

Civics Education: Mock Legislatures in Capitol

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State and Local Policy

August 2014

Simulated legislative sessions will give students a more concrete understand of how legislation is debated and passed, especially if part of a visit to the state capital.

The Problem: In a 1996 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, 37% of American adults said that they believed that politics and government are too complicated to understand. Among young eligible voters under 30, lack of awareness of local elections and the importance of primary elections can be particularly acute, leading to much larger disparities in voter turnout by age for such elections than in general elections.

Research indicates that civics education alone can help with citizen understanding of their government and voter turnout, but that it is most effective with an interactive component.

The Solution: The best way for students to understand how their elected officials pass laws is to participate in a mock legislative session. This can occur in a classroom, but ideally would occur during a visit to their city council or state capital. For example, some Scandinavian nations pay for all high school students to visit their national capital and be part of a mock legislature.

Those running the legislatures could spotlight topics relevant to the students' interests, such as student loans, education policy and youth driving legislation. Students would be divided into the upper and lower house and assigned roles in the legislature and on committees. Some students could be assigned roles as pressure groups and constituents. Legislators would draft model legislation, which might be amended in committee and on the floor of their chamber before a vote.

At the end of the experience, students should write what they learned, and pose any questions to the teacher that they may not have wanted to ask during the activity. They should also include any propositions to improve the experience or the democratic system. This way, they will be able to synthesize what they have learned and better understand how their government functions. Doing this exercise after visits to legislative sessions in their state or city would increase the value of their experience and increase their awareness of the role of state and local representatives.

Program Model

One successful program is Utah 4-H's mock legislative debates, which take place in the Utah House Chambers. Students travel from across the state to take a tour of the Capitol building, hear guest speakers discuss the legislative process, meet in their own assigned committees to discuss legislation, form their own rules committee to decide in what order legislation will be presented, and debate 15 bills before voting on the House floor.

Fiscal Impact

This program could have significant costs, depending on its degree of ambition, but is one that could involve public-private partnerships. A lower cost option would be to develop curriculum to do within schools or existing social studies classes.

Related Reforms

- 17 Year Old Primary Voting
- Lowering the Voting Age
- Civ. Ed. Mock Elections
- Civ. Ed. Model Curriculum

Part Two Resources

- Civic Education
- Demonstration Elections
- Civic Engagement