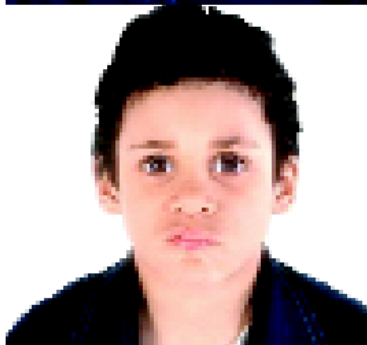


HOW TO TALK TO KIDS

There's nothing like a classroom visit from a lawmaker to bring the legislative process to life. Here are five ideas for activities that work.

By Jan Goehring and Michael Fischer



With schools back in session, it's time to think about reaching out to your young constituents. Meeting personally with students, answering their questions, sharing ideas and listening to concerns can impart a greater understanding of the legislative process. This helps develop good citizens, more effective representation and better public policy. You are uniquely qualified to teach young people—the nation's future voters and leaders—what it's like to be a state legislator: the processes, the pressures, and the debate, negotiation and compromise that are the fabric of representative democracy.

Consider calling schools in your district and setting up a classroom visit. Establish contact with a specific teacher either directly or through the school administrator. Find out if there are existing academic programs in which your participation might be beneficial. These could provide opportunities to raise awareness about our system of government and promote a more positive image of the legislature.

After the initial contact has been established, send your biography to the classroom teacher before your visit. This will help the students and teacher learn more about you and prepare some preliminary questions. As you plan for your visit avoid the temptation to prepare a lecture. The messages you will want to convey are best achieved through discussions and activities on issues students care about. Examples of topics that might be important to kids in your state include school uniforms, violence, driving age, helmets for bicyclists or roller bladers, video game restric-

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tions, smoking on campus, graffiti, competency testing to graduate and curfews.

IDEAS FOR REACHING KIDS

Kids will learn best about what it's like to be a legislator if lessons are personalized. Here are some suggestions for activities you can use with a class. These ideas work best in classrooms, rather than in large, all-school assemblies.

1 Legislative Simulation (high school or middle school). This activity requires advance planning and coordination with the classroom teacher. Before your visit, ask the teacher to work with the class to choose a public policy issue the students think is important and prepare a simple, policy proposal to address the problem. On your day in the classroom, ask several students to form a "legislative committee" to hold a public hearing on the proposal. Have other students present brief "testimony" for and against the proposed policy. Then have the committee members debate the proposal and make a recommendation to the full

CONNECT WITH KIDS

- ✓ Talk about issues that interest kids, but don't lecture.
- ✓ Listen to what they have to say.
- ✓ Let the students ask questions and give them honest responses.
- ✓ Encourage the kids to interact with you.
- ✓ Don't talk down to them.
- ✓ Don't use legislative jargon and acronyms.
- ✓ Most important, be yourself.

class. Finally, have the full class discuss and vote on the proposal. At the conclusion of the simulation, explain how this exercise relates to the real-world process of dealing with competing interests, negotiating, compromising and decision making that you experience in legislative life.

2 Solving a Class Problem (all grade levels). Ask the students to pretend they can have a field trip to go anywhere the entire class agrees on. Divide the class into three equal size groups that want to do three different things (e.g., go to the mall, a water park or a professional sports event). Ask them to resolve the disagreement and come to a class consensus. Assist them in negotiating, compromising and reaching a decision. At the conclusion, discuss how this exercise relates to the process of dealing with competing interests, negotiating, compromising and making decisions that you experience in legislative life.

3 A Day in the Life of a Legislator (all grade levels). Select a page from a legislative day on your personal calendar (if possible, enlarge the page on an overhead slide) and go over it with the class. Select a day that will allow you to illustrate such things as dealing with constituent problems, listening to diverse points of view on a difficult issue, negotiating, compromising, making decisions and balancing your personal, professional and legislative life. You could start the session by asking the students what they do during a typical day. If you're visiting an elementary school classroom, consider bringing your spouse or children to talk about what it's like to be part of a legislator's family.

4 There Ought to Be a Law (all grades). Agree to stay in contact with a classroom of students throughout the session or for the entire school year. Send the students periodic e-mail or letter updates of your activities in the legislature. Ask students what issues they are concerned about and how a new law might help. If appropriate, introduce a bill and ask the class to research all sides of the issue and follow the bill's progress. Your classroom students might also be a good resource to testify about the bill. Invite the class to the capitol.

5 The Perfect Chocolate Chip Cookie (elementary). Ask the students to decide as a class how they will make a batch of chocolate chip cookies (or pizza or school lunch) to take home. Begin by asking what makes a perfect chocolate chip cookie. When they are unable to agree, lead them through deciding on nuts or no nuts, many or few chips, soft or chewy, thick or thin ... at the conclusion, discuss how this exercise relates to the process of dealing with competing interests, negotiating, compromising and decision making that you experience in legislative life.

THE FINAL STEP

Contact the teacher before making your visit and find out from him or her what is expected and how you will fit in to what is happening in the class. Get some background on what will have happened before your visit and what will be going on after your visit so you have a sense of where you fit in the overall picture. 🏠