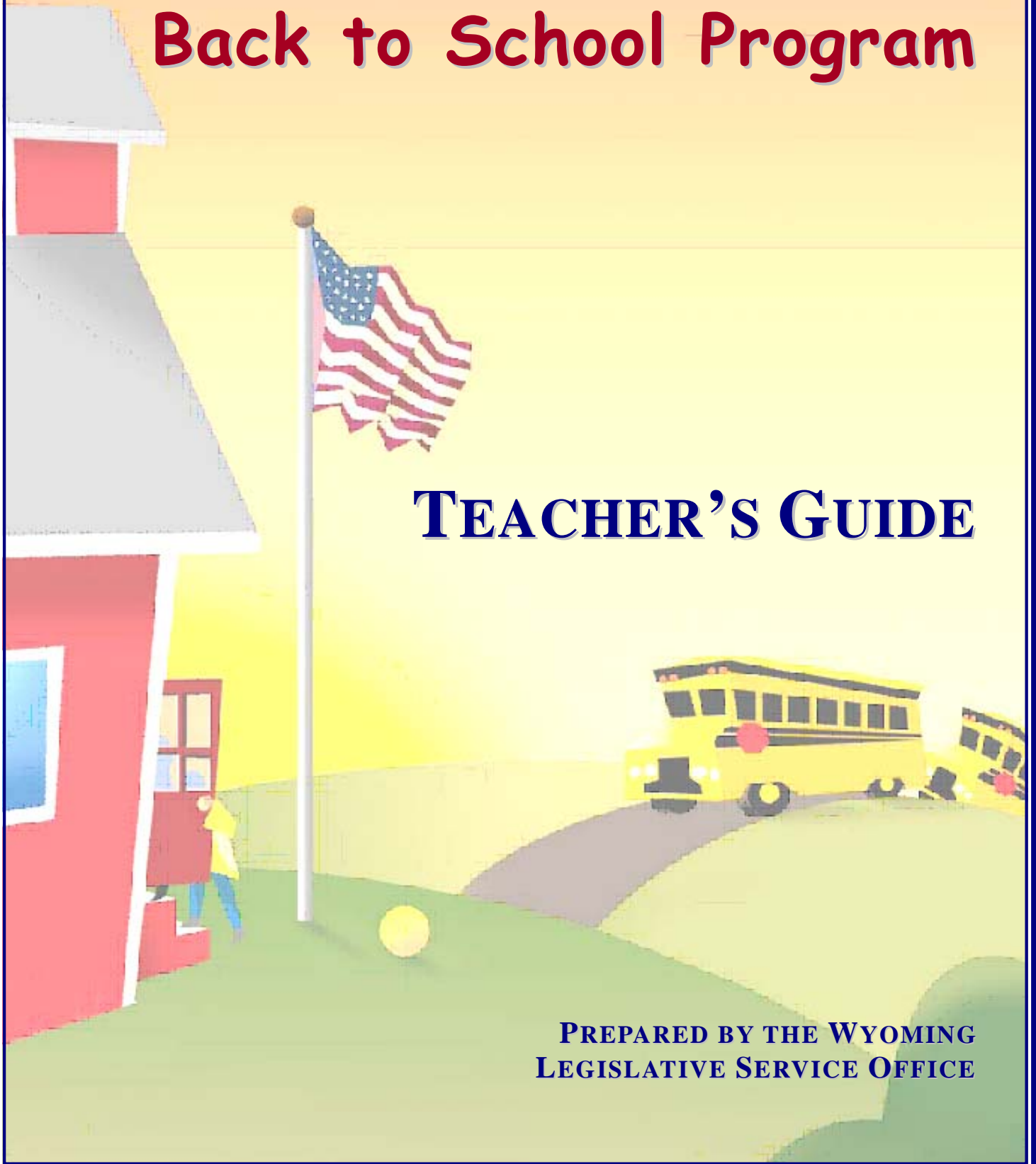


Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program

TEACHER'S GUIDE

PREPARED BY THE WYOMING
LEGISLATIVE SERVICE OFFICE



**TEACHER'S GUIDE DISTRIBUTED BY:
THE STATE OF WYOMING LEGISLATURE**



For information about participating in Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program and civic education resources available from the Wyoming Legislature, please contact Wendy Madsen, Legislative Information Officer, Wyoming Legislative Service Office
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TRUST *for* REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY
NATIONAL CONFERENCE of STATE LEGISLATURES

America's Legislators Back to School Program



TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR WYOMING'S LEGISLATORS BACK TO SCHOOL PROGRAM

Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program is designed 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 very fabric of representative democracy. This guide will aid classroom teachers in preparing their students for Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program, sponsored by the Wyoming Legislature and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). It offers background information on the goals of the event and activities to use as a complement to the legislator's visit.

Non-Partisan Civic Education Program

Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program is a non-partisan program. Legislators of both political parties participate in this national program to tell the real story about representative democracy in America. Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program is a valuable opportunity for state legislators to help promote civic education about representative democracy. With the goal of helping to instill the values of representative democracy, strengthen the democratic process, and encourage young Americans to play an active role in their government, the project speaks to youth in their own language about their own concerns. Legislators who visit classrooms as part of the program do not promote specific public policy agendas or campaign for office as part of their interaction with students. Rather, the role of the legislator in the classroom is to explain the legislative process, the importance of youth participation in the process, and to promote the principles of representative democracy.

Goal of the Program

State legislators can contribute to the quality of civic education by sharing their experience and explaining America's tradition of representative democracy to students. State legislators are especially qualified to help students understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens. The Back to School Program is designed to engage young people and build their understanding and support for America's democratic institutions and counter the recent heightened cynicism and distrust of the legislative process. The issues that state legislatures deal with are critical ones for people of all ages, including students. Because everyone's life can be affected by legislation, it is important that people pay attention to and get involved in the political process and that is the message of the Back to School program.

Legislators communicate that, in our system of representative democracy, participation can and does make a difference. In other words, "your ideas count." That means voting, joining groups, contacting elected public officials, and advocating interests and values. As important as civic engagement may be, it is not enough. Students need to understand and trust in our system of representative democracy. The purpose of this event is not to teach about the three branches of government or how a bill becomes a law, but rather to help students understand the pressures, conflicts, and difficulties that legislators deal with in trying to solve public problems. Students need to have a more realistic sense of what their political system is about, how it works, and what they can and cannot expect from it. Students need to learn democracy appreciation, just like they learn art or music appreciation. They need to appreciate the strengths of representative democracy to accept the fact that everyone in our diverse society does not agree and to realize that most of the time they cannot get everything they want in the public policy arena.

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Your Ideas Count Materials

To reinforce the themes of the program, NCSL and the Wyoming Legislative Service Office (LSO) have produced a number of materials for use during legislators' visits. All of these materials use the theme "Your Ideas Count" to help students understand that they do have a voice in our system of democracy, even if they are not old enough to vote. *Your Ideas Count* materials include leave-behind student pamphlets for different age levels and a video of the same name. Through the *Your Ideas Count* materials, students will learn that: disagreements are a natural part of life – at home and in the legislature; among any group of people, compromise is a necessity – not a sell-out; our chances of being heard by elected representatives increase when we join others who share our views. New in 2005, NCSL has also produced a video for upper elementary students called *Citizen Brain: Feeding on Democracy*.

Lesson Plans

NCSL has collaborated with educators to produce pre-visit and follow-up lesson plans to complement the *Your Ideas Count* materials for teachers' classroom use in conjunction with legislator visits to the classroom as part of Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program. Lesson plans are available for elementary, middle school, and high school students. These online lesson plans are available to download from NCSL at <http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/teachers.htm>. Lesson plans for high school students include topics such as the importance of diversity in public policy making, the role of special interest groups in legislation, and the importance of compromise in representative democracy. Middle school plans include an assessment of students' trust in government, a day in the life of a legislator component, and a public hearing simulation. Elementary plans include a segment on compromise, who legislators are, and citizen participation.

In addition to lesson plans that are available to educators, the Eagleton Institute of Politics has a prepared plan for legislators to bring into the classroom. The lesson plan is designed around a simulation on the appropriations process at: http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/democracylesson/LegLessonPlan_Intro.htm. In addition, the Wyoming Legislature has a series of lesson plans titled *Appreciating Democracy* and *Appreciating Representation* that you can use in conjunction with a classroom visit from a Wyoming legislator. Contact Wendy Madsen at the LSO at (307) 777-7881 for more information.

Legislators Back to School Program Themes

All of the materials available for the Legislators Back to School program focus on the themes of representative democracy that are not routinely communicated to students. NCSL and two other groups – the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the Center for Civic Education (CCE) – embarked in 1999 on a multi-year project to offer civic education on representative democracy to students and citizens of all ages. The first task of the project was to figure out the message to be conveyed about how representative democracy ought to work and how it actually does work. In collaboration with these organizations, four political scientists have formulated a mini-curriculum, titled "A New Public Perspective on Representative Democracy." This curriculum is presented below in an adapted, abbreviated form that can be used for Wyoming's Legislators Back to School Program and complements the video and student pamphlet produced for the event. The New Public Perspective is based generally on the research of congressional and state legislative scholars, whose work presents a very different picture than that which most people have of our nation's legislative institutions. The perspective presented here offers teachers and their students an alternative view, and a more accurate one, of the political system in which they live. The following sections list the common myths, the new perspective on each, and activities to help students understand the concepts.

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Where's My Voice?

Common Myth: Legislators don't care what regular people think.

More Likely the Case: Legislators are very concerned about what the people in their district want and need. Everybody's opinion is invited and welcome. But organizations that represent large numbers of people often get more attention than an individual person does.

Classroom Exercises

- ★ Ask a visiting legislator about his or her district, what the people are like, what's important to them. Also, how often does the legislator meet with constituents and groups in the constituency? What kinds of issues do people contact him or her about? What do legislators do for their constituents? How close to constituents does a legislator feel?
- ★ Use the web site of your state legislature to gather information about specific legislators and profiles of the districts that they represent. A list of state legislative web sites can be found at: <http://www.ncsl.org/public/sitesleg.htm>.
- ★ Ask students to discuss how they would relate to constituents if they were in the legislature. How would they vote, if they felt one way on an issue and a large number of constituents felt the other way? On what issues would they follow their own opinions rather than the predominance of constituency opinion?

Whose Special Interests?

Common Myth: The values and interests of the average person are not represented because legislators do what the special interest groups and the big campaign contributors want them to do.

More Likely the Case: Many people are members of organized interest groups; and legislators are dependent upon the good will and votes of these various groups. So Americans are actually well represented both by their interest groups and their legislators.

Classroom Exercises

- ★ Ask the students to indicate one or two of their own beliefs or views, and figure out by whom they are represented in the state capitol. Ask them about the interests of their parents. Are they represented, and by whom? Ask a visiting legislator what kind of groups and lobbyists he or she hears from, how they operate and what is persuasive.
- ★ Ask the students to indicate one or two areas of public policy in which they have strong views or beliefs; e.g., environmental protection, school violence, animal rights. Conduct an Internet search to find organizations and interest groups that share this view. Ask students to consider how effectively these organizations and interest groups speak for them. Ask students if they feel strongly enough about their view or belief to join or support these organizations or interest groups. What are other methods of expressing one's views and beliefs to representatives? Assess the effectiveness of the various alternatives. What might result if individuals, organizations, and interest groups were denied opportunities to monitor and influence the policy-making process?
- ★ Discuss whether representative democracy would be better or worse off without interest groups and lobbyists.

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Don't We All Agree?

Common Myth: The public mostly agrees on what is right so legislators should pass the laws that the people want.

More Likely the Case: There are so many different opinions in our society and very little agreement except at a very general level. It is the job of the legislature to help find a meeting point between different points of view, so they can pass laws that work well and benefit the largest number of people possible.

Classroom Exercises

- ★ Ask the class to discuss and come to a consensus about a school issue. Point out the differing opinions about the issue and the difficulty of resolving those differences. Ask if students think there should be more agreement in the legislature than in the classroom.
- ★ Ask the visiting legislator about a specific issue he or she has dealt with in the legislature. Have them describe the different positions on the issue, who they heard from about it and how, if at all, their position changed during the course of the debate.
- ★ Select a controversial issue that has multiple positions that the state legislature might have to address; e.g., hand gun control, school vouchers, the death penalty. For each issue develop 4-5 specific position statements. Consider each of the issues one at a time. Begin by posting the 4-5 position statements at intervals along the classroom wall. Briefly discuss what each position means and then have students move to the place along the wall that best represents their own position on the issue. Have the students at each position discuss with one another why they are standing there. Next, have several students at each position report out to the whole class as to why they are standing where they are. After students have had a chance to speak, provide an opportunity for students to ask questions they have of each other. Finally, allow any student who wishes to do so to change positions. If students do change, ask them to share their reasons. Pose the question: What does this exercise tell us about the complexity of the public's perceived consensus on policy issues?

Why Compromise?

Common Myth: The lawmaking process doesn't work well because of politics and needless conflict.

More Likely the Case: The democratic process often involves a lot of argument as legislators attempt to find common ground and areas of agreement for the different values and interests of the many voters they each represent. Sometimes these differences are hotly debated for long periods of time but most are settled through compromise.

Classroom Exercises

- ★ Ask the legislator about issues that have been compromised in the process as opposed to those where there were absolute winners and absolute losers. Ask the legislator to discuss a bill or issue where he or she had to compromise their position, why and what was the result.
- ★ Choose a controversial issue on which your students are likely to disagree. The issue could be personal and everyday (What kind of pizza should we order? Where shall we go on a field trip?), a local school policy issue (open vs. closed campus, dress codes, cafeteria food service) or a state policy issue (length of school year, animal rights, voting age). Assign the students the task of simulating a legislative session and reaching a decision about this issue. Discuss the outcome of the process. Were they able to reach a decision? If not, was that a reflection of lack of consensus among the students? How important was negotiation and compromise for students of differing opinions?

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