

Lesson Activity: Executive Session Role Play

- Time:** 1-2 hours
- Grades:** 8-12
- Objective:** Evaluate information and arguments from different sources on a policy issue
Practice and understand a legislator’s role in negotiating among different priorities and weighing trade-offs of various proposals
- Materials:** Committee Member Roles
Energy Drink Stakeholder Documents

Lesson Plan

1. Show Teach With TVW’s “Legislative Committees” module: <http://www.teachwithtvw.org/legislative-committees/>. Outline the basic role of committees in Washington State’s legislative process. Committees allow legislators to study related issues in greater depth, and make recommendations to the rest of the House or Senate about which bills should become law. In Washington, every bill must receive a public hearing in order to pass out of committee, allowing anyone with an opinion about the bill (businesses, agencies, citizens, interest groups) to share it publicly with the committee members. Committee members take stakeholders’ perspectives very seriously in considering legislation. In addition to hearing testimony, they also receive letters, fact sheets, and do research about any groups impacted by the bill. Legislators also bring their own priorities and perspectives to legislation, and weigh this in addition to the information they gather from outside sources. This activity shows what takes place after the committee has held a hearing and gathered information about the bill from a variety of sources. The committee meets for an “executive session,” where members discuss the bill and vote on it. In many cases, they will decide to amend the bill to address concerns raised by stakeholders or to help it get enough support to pass. If there is enough support, with or without amendments, the committee chair can decide to hold a vote so the bill can go on to the next step in the process.
2. Share the text of House Bill 8002: Restricting the Sale of Energy Drinks. Hold a brief class discussion to brainstorm a list of pros and cons of the bill, and stakeholders who would have a strong opinion about it (students, doctors, teachers, parents, energy drink manufacturers, stores, etc.) Emphasize the variety of perspectives that different stakeholders are likely to bring to this issue.
3. Divide the class into groups of five. Hand out the Committee Member Roles and the set of supporting documents, one to each student in the group. Have students take a few minutes on their own to consider the bill in light of their role description and the documents.



4. Each student should write down their number one goal or priority before the Executive Session, and use evidence from their role and/or the supporting documents to justify it. It's okay for the justification to be a matter of personal belief, as long as it's consistent with their role ("My goal is to not pass this bill because I strongly believe the government has no right to tell people what they can and can't drink"), but encourage students to cite a supporting fact from the documents as well ("The FDA and European regulators have found no evidence that these drinks are dangerous, so people should be free to drink them if they want, as the teen letter-writer points out.") Some members may think about an amendment that would change the bill to be closer to their priorities ("I would support this bill with an amendment to use the fine money for education programs that help young people make healthier choices.")
5. Start the Executive Session. Usually, the Chair goes around the group and asks each member to share their perspective. The Chair's job is also to make sure that members are acting politely and respectfully as they try to persuade one another about their position or amendment.
6. If a majority of group members want to pursue an amendment, students can either write out the change on the bill or note it on a separate piece of paper.
7. Conclude the Executive Session by taking a vote on any amendments, and then on the final bill as amended. Majority rules!
8. Bring the class back together to discuss the outcome of their sessions. Groups may have come up with a variety of amendments, or they may have decided to scrap the bill and propose a different version. How did the documents influence the way their role decided to vote? Encourage students to think about how a constituent might react to their member's decision – if you are playing the role of the member who strongly supported personal liberty, what would you say to the parent who wrote the letter concerned about her children's safety? In real life, it can take bills many years to become law, because legislators make changes every year and work with stakeholders for a long time to come up with a satisfactory compromise.

Adaptations and Extension Activities

Use any bill from the Mock Committee Hearing activity, or come up with a unique proposal to debate. Students can also do their own research online to find different perspectives on the bill, instead of using the prepared documents.

For More Information

Teach With TVW: Legislative Committees Module: <http://www.teachwithtvw.org/legislative-committees/>

Complete Mock Committee Hearing Lesson Plan: <http://leg.wa.gov/CivicEd/Pages/LessonPlans.aspx>

