

The First Amendment at School: A Scavenger Hunt

Purpose:

This lesson introduces students to the idea that the school is a special setting in which First Amendment rights are a little more limited than they are in the larger society. Through a First Amendment scavenger hunt, students identify the limits of these rights in their own school settings.

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into groups of five students and ask each group to draw a picture that shows one advantage and one disadvantage of students exercising their First Amendment rights at school. Post the drawings in the classroom so students can view all the pictures.
2. Conduct a class discussion of the drawings, using them as the basis for chalkboard lists of advantages and disadvantages of students exercising their First Amendment rights at school. Some advantages may be that students have a chance to develop their speaking and writing skills (for example, by producing a newspaper); they are exposed to a broad range of ideas; angry or upset students have a chance to air their concerns; the majority will not be able to keep those with unusual or unpopular views from speaking out; or that teachers will not be able to unfairly limit what students say or with whom they spend free time. Disadvantages may include that free speech may disrupt learning; some students may hurt others' feelings or make it hard for others to concentrate on learning; some students may not be mature enough to use good judgment in deciding what to print in a school newspaper and may damage someone's reputation or hurt someone's feelings.
3. Point out to students that the courts have held that school is a special setting in which students do have First Amendment rights, but those rights can have more limits placed on them than would be true in other settings. Students' First Amendment rights can be limited when they conflict with maintaining a safe environment in which all students can learn.
4. Ask students if they can think of examples of limits on their First Amendment rights in their school. (They might mention such limits as restrictions against swearing, writing notes to friends during class, disrupting class and wearing certain types of clothing.) Tell students that they are going to work in groups to complete a scavenger hunt of First Amendment rights and limits in their school. Distribute the handout *A First Amendment Scavenger Hunt* and help them develop strategies for completing their work. This may include identifying people who can provide the information needed, identifying other useful sources such as

the student handbook, suggesting students divide the items among group members, etc.

5. When students have completed the scavenger hunt, ask them to categorize the items according to which First Amendment right is involved. Discuss the results of the group work with the class. Sample discussion questions include:

- Is one of the First Amendment rights more likely to be limited than others? If so, why do you think this is true?
- Which First Amendment right can students at your school exercise most freely? Explain your answer.
- What is the most interesting thing you learned as a result of doing the scavenger hunt? Why did you find it most interesting?
- Were there any limits on First Amendment rights with which you disagreed? What reasons were given for this limit? What reasons would you give against this limit?
- Would you suggest any additional limits on First Amendment rights to ensure that your school has a safe environment in which everyone can learn? Give reasons for your answer.

6. Conclude the lesson by having each group write a letter to a school staff member to whom they talked while doing the scavenger hunt. The letters can urge a change in school policy or register support for the current policy, depending on the groups' views.

Enrichment/Extension: Students could write an article for the school newspaper in which they share the results of their research. Others could create editorial cartoons that show their views on the policies they learned about in the scavenger hunt to be submitted with the article.

A First Amendment Scavenger Hunt

Work with your group to find information on each of the following items. You must consult at least six different sources in completing the scavenger hunt.

1. Does your school have a dress code? If so, describe the dress code and the reasons for it.

Source:

2. Does your school observe religious holidays? Why or why not?

Source:

3. Are there any limits on commercials or advertisements on school property? Why or why not?

Source:

4. Is students' access to the Internet and World Wide Web limited? If so, how and why?

Source:

5. Do students have complete control over what goes into the school newspaper? Why or why not?

Source:

6. Are any types of clubs prohibited from meeting at your school? If so, why?

Source:

7. How can students voice their concerns about their school? Is there a process for seeking changes in school policies?

Source:

8. Who chooses the topics for school assemblies? Are there any limits on the topics? If so, why?

Source:

9. Are there any limits on the kind of music students in school music classes can perform? If so, what are the limits and what reasons support them?

Source:

10. Can students pray silently at their desks in your school? Why or why not?

Source:

11. Can the school librarian choose any book he or she wants for the library? Why or why not?

Source:

12. Can a teacher choose to show any movie he or she thinks will help students understand important subject matter? Why or why not?

Source: