



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

The Legislative Process:

Mock Hearings: Senate Committee & Full Senate Vote

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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The Legislative Process

Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: U.S., State and Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing.

Duration: 3 class sessions

Description: This lesson uses mock hearings to provide an overview of how a State Senate committee and the full Senate evaluate policy suggestions and laws.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

- A. Social Science:* 14C, 14D; 16B; 18B, 18C; and
B. English/Language Arts: 4A, 4B; 5A, 5B, 5C.

Objectives:

1. Understand the legislative process; and
2. Learn to communicate points of view effectively

Instruction and Activity

Background

A few days before doing this lesson, brainstorm with students various statewide policy issues of concern that they might like to learn more about. Help students develop a list by discussing issues that directly impact them and then broaden the list to general issues of concern. Examples of issues include: driving restrictions for young people, curfew laws, minimum wage laws, immigration laws, and issues related to the death penalty. After generating a list of ten issues, have students vote to determine the top three. Once the three top issues are identified, the teacher should consult the state legislative website or contact a state representative to ask what bills have been recently introduced that might impact the identified issues of concern. Make the final determination as to which issue to work on with students based on what bills and proposals are currently pending. Print out the text of the bill and any supplemental material from the state legislative website (Illinois: ilga.gov). Students will role-play Senate Committee hearings and then full Senate hearings to decide whether or not to pass the bill.

Day 1:

Begin by briefly discussing the policy issue or proposed bill that the students will be addressing. Discuss what the current law is, what changes students would like to make to the current law and why there is a need for amending current legislation or introducing new legislation to address the issue.

Discuss with students the legislative process, including how bills are introduced and why and how bills are amended. Also discuss the important role that citizens play in the legislative process as well as the roles of special interest groups and lobbyists.

Inform students that they will simulate a committee hearing and then a full session of the Senate. Divide students into the following groups in preparation for the simulated committee hearing:

- One timer;
- One Chairman or two co-Chairmen;
- One bill sponsor;
- One Minority Leader;
- Five Senate Democrats;
- Five Senate Republicans;
- Seven observers;
- Three opponents of the bill: one representing an average citizen, one a special interest organization and one a lobbyist; and
- Three proponents of the bill: one representing an average citizen, one a special interest organization and one a lobbyist.

As homework prior to the session, have students read the proposed bill and conduct internet research on the issue. Alternatively, if the teacher has compiled research on the issue, distribute that information to the class for review prior to the simulation. Instruct students to consult additional outside resources that support their positions and to be prepared to make three to five comments advocating for their positions.

Day 2 - Mock Senate Committee Public Hearing:

The Chair should call the meeting to order and request the bill sponsor and advocates to give testimony. Set a time limit for testimony, e.g. 3-5 minutes. Senators should then engage in discussion with each of the bill's advocates, asking questions to clarify or oppose the points made during testimony. Next, allow opponents of the bill to testify and then to respond to questions from the senators.

The Senators should then briefly adjourn to discuss amongst themselves whether amendments to the bill should be proposed in order to obtain a majority vote of the Senate Committee or if the bill as originally stated is sufficient. If the decision is to propose an amendment, or amendments, to the bill, the Committee should reconvene to discuss the proposed amendment(s) and hear testimony in favor of and opposed to the amendment. Once all testimony has been heard, the Senate Committee should hold a vote on the bill, with amendments if applicable. If the Committee votes in favor of the bill, it will then pass to the full Senate for consideration.

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Tips for setting up the room for the committee hearing: members of the Senate Committee should sit in a row at the front of the class, facing the “audience”; the Chair, or co-Chairs, should sit in the center of this row. The bill sponsor and advocates should sit in the first row facing the Committee members. The remaining participants fill out the audience chairs.

Day 3 - Mock Full Senate Hearing:

Plan to divide the class into twenty minute segments. During the first twenty minutes, the class will debate the merits of the bill and vote. For this full Senate hearing, all students are role-playing state legislators in the Senate. Students should develop their own points of view on the bill under debate and be prepared to make statements in favor of or opposed to it. Students should be prepared not only to state their opinion on the bill, but to explain the reasons why they hold that opinion. After all have had an opportunity to express their points of view, a vote should be taken. The vote taken in this Senate simulation will determine whether or not the bill will be sent to the General Assembly for a vote.

For the next segment of the class, discuss with the students their experiences in hearing and voting on the bill. Was it difficult to express a point of view? What were the differences between advocating for a bill as a lobbyist and advocating as a citizen? As “public officials,” what was it like trying to compromise in order to pass some kind of bill rather than let the whole issue “die” in the Senate Committee?