

Learning Gateways

Lesson: Creating a Redistricting Plan for the Town of Athena

by Gayle Mertz

Overview

The editors are pleased to reissue this strategy, which first appeared in the ABA Division for Public Education's *Update on the Courts* 3.1 (fall 1994): 8-10. It is designed to help students learn more about Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as the challenges of redistricting.

This lesson complements instruction related to information in the feature article "[Where Politics, Race, and Law Collide: The Legal Challenges of Redistricting in the Post-2000 Cycle](#)" by J. Gerald Hebert and John Bryan Williams; various materials in [Update on Law-Related Education](#) 20.3 (Election 1996); and other materials in this edition.

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will:

- Identify major concepts in Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965
- Organize data and apply data analysis to Section 2 concepts

Target Group: Middle- to high-school students

Time Needed: 2-5 class meetings, depending on the use of Optional Activities

Materials Needed: Feature Article [Where Politics, Race, and Law Collide: The Legal Challenges of Redistricting in the Post-2000 Cycle](#); [Student Handout #1](#); [Student Handout #2](#); [Student Handout #3](#); [Student Handout #4](#); [Student Handout #5](#); and optional materials as appropriate to instructional situation such as those found in [Update on Law-Related Education 20.3](#) (Election 1996)

Procedures

1. Prepare for the lesson by reading J. Gerald Hebert and John Bryan Williams's feature article "Where Politics, Race, and Law Collide: The Legal Challenges of Redistricting in the Post-2000 Cycle" and perusing in *Update on Law-Related Education* 20.3 for articles, lessons, and activities that might be useful to use with your students.

2. Share Student Handout #1 with students to familiarize them with the Voting Rights act of 1965 and useful vocabulary for this lesson. Assign Student Handout #2 for reading, as well as other materials in you have found appropriate in this edition to enhance their understanding of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and related issues. Discuss the questions in Student Handout #2. If desired, assign Optional Activities.

3. Use any of these questions for class discussion.

- a. In what ways do citizens benefit from participating in the voting process?
- b. Are citizens harmed if they cannot participate in the voting process? If not, why not? If so, in what ways?
- c. Should the government try to make it more convenient for some groups to vote because the groups have experienced discrimination in the past?
- d. Should race/ethnicity/sex/age be considered when drawing voting district lines? To what extent? Why?

4. Give students Student Handout #3. Tell them about the town of Athena, which has a population of 200,000 and the responsibility to create 20 voting districts of 10,000 voters each. This is a town that is proud of its diverse population and wants to live up to the ideals that are represented by its namesake. (Athena is the Greek goddess of wisdom.) In small groups, ask students to devise a fair and equitable plan for dividing this town into 20 districts, simply by drawing lines around the symbols representing voters (see Student Handout #4 and Student Handout #5). It is not necessary to give students sufficient time to complete the task. The goal of introducing Student Handout #3 is to make students aware of the difficulty of the task. Debrief.

5. Tell students that the town council of Athena decided that the only fair way to create districts was to be purely objective. Give students Student Handout #4 to show them how the council decided to draw districts in the Town Council Redistricting Plan. Ask groups of students to count and analyze the data presented. Debrief with the questions on the handout.

6. Explain to students that the Athena town council's plan met with controversy, and a meeting was held to gather citizen input. Show students the plan that was proposed by the Hispanic and Latin-American Association on Student Handout #5. Have student groups assess the fairness of this plan from different perspectives. Ask different groups of students to represent different ethnic/racial groups and prepared themselves to answer the questions on the handout.

Optional Activities

1. Ask one or more students to report on the practice of gerrymandering.
2. Assign students different periods in U.S. history, and ask them to research and report on voting rights at those times. Ask students to briefly present their history to the class in chronological order.

Recommended Historical Periods

- 1776: Declaration of Independence signed
- 1788: U.S. Constitution in effect
- 1848: Women's Rights Convention
- 1868: Fourteenth Amendment ratified

1870: Fifteenth Amendment ratified
1920: Nineteenth Amendment ratified
1964: Twenty-fourth Amendment ratified
1965: Voting Rights Act passed
1970: Voting Rights Act amended
1971: Twenty-sixth Amendment ratified
1982: Voting Rights Act amended to include Section 2

About the Author

Gayle Mertz has focused her professional career on developing K-12 curriculum and conducting teacher training. Law-related education, conflict resolution, social justice, and human diversity issues comprise areas of particular interest and specialization. Mertz has written and contributed to many educational publications including *Social Education*, *Education for the Young Learner*, *Update on Law-Related Education*, *Update on the Courts*, and the *I'm the People and Lawyers in the Classroom* programs. She is author of *Conflict in Context: Understanding Local to Global Security*, a high-school curriculum book that was published in January 2001 by Educators for Social Responsibility. Mertz has directed educational programs and projects for the Colorado Supreme Court, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice, among other governmental agencies. She is a recipient of the Boulder, Colo., Pacesetter in Education award and the American Bar Association's Isidore Starr Excellence in Education Award.

