](http://www.citizenadvocacycenter.org)

**Starter Questions for the class:**

1. What is a government meeting? What kinds of meetings have you heard of?
2. Should the public be allowed to observe government officials deliberate government decisions? What types of things does the government decide?
3. Why might it be important for the public to be able to attend the meetings and be able to speak at them? For example, if the school board were meeting to decide whether or not you had to wear uniforms, would you want to be heard at that meeting? Why?
4. When would there be times that it would be OK for government officials to talk about issues?

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**Background:**

Note: for each of the definitions below, have the students volunteer what they think those words might mean prior to telling them.

I. The OMA requires **public bodies** to:

**A. Hold open meetings**

- “Public Bodies” include legislative, executive, administrative, and advisory arms of the state and local government (any group of public officials who collect or use public monies).
  - Have students brainstorm a list of 15 public bodies. Examples of public bodies include: school board, city council, park district board, and committees of any of these organizations.
- “Meetings” are gatherings of a majority of a quorum of a public body for the purpose of discussing affairs affecting the public. A quorum is the number of public officials required to take a vote on an issue (usually a majority of the public body).
  - Have students identify how many public officials are on their municipal park district, school district, and county board. Have them determine what the number is for a quorum.

**B. Provide “adequate” notice of those meetings so that the public may attend.**

- Have students brainstorm (or look in the dictionary for) the definition of “adequate.” Does it mean the same as “excellent,” or “fabulous?” Is it the maximum or the minimum?
- What types of notice would effectively notify the public as to the plans of the public body? i.e. just that a meeting is being held or do they have to say what the meeting is about? How much detail should be given?
- “Notice” means public bodies publish their schedule of regular dates, times, and places of meetings.
- Example: The school board is going to have a meeting about changing the school lunch menu. Should school boards (1) give only date, time, and location of meeting (2) Say “School Lunch” or (3) say “School Lunch menu changing to eliminate pizza, hot dogs, and burgers.”

### C. Keep records of public meetings:

- What type of record should be kept? A verbatim record such as a transcript or merely written minutes? What are the pros and cons of each?
- Written minutes (a summary) of the meeting must be published within 7 days of the body's approval of the minutes.

II. The Open Meetings Act requires that public bodies deliberate in public so that decisions that affect the public are not made in secret, and so that the public has a right to participate in the process.

**The exception:** Some parts of a meeting can be closed to the public if the public body plans to discuss personnel and employment matters, property sales, security issues, student records, imminent litigation, and others.

Although the OMA does not require that public bodies reserve time for public comment from citizens, most public bodies allow public comment at their meetings. The one exception: school board meetings **MUST** have a public comment section.

### Activities

- Have students attend a school board meeting or a portion of a school board meeting. Have students take minutes of the meeting to report back to the class. Students can then make a Freedom of Information Act request (see Freedom of Information Act lesson plan) to get the official meeting minutes and see how they match their own notes.
- Make a public comment! Students who are willing can make their own public comments. They can share class projects with the school board or make a comment about a school issue that is important to them. Have the student contact the school board office in advance to see what rules govern public comment: Is it at the beginning or the end of the meeting? Does the student have to sign up in advance? How long is the student allowed to speak? (FYI: most public bodies allow individuals to make comments for 3-5 minutes each with a total of 30 minutes of the meeting dedicated to public comment. However, it's important to check, as each public body is different.)
- Have a school board member visit the class to explain what goes on at a meeting. Have each student should come up with at least 5 questions to ask the school board member.
- Have the class create their own meeting agenda. If they were on the school board, what issues would they want to discuss? Share the list with the school board.