What Makes a Good Law?
Understanding rules and laws

Grade Level: Secondary School

New Jersey Standards:

6.1A6 Apply problem-solving skills to national, state, or local issues and propose reasoned solutions.
6.2A3 Analyze how individual responsibility and commitment to law are related to the stability of American society.
6.2A5 Discuss how participation in civic and political life can contribute to the attainment of individual and public good.
6.2B2 Propose and justify new local, state, or federal governmental policies on a variety of contemporary issues . . .
6.2C6 Explain the federal and state legislative process and analyze the influence of lobbying, advocacy groups, the media, and campaign finance on the development of laws and regulations.

Objectives:

1. Identify the purpose and intent of a rule or law
2. Analyze how interest groups influence law-making
3. Analyze the difficulty in writing a good rule or law
4. Evaluate what makes a good rule or law
5. Apply the skills needed to write a good rule or law

Lesson Length: Two class periods

Materials:

Handout 1—“No Cell Phones Allowed in the School Building”
Handout 2—Who Can Have a Cell Phone at School?

Lesson Overview:

This lesson will ask students analyze the criteria used to create a good rule or law. They will look at two New Jersey statutes that determine who runs our local school districts (NJSA 18A:10-1) and the powers and duties of local school boards (NJSA 18A:11-1). They will study a proposed school board policy banning cell phones in district schools. In small groups students will devise arguments to support their position when they present their case to the school board members. Following the role playing simulation, small groups will draft a bill on a current issue that needs to be addressed.
Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

What makes a good rule or law? On a flip chart or whiteboard write the heading—A Good Rule or Law Should Meet the Following Criteria. Then challenge students to create a list of criteria that is needs to be met in a good law. Discuss each requirement and why it is necessary. (Note: the list should include 1. worthwhile purpose; 2. fair; 3. clear; 4. possible to follow; 5. enforceable; 6. consistent with constitutionally guaranteed individual rights; 7. flexible.)

Activities/Procedures:

1. Ask students to answer the following questions and after hearing their responses, tell them the New Jersey statute that answers the question.

   A. Who runs our local school district?

   **NJSA 18A:10-1. Conduct of districts**
   18A:10-1. The schools of each school district shall be conducted, by and under the supervision of a board of education, which shall be a body corporate and which shall be constituted and governed, as provided by this title, for a type I, type II or regional school district, as the case may be, but the State board pursuant to an administrative order issued by authority of section 15 of P.L. 1975, c.212 (C.18A:7A-15) may create a State-operated school district which shall be conducted by a State district superintendent.
   
   L.1967, c.271; amended 1987, c.399,s21.

   (Examples of “State-operated” school districts are Jersey City, Newark, Paterson, and Camden, NJ school districts.)

   B. What are the powers and duties of local school boards?

   **NJSA 18A:11-1. General mandatory powers and duties**
   
   . . . d. Perform all acts and do all things, consistent with law and the rules of the state board, necessary for the lawful and proper conduct, equipment and maintenance of the public schools of the district.
   
   L.1967, c.271.

2. Read Handout 1 which presents a proposed school district policy and Handout 2 which addresses how various interest groups may be affected if the policy goes into effect.

3. Divide the class into groups of nine. Have all the 1's, 2's, etc. meet in small groups to determine how they will lobby for or against the proposed bill. Each group represents an interest group that will be affected by the proposed law. Allow students 20 minutes to assemble the arguments they will use when they bring their case before the school
board. Have them choose one group member to present their case to the school board.

4. Choose five to seven students to serve as School Board members.

5. Have the individuals representing the interest groups present their arguments explaining why they support or oppose the board policy.

6. After hearing arguments from all parties, the Board of Education members deliberate and vote for or against the policy.

7. Discuss whether the decision made by the Board of Education members was valid. Ask the following questions about the validity of the law.
   - What is the purpose of the law?
   - Is it fair?
   - Is it clear?
   - Can citizens be expected to follow it?
   - Can it be enforced?
   - Is it consistent with constitutionally guaranteed individual rights?
   - Is it flexible?
   - Does it meet the criteria of a good law? Why or why not?

Closure:

After participating in the “No Cell Phones in the School Building” role-playing simulation, the students should have a greater appreciation of how difficult it is to write good policy or legislation. They should have observed that individual needs and attitudes have a tremendous influence on how people view legislation. Ask them to draft a rule or law. Working in small groups or four or five, students will rewrite a current law that they consider unfair or unenforceable; draft a new school policy that could be effective in solving a problem in the building or school district; or draft a bill on any issue that they feel needs addressing. Be sure to follow the criteria listed on the chart: What makes a good rule or law. Take into consideration different points of view on the policy and compromises that may be necessary to make an effective rule or law. Share their drafts with the group.

Assessment:

Teacher will grade the small group presentation of arguments in the role-playing simulation part of the lesson. A grade can also be assigned to the draft of each group’s proposed rule or law. Base the assessment on how well they meet the criteria for a good law. The teacher can create a rubric that includes the good rule/law criteria for the students to use as a grading guide.

Extension:

Invite a Board of Education member to the class. Ask them to explain board policy on cell phones in schools.
Handout 1

“No Cell Phones Allowed in the School Building”

The No Name School District has proposed that because of the disruptions that cell phones cause in the school learning community, cell phones will be banned in all school buildings in the district. Any person discovered using a cell phone will have their phone confiscated and turned into the school principal. To recover a student phone, parents will have to come to the principal’s office and request the return of the phone. The principal will then discuss the importance of student's obeying the board policy of no cell phones in school buildings.

At all entrances to the school building the following sign is posted:

NO CELL PHONES ALLOWED IN THIS BUILDING
Handout 2

Who Can Have a Cell Phone at School?
Different Views on the Proposed Policy

1. John Reilly, a teacher, is a volunteer fire fighter. When a fire is called into his fire station, the district chief notifies him by cell phone to report to the fire.

2. Sally Vassar, a 10th grade student, is a diabetic. She needs her cell phone in case she runs out of insulin or is feeling ill and needs to contact her mother.

3. Tom Talent, a freshman, lives with his father who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome after surviving an IED attack in Iraq. Tom calls during his lunch period and at the end of the school day to assure his dad that he is okay and that he will be staying for an after school activity or coming home immediately after school. His father needs to be assured of his son’s safety.

4. Tina Taylor, a senior, is distracted by students receiving calls, taking pictures, searching the web and text messaging during class. She finds it hard to concentration on the lesson when students are disrupting the learning environment with their phone use.

5. Mr. Banner, a teacher, has two young children in daycare and sometimes calls the center during his non-teaching periods to check on the well-being of his children. However, as a classroom teacher he frequently has to tell students to stop text messaging and playing web games during his class. He feels the phones are not conducive to the classroom learning he is trying to provide.

6. The school principal, Ms. Cannery, frequently travels between the board office and her building for meetings. Often when she is in the building, she finds it easier to use her cell phone for communications rather than to wait for an open line on the school phone system.

7. Mr. Mundy works in a portable classroom that does not have phone service. He needs his cell phone to call for security in the main building if an uncontrollable problem arises in his classroom.

8. Students Teri and Mike need their cell phones to send text messages to each other during class.

9. Numerous parents want their children to carry cell phones in case there is a family or national emergency. They want to be able to have instant contact with their children if a need arises.