



Law & Policy

Overview

In this lesson, students learn about how existing law can influence public policy. First, students read about and discuss how law can affect public policy. Then they examine hypothetical situations involving CAP students and identify laws and policies in the hypothetical situations. Then in small groups, students are assigned one of the hypothetical situations, given legal updates on the situation, and asked how the law might affect the problem and the proposed civic action.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Name different sources of law.
- Rank the precedence of different sources of law.
- Cite examples of how existing law can affect public policy.
- Identify laws and policies in hypothetical situations.
- Determine and explain how a law might affect a hypothetical problem and civic action.

Preparation & Materials

[Handout A: How Existing Law Can Influence Public Policy](#)—1 per student

[Handout B: Laws, Policy, and Civic Actions](#)—1 per student

[Handout C: Legal Updates](#)—1 per student. Consider cutting the handout and distributing just the applicable legal update to the group instead of the whole handout.

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

A. Tell the class that students at a high school in Los Angeles took on this problem as their Civic Action Project:

Graffiti covered the walls inside Southeast High School's bathrooms. The school administration repeatedly had to pay to have the bathrooms repainted. To keep costs down, the administration decided that only restrooms monitored by school staff could remain open. That meant that only restrooms located near the school's main entrance would remain open. Other restrooms located in more convenient areas throughout the campus were closed.

Hold a discussion by asking students:

- What was the new anti-graffiti policy?
- If you were a student at this school who opposed this policy, what would you do to get it changed?

Explain that the Los Angeles students made an action plan to try to get the bathrooms unlocked. But as they were doing research, they discovered something important. They found out that the state education code did not permit schools to close bathrooms. Once they presented the conflict between education code and school policy to administrators, the bathrooms were reopened.

B. Tell students that existing law often influences public policy and the making of public policy.

II. Reading and Discussion—How Existing Law Can Influence Public Policy

A. Distribute [Handout A: How Existing Law Can Influence Public Policy](#) to each student. Ask students to read the handout and look for ways that existing law influences public policy.

B. When students finish reading, hold a discussion using the questions at the bottom of the handout:

1. What different sources of laws are mentioned in this article? Assume that each of these sources created a law on the same subject, rank the sources in order of precedence.

(These are the sources of law mentioned in order of precedence: U.S. Constitution, federal law, federal regulation, state constitution, state law, city charter, city law, city regulation.)

2. How can existing law affect public policy? Give examples.

III. Small-Group Activity—Laws, Policies, and Civic Actions

A. Remind students that public policies are often formalized in laws and regulations and that civic action may involve trying to change policies or create new ones. Also mention that when preparing for a civic action, it is important to understand the laws or regulations that might affect what students do.

Distribute [Handout B: Laws, Policy, and Civic Actions](#) to each student. Ask students to read the handout and look for examples of laws and policies described in each of the five hypotheticals.

B. When students finish reading, divide them into five groups and assign each group one of the five hypotheticals, 1–5. Explain that sometimes when conducting a civic action, new information is discovered that can affect what you are doing. Then distribute each group the corresponding Legal Updates from [Handout C: Legal Updates](#). Explain that each group is to discuss the update and be prepared to report on their answers to the questions that follow the update.

Have each group report on its findings and discuss as a class.

IV. Debrief

A. Debrief the activity using the following question:

- Why might it be important to research laws and regulations before conducting a civic action?

(There may be an existing law, regulation, or court decision that addresses the problem or issue; a law, regulation, or court decision might change the civic action you are considering.)

B. After completing this lesson, have students return to the Citizenship Brainstorm, identifying and adding to the lists.