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Center for Civic Education

Citizens, Not Spectators

Lesson 2: What Is A Good Rule? Creating Our Ballot Questions

Lesson Overview

This lesson offers students the opportunity to play the role of voters with special interests. Students draw up initiatives for new classroom or school rules. Working in groups of four or five, students share their ideas and rationale for new rules. Students listen to other students' interests, provide justifications for new rules, and reach a consensus by majority vote. Each group submits its priority initiative for ballot consideration. Schedule this lesson to give students sufficient time to discuss their initiatives before the simulated election.

Suggested Grade Level

Elementary (Grades 5–6)

Estimated Time to Complete

One to two class periods

Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to

- define the terms *apolitical*, *direct democracy*, *initiative*, *majority*, and *referendum*;
- learn the requirements for a good rule;
- understand that a rule on a ballot is an initiative;
- develop clear and understandable wording for an initiative;
- explain the need for supportive information for an initiative; and
- explain prioritizing ideas.

Materials Needed

Supplies

- Chart paper
- Scratch paper
- Markers

Teacher Resources

- Quick Vocabulary (Teacher Resource 1)
- Characteristics of a Good or Useful Rule (Teacher Resource 4), an initiative requirement chart
- 2011 Class Ballot (Teacher Resource 5)

Student Handouts

- Building Our Vocabulary (Student Handout 1)
- Is This a Good Rule? (Student Handout 3)
- *We the People: The Citizen & the Constitution*, Level 1, or a comparable social studies text

Before the Lesson

- Confirm with the registrar's office the delivery of voting materials and date of participation in the simulated election.
- Check that each student has completed the assignment to create a proposed initiative with justifications for their simulated classroom election.

Lesson Procedure

1. Beginning the Lesson: What Is a Good Rule?

Student Handouts 1 and 3, Teacher Resources 1 and 4, and *We the People* or a comparable social studies text are required for this part of the lesson.

Distribute Student Handout 3 to each student. Explain to students that they have the opportunity to create new rules. These new rules will be initiatives placed on the class ballot. Explain that, in creating these initiatives, the class is exercising *direct democracy*.

- Begin by explaining the difference between an initiative and a referendum (reference Teacher Resource 1).
- Ask students for an example of an existing school rule that they might be asked to vote on. Explain that the school rule placed on the ballot is an example of a referendum because a governmental agency is asking citizens to vote on one of the school's proposed policies.

Ask various students to read aloud about direct democracy from a brief passage in a social studies text; if using *We the People*, go to "How can the people rule themselves?" (pp. 22–23).

Ask students to define *direct democracy*. If help is needed, have them read the definition found in a social studies glossary; if using *We the People*, turn to page 229.

Instruct students to add the definitions of the terms *direct democracy*, *initiative*, and *referendum* to their vocabulary list.

- Ask if their proposed rules are the same as an initiative.
 - Students should recognize their right as citizens to create these policies for a general vote.

Tell the class that each student has created a proposed initiative for the class ballot. Groups will consider every member's proposal, but first the class must learn what makes a good rule.

- Project Teacher Resource 4 on a screen or the classroom board.
- Explain to the class that every new rule must meet all of these qualifications.
- Ask students for their explanations for each requirement.

Using the following hypothetical classroom policy, ask students to apply each rule requirement to their classroom policy.

Policy: Any student who is late to class must stay after school for two hours every day for a month.

- Reason: To get students to class on time. Too many students are arriving late.
- Fair: No. Two hours is too long a penalty for being late to class. Some students may arrive only one or two minutes late.
- Understandable/Clear: Yes
- Possible to Obey: Yes, students can take the late bus home or have parents pick them up from school.
- Legal: Yes, a teacher can set discipline rules for a class.

2. Exercising Citizen Power: Creating an Initiative

Explain to the class that they will be working in groups to listen to, evaluate, and vote on new rule proposals by group members. They have 20 minutes to complete their considerations.

- Have students work in groups of four or five for this exercise.
- Ask that one group member pick up Student Handout 3 for each member of his or her group.
- Review the handout with the class and instruct the groups to listen to member proposals and apply the Good Rule requirements for each proposal.
 - Each student will explain his or her suggested rule and offer reasons in favor of the rule to their group.
 - Group members should write their opinions on the rule requirements as each proposal is presented.

3. Reaching a Majority Vote

Ask a student to read aloud the definition of *majority* found in a social studies glossary; if using *We the People*, turn to page 231.

After the group hears all the suggested rules, they will take a vote to prioritize the rules.

- Tell students that they may need to take several votes in order to reach a majority vote in deciding their group's initiative.
- If a rule earns a majority vote, have students keep a list of the other rules considered and the number of votes each received.
- Remind students that their secondary rules may be other groups' chosen rule for the ballot.
 - Ask what this might mean for the class vote. Students may respond that one of their own secondary rules may win the vote.

Instruct students to refocus on the Good Rule chart (Student Handout 3) and ask the following:

- Have you applied each requirement for a good rule?
If not, have you changed the suggested rule to meet the requirement?
- Did you reach a majority vote?
- Is your suggestion for a new rule realistic?
- Is there a possibility that this new rule will pass?
- Will your teacher or principal accept it as a new rule?

Give groups an additional few minutes for final consideration of their initiative.

4. Informing the Voters: Initiative Charts

When groups have reached the goal of identifying their choice for a good rule, distribute chart paper, scratch paper, and markers to each group.

- Instruct the groups to write their initiative entry for the ballot on the chart paper and a piece of scratch paper.
 - Tell them not to include the reasons for the rule.
 - They should use their free time to explain their proposal to classmates.
 - Instruct students to put all group member names on the initiative poster and give you their initiative proposals.

Explain that the class will have several days to ask group members questions about their initiative.

Define the term *apolitical* and have students add the definition to their vocabulary list.

- Explain to students that a voting area must remain apolitical. Therefore, questions and discussions about the proposed ballot initiatives must be conducted during free class time.

Have groups post their initiative charts around the room.

Check that all groups have handed in their initiative proposal to you.

5. Concluding the Lesson: Becoming an Informed Voter

Ask one person from each group to read their initiative to the class.

Tell the class that the initiatives will remain posted until the simulated election, and that during their free time, they should ask other group members questions they might have about an initiative.

Write or type in the group initiatives on the 2011 Class Ballot (Teacher Resource 5).