

Spending Priorities

Objective:

Students will be able to articulate how tax dollars are allocated between different spending categories.

Description:

Teacher facilitates an all-class activity primarily focused on individual federal income taxes.

1. On a very large piece of paper or multiple pieces of paper taped together, the teacher draws 13 vertical bars of equal height.
2. Label the bars to coincide with NPP's federal spending categories: Social Security, Unemployment & Labor; Medicare & Health; Military; Interest on Debt; Food & Agriculture; Veterans' Benefits; Transportation; Education; Energy & Environment; Housing & Community; International Affairs; Government; and Science.
3. As students enter the classroom, hand each one 20 colored stickers or Post-It notes.
4. Once assembled, invite the students to pretend that they have just paid one dollar in federal income taxes.
5. Tell the students that each of their twenty stickers are worth 5 cents of their tax dollar.
6. Briefly describe the bar chart you have created and explain the contents of each spending category. It is *very* important that students understand each spending category. (Note: find the contents in Notes and Sources for Tax Day <http://nationalpriorities.org/en/analysis/2012/taxday-2012/notes-and-sources/>)
7. Invite students to gather around the bar chart and place their stickers on the empty bars to correspond with where they want the federal government to spend their federal income tax dollar. Students may spend their tax dollar in any way they choose. For example, if a student thinks the Education category deserves 30 cents of her taxes, she should place six stickers on the Education bar.
8. Once all students have completed this exercise ask them to take their seats.

9. Ask for students to volunteer to tell the class where they spent their tax dollar. Ask them why they prioritized their spending the way they did. Allow ample time for students to respond to each other.
10. Encourage students to ask follow-up questions about why their peers chose to spend their tax dollars in the ways they did.
11. Following this discussion, ask students to write individually for three to five minutes in response to the following questions:
 - ⤴ To which spending category did you give the most stickers? Why?
 - ⤴ To which spending category did you give the fewest stickers? Why?
 - ⤴ Was it difficult to decide how to spend your tax dollar? Why or why not?
12. At the conclusion of this writing exercise, distribute Figure 6.8: Where Your 2011 Income-Tax Dollar Went. You may also direct students to NPP's Tax Chart / Tax Receipt (<http://nationalpriorities.org/en/interactive-data/taxday/>).
13. Engage the students with the following questions:
 - Do your own priorities match our government's current spending priorities? How are they similar or different?
 - What do you think of our government's priorities?
 - Would members of this class be able to agree on how their taxes are spent?
 - Do you think Congress has a difficult time agreeing on how to spend the trillions of dollars these stickers represent? Why or why not?