



Policymaking at the Local Level

Overview

In this two-day lesson, students examine an instance of policymaking at a school board, one of the most common institutions at the local level. Students take the roles of community members serving on a special committee to develop policy recommendations to address a hypothetical city's high dropout rate. As committee members, they examine documents about the dropout problem and craft a policy to address the dropout problem. Finally, they exchange policies with other groups and evaluate one another's policies using a rubric.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify several causes and effects of the high school dropout problem.
- Use primary documents to create a public policy that addresses the dropout problem.
- Evaluate a public policy using a rubric.
- Describe different types of government involved in policymaking at the local level.

Preparation & Materials

- [Handout A: Central Heights School Board Special Committee Letter](#)—1 per student
- [Handout B: Document Pack](#)—1 per group (6 groups)
- [Handout C: Policy Recommendation Form](#)—1 per group
- [Handout D: School Board Policy Evaluation](#)—1 per group

Procedure

Day One

I. Focus Discussion

A. Tell students that the national rate of high-school dropouts is about 25 percent. Hold a brief discussion by asking students:

1. Let's talk about effects of the dropout problem. What do you think are the most serious consequences of the dropout problem? Why?
2. How about the causes? Why do you think so many students drop out of schools?

B. Explain that the dropout rate is a major problem nationally and locally and policymakers are working to develop policies to lower the dropout rate. Today they are going to get an inside look at how policy is developed at the local level—a school board.

II. Small-Group Activity—Special Committee

A. Ask students to imagine that they live in a small city named Central Heights. Tell them that like communities across the nation, Central Heights has a dropout problem and the school board wants to do something about it. Tell them that the board has formed a number of citizen committees to propose policies that address the dropout problem. Tell them that they are going to be members of these committees.

B. Divide the class into six groups. Distribute:

- [Handout A: Central Heights School Board Special Committee Letter](#)—1 per student
- [Handout B: Document Pack](#)—1 per group
- [Handout C: Policy Recommendation Form](#)—1 per group

Explain that when citizens and government work on complex problems, such as the dropout problem, they need reliable and current data to craft effective policy. Tell students that the document pack contains a lot of information, including excerpts from a research report currently being used to drive policymaking.

Explain that one of the skills they will apply today is being able to **cull out the most relevant information** they need to make effective policy to address the needs of the hypothetical school district.

Let students know that they are not expected to thoroughly read and comprehend full research reports, but that it is a “civic skill” to be able to look at research, articles, etc.,

and extract needed information. (Tips: Look for the “headlines,” bold print, first sentences; scan for keywords; look at the first and last paragraph.)

C. Give students time to work on their policies, reminding them that in the next CAP class period they will be presenting their policy recommendations.

Day Two

III. Small-Group Activity—Presentations

A. Regroup students and tell them that they will be presenting their policy proposal to another group.

B. Pair groups. Distribute [Handout D: School Board Policy Evaluation](#) to each student. Explain that each group will take turns evaluating each other’s policy using Handout D. Explain that the group evaluating should pay attention to the presentation, take notes on it, and ask clarifying questions at the end of the presentation.

The evaluating group should then decide if they would vote for or against the proposed policy, reasoning out loud in front of the other group.

After the first group presents, members of this group become the evaluators and the second group presents.

IV. Debriefing

A. Ask students:

- Was it more difficult to develop a policy or to evaluate one? Why?
- Which of the documents helped you most in developing your policy? Why?
- Did the policy you developed address a cause or effect of the dropout problem? Explain.
- What was a good policy proposal you heard? Why was it good?
- This was a local school board. What other types of local government are you familiar with?

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