

FUN, GAMES, & OTHER LEARNING

Candy store

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Often in a democracy with all that needs to be done, changed, and fixed, there are simply too many choices. It's like the kid in a candy store presented with scores of temptations, but having only enough money to buy one thing.

As a game, create a series of boxes on the blackboard to represent the government's budget. Have your students fill in what the government should do with its budget. Make sure the class covers all of the government's territory: Defense, Social Security, the Attorney General, Energy, Health, Education, Welfare, Agriculture, Treasury, and so on, as well as regulatory agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration, Federal Communications Commission, and the Federal Trade Commission. Initially, the boxes should be for programs (needs, problems, and opportunities) despite whether those programs are the proper province of the federal, state, or local government. Don't get bogged down in specifics about the federal budget. The aim of this game is to realize that there are many competing interests; this is what inevitably leads to hard choices.

Jobs, people's livelihoods, are affected by almost every decision. If an Army base is closed to save money on defense, people are put out of work. If cutbacks are made on agriculture subsidies, some farmers go under. The people and/or their lobbies will fight.

EXAMPLES

1. Pick some students in your class to be lobbies that are against funding cuts in certain government programs (represented by the boxes). Now, let the rest of the class try to make the hard choices that are necessary to divide tax dollars in the face of those who may lose their jobs. Democratic choices are seldom made out of the public eye or out of the range of some aggrieved voice. This is what makes democracy especially noisy and clumsy. On the other hand, in a democracy, everyone has the opportunity to have a say.

2. Divide the population into the following categories: elderly, middle age, students, and young. Then divide again into: very rich, well-off, middle class, scraping by, and poor. And lastly, divide into: race, religion, or any of the other ways you can look at our diverse nation. Now imagine that you're in one of the categories—say retired, poor, and Italian-American. How would you reset priorities from your point of view? How do the priorities established in the candy store game look to you now?

In a democracy, the way that hard choices get decided depends on whose toes are getting squashed and who has the individual or collective power to yell loud enough to be heard. The point is that hard choices only get harder when the people who will be affected are taken into consideration.

Divide and fail



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This game divides the class into at least eight groups and assigns each definitive points of view. For instance, if the school were torn down and moved to a new part of the town or county or state, where should it go and how should it be changed to become a better school?

Group A doesn't want to move; it's too expensive.

Group B wants a new, modern school nearby.

Group C wants to turn the school into a magnet school for arts and sciences and redo the existing school.

Group D wants the school be in another town and wants it to be twice as big so it can have better athletic teams.

Group E wants a freer environment with more electives and wants to move the school onto a campus and have it be like a minicollege.

Group F wants to cut back the existing school to save money and have it just for students in the area.

Group G wants to turn the school into a private school and give kids (not parents) vouchers.

With a little preparation, your students should be able to talk about their assigned positions. Now, add that a bribery charge was laid against one of the groups (not yet named). Also, add that another group has pulled strings with the governor and is said to have the inside track. How does the discussion fare? Is everybody on everyone else's back? Is compromise in the air? Or is everyone just out to make their own points at any cost? Winner take all? Now that the air has become polluted and positions set in concrete, no matter what the final conclusion or vote may be, no one in the class will trust the decision. Solving hard choices is as much about the process as it is about the decision generated. (See the Chelsea and Eagle Pass examples in the "Hard Choices" Act.)

Winner takes nothing

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When it comes to a vote, sometimes the majority doesn't rule. Sometimes there simply isn't a majority. The vote may be split among too many candidates; or perhaps no issue, candidate, or proposed regulation fits the bill and no one ends up winning. Often these situations please those who favor the status quo or the incumbent. When is maintaining the status quo good? If there is no consensus, maybe it's because all of the positions were too radical. How can hard-choice decisions get made? Endless rancor and debate don't tend to change minds.