

Activities in the Classroom

Bringing Civics to the classroom helps young people learn about government, the process of lawmaking and compromise, and how to have their voices and ideas heard in our democracy. Here are some ideas for activities that will engage students and get them excited about how government works.

All Grade Levels

Negotiation and Compromise

Present a problem to the class (for example, a good destination for a class outing or the merits of a later start to the school day) and have them divide into stakeholder groups representing the various perspectives on the issue. Guide them through the process of civil debate and compromise as they negotiate on a class-wide agreement.

A Day in the Life of a Legislator

Bring in a copy of one day on your calendar during session. (Have enough copies to hand out to the class, or put it on a PowerPoint slide to display.) Talk through each event on your schedule, explaining committee hearings, meeting with lobbyists and constituents, helping people from the district solve problems, and communicating with constituents about the work you're doing. For an interactive version, bring in blank schedule pages and have students help you brainstorm a list of meetings and events, and fit them into the day.

State Symbols and Virtual Capitol Tour

Use [DES's online Virtual Tour](#) or create your own slideshow of photos of the Capitol to share with students. Personalize it with pictures of your office or your desk on the floor, and share some of your favorite spots on campus. Highlight places where state symbols or historical items appear (rhododendrons on the carpet on the floor, George Washington and state seals, etc). Share the list of other [State Symbols](#) and have students create an art project suggesting ways they could be incorporated at the Capitol.

Who Gets to Vote?

Divide the class into several groups (4-5 for older students, 2 for younger) and assign each group a different color or kind of candy bar. Pick a topic of interest to the students (anything from what to serve for lunch to a state policy issue). Come up with a proposal on that topic and hold a vote, but only allow members of one group to vote in the first round. Hold a series of votes, adding one group of students each time, until everyone is voting. Point out the comparison to groups of people who weren't able to vote earlier in our country's history, and lead a discussion about how it feels to be excluded from the decision-making process. Students may want to talk about the fact that people under 18 don't get to vote! Encourage students to recognize that even though they may not be able to vote yet, legislators still want to hear their voices and serve their interests, and there are many ways they can participate.

Bill Writing

Bring in a short bill on an interesting topic, or pull one up on the www.leg.wa.gov website. Walk through the "anatomy of a bill," showing the bill number, the sponsor, the committee referral, the title, and the body of the bill. Have the students write their own bills (individually or in pairs for older students, or as a whole class for younger students). If you like, bring in a box labeled the "Hopper" and have students "drop" their bills. Invite the sponsors to share their bills with the class, and decide which committees to refer them to.

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Elementary School

The Perfect Pizza Recipe

Lead students in a class discussion to decide on the recipe for a perfect pizza (or chocolate chip cookie, or some other treat to share). Should it be thin or thick crust? Have cheese or not? Lots of toppings or few? Encourage students to speak up about their preferences and try to persuade their classmates, and then vote on each item. Afterwards, explain that this is very similar to how legislators have to negotiate and make compromise decisions about issues affecting the entire state.

Our District

Bring in a slideshow or handout with information about your district, or watch [a short video from TVW](#). Explain to students that different areas in Washington send their own representatives and senators to the Legislature, so that each community has their unique needs and perspectives represented. Have students brainstorm important things about their community, like special events, things you produce or grow locally, schools, businesses, and natural and cultural landmarks. Students can select a set of “district symbols,” like our Washington State symbols, or make a poster sharing what they’re most proud of about the district.

Rules of Debate

Divide the class into two groups. Have an adult work with each group to write down ideas as the students brainstorm a list of rules for class discussions. Let students take the lead in generating ideas, but if necessary, guide them to think about questions like “How can we make sure everyone gets a fair turn to talk?” or “What will help people remember to be polite and respectful of others’ views?” After about 20 minutes of brainstorming, have each group share their rules, and invite the other half of the class to give positive feedback. Combine the rules into a class list. Use this as a jumping off point to talk about the rules legislators follow in committee or on the floor, and how they help make sure that time is used efficiently, that people have a fair chance to speak, and that people are respectful of one another and the process.

Middle and High School

Budgeting and Priorities

Propose an event for the class to plan (a party, school dance, etc.). For five minutes, lead students in brainstorming ideas to make it the best party ever and encourage big thinking (bring in a favorite band! Unlimited ice cream sundae toppings! Rent the Space Needle!) Write down the ideas on the board in categories as they arise (entertainment, food, venue, decorations). After brainstorming, announce that the budget for the event is only \$500. Help students estimate costs for their ideas and decide what categories they want to spend the most money on to come up with an event budget within the \$500 limit. Make the comparison to the state budgeting process and discuss how legislators must negotiate and prioritize the most important programs within limited resources.

How Bills Become Law

Describe the process of lawmaking in Washington State, highlighting how legislators get information from constituents, experts, and stakeholders and negotiate and compromise to come up with the best possible policy outcomes. Choose a topic that students care about (school testing, smoking, texting and driving, wages for teen workers, etc.) to illustrate the process. Sketch steps on the board or use the [How Bills Become Law PowerPoint](#) as a visual aid.

Committee Hearing

Select a policy proposal the class is interested in (it could be a state policy, or something like “better school lunches”). Briefly have students call out pros and cons of the proposal. Then, pick volunteers to act as legislators hearing the bill in committee. Assign other students the role of stakeholders and lobbyists to testify for or against the proposal, while you act as chair. Encourage students to play the role of passionate stakeholders giving testimony and model the kinds of questions you might ask about their positions as a committee member. At the end of the hearing, have the committee vote on whether the proposal should be adopted or not.