

TEACHING TOOLS: NYS UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

The Student Infomercial: Student Rights and Responsibilities*

LEARNING CONTEXT

Purpose:

Students will become aware of the laws, rules, and policies that directly govern them. They will consider and identify school or community issues relating to education that could use innovative solutions. Students will construct a videotaped “infomercial” or other presentation that depicts the issue of concern and provides a possible solution that the school or community may consider.

Grade Level:

10, 11, and 12

Learning Standards:

1, 4, and 5

Core Curriculum (excerpts from the Social Studies Resource Guide with Core Curriculum):

Students will investigate how citizenship is defined and how different societies view the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They will also learn how concepts of justice and human values differ across time and space and how decisions may be made under different political systems (Methodology of Global History and Geography). Additionally, students will monitor the application of basic constitutional principles. Students should understand those basic principles and the cultural heritage that support our democracy so that they can become informed, committed participants in our democracy. Students will recognize how individuals and groups throughout history have challenged and influenced public policy and constitutional change (United States History and Government). Through participatory activities, students will learn to define, analyze, monitor and discuss issues and policies (Grade 12 Social Studies: Participation in Government). Students will learn rational decision making skills and see the role that economics plays in all aspects of our society (Grade 12 Social Studies: Economics and Economic Decision Making).

Concepts/Themes:

- Analyzing the sources of the nation’s values as embodied in federal and state constitutions, statutes and case law; appreciating the principles, ideals and core values of our democracy (human dignity, liberty, justice, and equality).
- Working together and with community members to identify and seek solutions to students’ concerns regarding their rights and responsibilities.

*Developed with the assistance of George Habib, Director, Law-Related Education Program, John Jay High School

Prior Knowledge:

Students should be familiar with the basic purpose of our justice system. Students should understand civic values, such as justice, due process, equality, fairness, and majority rule with respect for minority rights, as expressed in the constitutions and laws of the United States.

Students should be at a stage where they are able to develop problem-identification and problem-solving skills. They should be able to gather, process, and present information in verbal and written forms.

PROCEDURE

The teacher should adjust the topics to specifically address the Core Curriculum requirements of their course or grade level. The teacher should expect to spend three hours of preparation to adjust the curriculum and to ensure that sufficient resources are available to the students.

Students will learn about the laws and rules that regulate behavior in school, from state statutes to school policy manuals. Students will then interview one another and, if possible, survey members of the community in order to find out what kind of issues or concerns the students, as well as the community, face with respect to student rights and responsibilities. After all interview and survey results are analyzed, the class will select an issue to fully research and analyze for a resolution. The students will then create an “infomercial” on videotape or, if that is not possible, with a live presentation regarding the school/ community issue.

This exercise places the students in a position to use verbal, written, research, communication, and technology skills, as well as discover their own interest in public service.

Special Message to Teachers

The activities within each Teaching Tool are designed to build on each other to, first, develop students’ knowledge of basic law-related concepts; then, show students how the concepts are utilized or implemented in the court system; and, finally, demonstrate how students should apply the concepts in their everyday lives. However, the various activities that comprise each tool may also be used as stand-alone exercises. For example, you may choose to incorporate only Day 1 or Day 3 into your course work. Or, you may choose to use Day 1 in connection with one unit and then use Day 2 in a later unit.

There is more than one way to utilize the Teaching Tools – the proper use is the use that is beneficial to your classroom.

Day 1 – Student Rights and Responsibilities

The teacher should discuss with the students the various laws that govern schools, teachers, and students, ranging from federal laws that generally prevent discrimination against all individuals, to state laws that mandate certain courses of study, state regulations that describe those courses of study in detail, and individual school policy manuals that address particular issues, such as disciplinary issues. The Appendix provides citations to pertinent primary resources if the students are interested in seeing some of the provisions that apply directly to them.

Students should understand the interdependence of these laws, rules and policies. The teacher should obtain a copy of the school's disciplinary policies and foster a discussion among the students about the need for the various policies and the manner in which concepts like justice, fairness and due process are evident in the school policies. The class should discuss any recent court cases in the federal or state courts that involve disciplinary issues (the teacher may check the Unified Court System web page for a "case of the month" that may be of interest). The teacher and students may also search for and discuss recent newspaper articles regarding topics related to education, such as charter schools, school vouchers, school busing changes, etc. The students should also be aware of the economic implications of many of the governing principles (grant money, budgetary considerations) and of the recent issues discussed (charter schools).

As a homework or evaluation assignment, the students should draft an amendment to one of the disciplinary policies, citing a reason for the amendment. The students should list the various perspectives of people that would be affected by the policy change (school administration, teachers, budget planners, students, parents, bus drivers, maintenance staff, etc.) and set forth an opinion that each affected person might have about the amendment. For example, a disciplinary provision regarding expulsion may be amended to require a second chance prior to expulsion. Parents may like this change because it insures a second chance for their children to remain in school, but teachers may not because they will not be able to easily expel a student that is creating a disciplinary problem.

In the alternative, the teacher may wish to have different groups of students review different parts of the disciplinary policy, research whether the policies have been successfully implemented or are in need of revision, and present their findings to the rest of the class. If merited, the class may work on a formal request to the local Board of Education to change existing rules or establish new policies and procedures.

Days 2 & 3 – Student Survey

The teacher may wish to contact the Communications Department of a local institute of higher education or a representative of a local public relations firm to ask for a classroom visit and assistance with the proper method of constructing and analyzing a survey.

The students should create a brief survey form to be distributed to other students in the school building and to appropriate members of the community (parents, relatives, family friends). The

purpose of the survey is to determine what issues or problems their peers or community members are encountering that they find difficult to understand and resolve.

The students should interview each other to create a list of public concerns about which they would like to poll public opinion. They can consult local newspapers for recent topics, or consider topics of interest to them. Some examples follow:

- students who have encountered difficulties riding the bus may wish to have bus monitors placed on buses in addition to bus drivers
- if the school has a policy that only seniors may leave school grounds during their lunch hour, students may wish to investigate the reasons for that policy
- students may want the cafeteria to serve different kinds of foods
- students who play Varsity sports may want to be excused from the physical education requirement and have study halls instead of gym classes
- students may wish to have an after school peer tutoring program set up by the school

From the list of public concerns, a topic should be chosen, and the survey should be developed and distributed. The responses should be collected within a week, and then this exercise should continue with Day 4's activities.

Days 4 & 5 – Creating an Infomercial

The students should review the results of the survey to find common themes to address. The students should research whatever issues or concerns are the focus from the survey, develop a proposed solution, and create an infomercial or presentation that would coherently present the problem and the proposed solution to the community, as well as to those in a position to implement the proposed solution. Students should present all perspectives in some way over the course of the infomercial and should incorporate statistics or facts garnered (as a result of the survey and research) to support and rationalize the proposed solution.

If the teacher wishes, this could become a semester long project to develop an infomercial or presentation that will actually be presented to the school administration. The project offers a variety of participation opportunities for students with various interests. For example, some students may be interested in actually videotaping the project, some in directing it, and some appearing in the infomercial. The flexible nature of the project will allow the teacher to accommodate these various interests.

RESOURCES

Depending on the scope of the project, the students may need access to computers with graphic design capabilities (for the survey), video recording and editing equipment, and transportation. If this equipment is unavailable to a school, it may be worthwhile to contact a local television station for assistance. In the alternative, it may be possible for your class to create power point presentations, instead of a videotape.

ASSESSMENT PLAN

Students will be evaluated by direct observation and in the context of formal and informal group activities. The teachers should monitor group dynamics and provide assistance to individuals, where appropriate. The surveys, homework suggestions, and infomercial itself will provide tangible products for consideration.

APPENDIX

If the students wish to view some of the pertinent laws, rules, and policies in original form, they should research the following:

- New York State Education Law section 801 (a statute) requires courses of instruction in patriotism and citizenship and in certain historic documents
- 8 NYCRR 100.1 (a regulation) sets forth the state learning standards, which includes the five social studies learning standards
- 8 NYCRR 100.2 (a regulation) addresses general school requirements; it cross references Education Law section 801; it also requires that schools adopt and implement written policies on school conduct and discipline “designed to promote responsible student behavior”
- review your school policy manual

For other examples, or for use as a research tool, visit the New York State Bar Association’s Law, Youth and Citizenship web site, www.nysba.org/lyc/rights.html and review the guide, “Rights and Responsibilities of Young People in New York State.”