



## CULMINATING ACTIVITY: DEMOCRACY, TAKING A STAND

(45-60 minutes)

### OBJECTIVE

Students learn the characteristics of a democratic society and explore their roles as citizens.

### MATERIALS

*Teens Pressure Lawmakers for Tobacco-Free Schools* handout

### GET READY

- ✓ Copy the *Teens Pressure Lawmakers for Tobacco-Free Schools* handout for each of your students.

### INSTRUCTIONS

- ✓ Ask your students, *What words come to mind when you think of the word 'democracy'?* List the students' ideas on the board.
- ✓ Read each of the following statements one at a time and ask students to stand if they agree with the statement: *Democracy is a type of government. Democracy is a way of living with each other in our communities, states, and nation. People's participation in public life is the essential ingredient in democratic government. Only adults can effect changes in our democracy.*
- ✓ Discuss your students' responses to the above exercise: *Democracy is both a way of living in society and our form of government. While citizens must be 18 or older to vote, there are many ways that youth can effect changes in our society.*
- ✓ Ask your students to read the true story on the handout, *Teens Pressure Lawmakers for Tobacco-Free Schools*. Discuss the vocabulary

words in italics (or ask the students to look up words that are unfamiliar to them).

- ✓ After reading the story, ask your students to form pairs to discuss and write answers to the following questions: 1) What strategies did the students use to bring about the successful passage of the bill? 2) What personal qualities or characteristics were necessary for the students' success? 3) These students took a stand for a cause they believed in. Can you think of other causes for which you might take a stand? Write down at least three.
- ✓ Finally, invite students to stand and tell about a time when they, or other students they know or have heard about, took a stand for a cause they believed in and worked to create change.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ★ *What are the characteristics of a democratic society?*
- ★ *What qualifies America as a democratic society?*
- ★ *What keeps some countries from being considered a democracy?*
- ★ *What rights and responsibilities do you have as an American citizen?*
- ★ *What strategies did the students in the handout use to bring about change?*
- ★ *What personal qualities or characteristics were necessary for the students to achieve their goal?*
- ★ *What are causes for which you might take a stand? Why are you passionate about these causes?*



## TEENS PRESSURE LAWMAKERS FOR TOBACCO-FREE SCHOOLS

In the town of Sandwich, Massachusetts, nearly thirty students started what turned into a successful two year campaign to lobby Massachusetts lawmakers to pass a law banning tobacco on school grounds. Since this law was passed in 1987, many other states have passed similar laws. Here is how this group of committed teens made a difference.

Working with the health teacher, William Sangster, the teens met after school and brainstormed strategies to use in their quest to deter youth from taking up the smoking habit. To begin, they wrote letters to all the *legislators* in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Working with a key *ally*, State Representative Peter Morin, a bill was created. Students attended *committee hearings* for the proposed bill, and testified before the House. April Swartz, a quiet member of Students Against Smoking challenged committee members with this argument: “If someone came to you asking to stop teen suicide, everyone would be in favor of that idea. Our bill is the first step to slowing down a form of teen suicide. We need your help. Vote in favor of our bill for the children of tomorrow.”

April had a sound argument, but the opposition didn’t buy it. The *legislation* was opposed by the Mass. Department of Education who argued that local school boards should

decide such policies, rather than the state. But the major stumbling block was that the Committee chairman insisted that school faculty smoking be banned as well, a position that the Mass. Federation of Teachers vowed to fight. The bill was defeated.

The students might have given up, but in the summer reporters from a local newspaper and TV station wanted to feature their cause. The teens went back to Mr. Sangster and asked if they could re-file the bill and keep working on it. They did, though the new bill reflected a compromise with the Committee chairman and now included banning smoking for teachers as well.

By the time the bill cleared the full House and landed in the Senate, senators were being pressured to remove teachers from the legislation. Now the students geared up for *lobbying* the senators. Mr. Sangster paired the students and set them free to talk with every legislator they could find. The impact was evident, most notably in the Speaker of the House deciding to be a co-sponsor of the bill. As a result, the bill received strong *bipartisan* support. In the end, the bill passed, but did not include banning smoking for teachers. The vote was 112-27. This bill was the first piece of legislation ever passed in the history of the Massachusetts legislature sponsored directly by kids.

Adapted from Lesko, W. (1992). *No Kidding Around!: America’s Young Activists are Changing Our World and You Can Too*. Kensington, MD: Information USA, Inc.