ESTABLISHING A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

LESSON PLAN

CLOSE UP
WASHINGTON DC
Goal: Students will understand what an issue is and establish rules for future issue discussions.

Time: 45-50 minutes

Materials:

- Flipchart or butcher paper
- Markers
- Blank notebook paper
- Pens

Procedures:

Let your students know that in the upcoming weeks, they will be discussing and debating important controversial issues in the news. The class is going to start by talking about what issues students believe to be the most important, and how to look at those issues in a respectful, productive way.

1. What Are the Important Issues Facing the Country and/or Community Today? (8 minutes)

   - In groups of 2-4, have students answer the following questions:
     - What do you think are the two most important policy issues facing the country today?
     - Why do you think these issues are so important right now?
     - What are some of the different views people have on these issues?

   - Have students refine their issues so they get specific. If they say the economy, get them to explain the specific problem, such as high unemployment. If they say crime, maybe they want to narrow that down to too many shootings. You may also want to clarify if they are talking about crime on the local or national scale.

2. Share and Discuss Important Issues (5 minutes)

   - As a whole class, ask someone from each group to share the issues they have brainstormed. List the different issues on the board. If time allows, ask a few groups to expand on one of the issues they shared. Prompts could include:
     - What is your position on this issue?
     - What do you think the government should do about this issue?
     - Does anyone disagree with that position?
     - How will these issues impact your life?
     - Why is it important to discuss these issues, even though they are controversial?
     - What is challenging about discussing issues like these?
     - Why is it good to discuss issues with people who have different views than you?

3. Establish Rules for Discussing Controversial Issues (20 minutes)

   - Use the discussion about important issues to establish a purpose for creating rules. For example: “You have outlined a lot of important issues that are going to make a difference in our country, and in your lives. We live in a democracy, which means you get a voice in how these issues are decided. We are going to work together to explore these issues and practice how to address them so that you can make your voice heard effectively.
We will spend a lot of time debating issues, considering different opinions, and discussing ongoing conflicts and controversies about what our government should or should not do. In order for this to work, we need to create a community in which everyone has an opportunity to hear as many ideas and viewpoints as possible, where information is freely shared, and where everyone feels safe and encouraged to speak up. To do this, we will create a set of rules for everyone to follow.

- Explain to students that, before creating the rules for the community, students should consider communities they have been involved with previously to identify what made those communities successful or unsuccessful. Brainstorm (and record responses) using the following prompts:
  - Think of a community (a classroom, team, after-school club, youth group, etc.) that you have enjoyed being a part of and that you have found successful. What are words that describe that community? What did members of that community do to make it enjoyable and successful?
  - Now, think of a community that has been unsuccessful and/or not enjoyable. What did members of that community do to create those conditions?
  - Ask students to keep the previously listed actions in mind as they develop rules and guidelines for the class.

- Divide students into groups of 2-4 and have them discuss rules that they believe the class members should follow when discussing controversial issues. (What should members of this class do, or refrain from doing, in order to make our community successful?) Students should be able to explain their reasoning for the suggested rules.

- Reconvening back in the large group, have different groups offer their suggestions for rules as a student in front writes them down. As each group offers their suggestions, the teacher may clarify the rule and ask why the group thought it was important. When needed, ask students to be specific. For example, if students suggest that members should be respectful, ask them what actions are necessary to be respectful.

- If students are stuck at any point, here are some examples of typical student-generated rules that you can guide them toward:
  - Everyone gets a fair hearing
  - If you are offended, say so and explain why
  - One person speaks at a time
  - Conflict is not personal
  - Do not stereotype or call people names
  - Speak for yourself, not for others

- After everyone shares, have students review the list and discuss any points that they disagree with, or that need further clarification. Then, vote and/or prioritize the list.

- Tell students that these are now their rules for discussion and debate for the rest of the semester (or year). Have everyone sign the rules or give verbal confirmation that they agree to uphold them. Keep them posted in the classroom so that everyone can refer to them for the rest of the semester.

- Tell students that if other ideas arise throughout the semester, the class may amend the rules.

4. Reflection on Process (5 minutes)

- Have students reflect on their own deliberative process.
  - How well did you work in your small groups?
  - How did you make decisions when you disagreed?
  - Do you think you showed how people with different views can have civil discussion?