Unit 3: Is Decriminalizing Marijuana Good Policy for Illinois?

Overview

According to state and federal law, possessing marijuana is illegal in Illinois. Many people, however, are concerned that punishment for possessing marijuana is too harsh—especially those for possessing small amounts of marijuana. In Illinois, the penalty for possessing less than 2.5 grams of marijuana (about one-tenth of an ounce) is 30 days in jail and/or a fine of up to $1,500; for possession of more than 30 grams, the penalty is one to three years in a state penitentiary and fines of up to $25,000. Some cities, including Chicago, have passed ordinances decriminalizing possession of small amounts of marijuana. Rather than arresting people, police officers can write a ticket. Not everyone agrees that decriminalization is a good idea, however. The disagreements about decriminalization are the focus of this unit, which looks at the possibility of extending Chicago’s decriminalization policy to the entire state of Illinois.

Focus Question

- Should Illinois enact a law that would decriminalize possession of marijuana for people age 18 and older in possession of 15 grams or less?

Objectives

- Identify the thesis statements of cartoons about marijuana.
- Evaluate arguments for and against a state law decriminalizing possession of marijuana for people age 18 and older in possession of 15 grams or less.
- Take and defend a position on whether decriminalizing possession of small amounts of marijuana is good policy for Illinois.

Materials

3A: Activity: Analyzing Cartoons
3B: Handout: Cartoons
3C: Activity: Each One Teach One Activity on Decriminalizing Marijuana
3D: Handout: Each One Teach One Notes Chart
3E: Each One Teach One Cards
3F: Activity: Analyzing Arguments for and Against Decriminalizing Marijuana
3G: Handout: Senate Staff Assignment
3H: Reading: Interviews with Advocates
3I: Activity: Making the Case: A Senate Debate
3J: Handout: Instructions for Senate Debate
Decriminalizing Marijuana: Selected Resources
3A: Activity: Analyzing Cartoons

Objective
This activity introduces the unit focus question and engages students in analyzing two cartoons on the topic. The cartoons provide students with an argument on each side of the marijuana issue: (1) that marijuana, while perhaps not harmful in and of itself, leads to the use of other, more dangerous drugs and (2) that punishing violators of marijuana laws is more expensive than allowing people to use the drug.

Procedure
- Post the focus question for this unit: Should Illinois enact a law that would decriminalize possession of marijuana for people age 18 and older in possession of 15 grams or less? Ask if there is anything they don’t understand about the focus question. You may need to help students distinguish between decriminalizing marijuana and legalizing it. If marijuana is decriminalized, it will still be against the law to own it, but it will be a civil offense rather than a criminal one; the person in possession of marijuana would be issued a ticket rather than arrested. Students may not have a good idea of how much 15 grams is; 15 grams is .52911 ounces, or about as much as half a slice of bread.
- Explain that students will begin their study of the focus question with two cartoons presenting different views on marijuana. Introduce the idea that a cartoonist starts with a thesis statement, just as students do when they are writing an essay. The thesis statement is the idea they want to convey through the cartoon. They then use the tools of the cartoonist—symbolism, labeling, exaggeration, analogy, and irony, among others—to convey that thesis statement. If necessary, explain these tools:
  - **Symbolism** – Symbols are images used to represent something else; for example, Uncle Sam is often used in cartoons to represent the United States.
  - **Exaggeration** – Physical characteristics of people or things are exaggerated to make a point. Cartoonists have found something to exaggerate in virtually every President’s appearance, whether it is President Obama’s ears or President Reagan’s hair.
  - **Labeling** – People and objects are labeled to make it clear who or what they represent.
  - **Analogy** – One thing or situation is likened to another thing or situation that might otherwise seem unrelated. For example, a recent cartoon compared budget cutting by Congress to a butcher cutting up a side of beef.
  - **Irony** – The difference between the way things are and the way things ought or should be is expressed. A well-known historic cartoon showed immigrants from many different nations building a wall to keep Chinese immigrants out.
- Distribute **Handout 3B** and ask students to work in pairs to analyze the cartoons about marijuana. Their goal is to determine what each cartoonist’s thesis statement is. The questions on the handout will help them do that.
- When students have completed their work, discuss each cartoon as a class, using the following questions:
  - In your opinion, what is the primary message of this cartoon? Does it support or oppose marijuana and/or its decriminalization? What elements of the cartoon lead you to this conclusion?
  - Did you find this cartoon persuasive? Why or why not?
• What arguments germane to the focus question of this unit can you identify in this cartoon?

- Using the arguments students identified in the cartoon, start class lists of arguments for and against decriminalizing marijuana. Tell students that, in the next activity, they will be adding to these lists as well as gathering information to evaluate these and other arguments on both sides of the focus question.
What objects do you see in this photo?
Are any of the objects symbols? That is, do they represent something else?
What do the labels in the cartoon tell you about the cartoonist’s point of view?
Is the cartoonist drawing an analogy between marijuana and something else?
Does the cartoonist use irony? That is, does the cartoonist compare things as they are with things as they should be?
What is the thesis statement of this cartoon?

Source: CartoonStock.com.

What objects do you see in this photo?
Are any of the objects symbols? That is, do they represent something else?
What do the labels in the cartoon tell you about the cartoonist’s point of view?
Is the cartoonist drawing an analogy between marijuana and something else?
Does the cartoonist use irony? That is, does the cartoonist compare things as they are with things as they should be?
What is the thesis statement of this cartoon?

Source: Adam Zyglis, Buffalo News (June 8, 2012), www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/8911d7b1-9103-4e7d-a07b-61e6f4314468.html.
3C: Activity: Each One Teach One: Facts and Opinions on Decriminalizing Marijuana

Objective
Having been introduced to the focus question and at least one argument on each side of the issue, students in this activity deepen their understanding of the issue through an “each one teach one” activity. Each student receives a card containing information about marijuana and its decriminalization. Students teach the information from their card to their classmates, considering how they could use what they learned to argue for or against decriminalizing marijuana.

Procedure
- Remind students of the unit focus question. Ask: What do you need to know in order to decide whether such a law would be good policy for the state of Illinois? Accept all student answers, posting them on the board.
- Inform students that they will be teaching and learning information about marijuana. Explain the Each One Teach One activity to students. Each student will receive a card with information about legalizing marijuana. There are 14 different cards, so in most classes some students will have the same card. (If time allows, you might have students with the same card caucus briefly before the teaching and learning begin so they can discuss how they will teach the information on their card to classmates.) Each student’s job is to teach the information from his/her card to classmates and to learn the information from classmates’ cards. The teaching and learning should be done one-on-one; that is, students will pair up, teach and learn, and then move on individually to conference with another classmate. Distribute Handout 3D and explain that students will use this chart to record the information they learn; as they record information, they could use that information to argue for decriminalizing marijuana, against decriminalizing marijuana, or both. Answer any questions students have and then set them to work with the two following pieces of advice:
  - Don’t just read from your card. Share the information in your own words and have a conversation about that information with your classmate.
  - You will have 15 minutes to do this teaching. Afterwards, I will ask you to report on what you learned, so good notes will be important.
- As students are teaching and learning, remind them not to form larger groups (as necessary). Give a two-minute warning before time is up. When time is up, ask students to return to their desks.
- Use the following questions to debrief the activity:
  - What facts did you learn about the marijuana issue?
  - What surprised you?
  - What information was not clear to you?
  - What did you agree with? What did you disagree with?
  - What information that you learned could be used to argue for decriminalizing marijuana? Against it? For both sides?
Note: Students may need help differentiating between (1) decriminalization and legalization, (2) medical marijuana laws and decriminalization laws, and (3) state and federal laws.
• Decriminalization means that someone possessing marijuana will not be charged with a crime. However, they may still be charged (ticketed) with a civil offense. In other words, possessing marijuana is still illegal but punished less severely. Legalization means that possessing marijuana is no longer against the law. There is no punishment—civil or criminal—associated with possessing marijuana.

• Medical marijuana, as noted on one of the Each One Teach One cards, is marijuana prescribed by a doctor to treat certain illnesses. Medical marijuana is legal in 17 states and the District of Columbia (the specifics of the laws vary from state to state). With a prescription, a person can be in possession of marijuana completely legally according to state law. Decriminalization laws apply more broadly, since they cover marijuana held for recreational use as well as medical use. But possessing marijuana is still a civil (ticketed) offense under decriminalization statutes.

• All of the reforms to marijuana law to date have been at the state level. This has created a conflict between state and federal law. Whether a state has legalized medical marijuana or decriminalized possession of marijuana for all users, possessing marijuana is still a federal crime. In the case of Gonzales v. Raich (2005), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld enforcement of U.S. drug laws in states that have legalized medical marijuana.

• Ask students to return to the list of things they would need to know in order to decide whether law decriminalizing possession of small amounts of marijuana would be good policy for the state of Illinois. Check off items that this activity covered. Encourage interested students to research items that are still unknown and explain that the next activity may also provide some of the needed information. If students have inferred pro and con arguments from the information gained in the Each One Teach One activity, these arguments could be added to the class list.
3D: Each One Teach One Notes Chart

**Directions:** You will be teaching and learning from your classmates. You will meet with one classmate at a time. Decide whether each piece of information could be used to argue for or against decriminalizing marijuana. Then make notes in the right or left column below. If you aren't sure or think it could be used to argue both sides, put the information in the center column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information that Could Be Used to Argue for Decriminalization</th>
<th>Not Sure/ Both</th>
<th>Information that Could Be Used to Argue Against Decriminalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
# 3E: Each One Teach One Cards

## Do Americans Favor Changing Marijuana Laws?
As of late 2011, a majority of Americans favor legalizing marijuana. A 2011 Angus Reed poll showed that 55% of Americans supported legalization of marijuana; 40% oppose it. A Gallup poll earlier the same year showed a smaller margin—40% supporting, 46% opposing. The support has increased steadily since 1969, when only 12% of Americans thought marijuana should be legal.

## Who Favors Changing Marijuana Laws?
Some groups favor legalizing marijuana more strongly than others. A Gallup poll showed that liberals, moderates, independents, and Democrats all favor legalization. Republicans and Conservatives do not. Support for legalizing marijuana is stronger among younger Americans than among older ones. Men favor legalization, while women do not. The South is the one region where a majority of people oppose legalization.

## What Is Marijuana?
Marijuana is the dried flowers and leaves of the cannabis plant. Marijuana’s psychoactive properties result from the compound tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Different parts of the cannabis plant have different levels of THC. Different types of cannabis plants also have different levels of THC. According to police reports, the level of THC in marijuana confiscated in drug arrests has risen sharply since the 1980s.

## How Common Is Marijuana Use?
Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal drug in the United States. According to a government-sponsored survey, in 2009, 28.5 million Americans over the age of 12 had used marijuana at least once in the prior year. A 2010 study showed that 13.7% of eighth-graders, 27.5% of 10th-graders, and 34.8% of twelfth-graders had used marijuana at least once in the past year.

## What Does Illinois Law Say about Marijuana?
Possession of marijuana is a crime in Illinois. The seriousness of the crime depends on how much marijuana the person has. Possessing small quantities—up to 2.5 grams—is a class C misdemeanor. If convicted, a person can be sentenced to spend up to 30 days in jail and/or pay a fine of up to $1500. Possessing progressively larger quantities is a progressively more serious crime with more severe penalties.

## What Is Chicago’s Marijuana Ordinance?
In mid-2012, Chicago City Council passed an ordinance that decriminalized possession of small amounts (up to 15 grams) of marijuana. Marijuana is still illegal, but possessing it is a civil offense, not a crime. Thus, a person caught with a small amount of the drug is ticketed rather than arrested. The cost of the tickets can range from $250 to $500. People actually smoking marijuana, those under 17, those who believe intend to sell the drug, and those carrying the drug in parks or on school grounds are still arrested.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Does Federal Law Say about Marijuana?</th>
<th>What Do Other States’ Laws Say about Marijuana?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The federal Controlled Substances Act puts drugs into five groups or “schedules.” The classification is based on potential for abuse, safety of use, and whether there is an accepted medical use for the drug. Marijuana is a Schedule I drug, deemed to have high potential for abuse and no accepted medical use for the drug. No matter what state or local law says, possessing marijuana is a federal crime. This is true even if the marijuana is for medical use. In the case of <em>Gonzales v. Raich</em> (2005), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld enforcement of U.S. drug laws even in states that have legalized medical marijuana.</td>
<td>In 2012, voters in two states—Colorado and Washington—voted to legalize marijuana. Thirteen other states have decriminalized marijuana. In those states, a person who is caught for the first time with a small amount of marijuana is ticketed rather than arrested. The details of these laws vary widely from state to state.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Are Marijuana’s Short-Term Effects?</th>
<th>What Are Marijuana’s Long-Term Effects?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| According to U.S. government reports, marijuana use impairs short-term memory, slows reaction time, and reduces coordination. It also alters judgment and increases the heart rate. Based on animal research, government reports say that exposure to THC (the psychoactive component of marijuana) in key periods of brain development can alter the brain. These key periods include during pregnancy, in infancy, and in adolescence. Marijuana use also alters the user’s mood, causing euphoria or calmness. Using large quantities can cause anxiety and paranoia. | According to U.S. government reports, long-term marijuana use can lead to the following problems:  
- Addiction  
- Poor performance in school or on the job  
- Respiratory problems  
- Psychosis (in vulnerable individuals)  
- Impaired decision-making  
Others disagree. The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws says that marijuana is far less dangerous than alcohol or tobacco. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have Any Bills to Decriminalize Marijuana Been Introduced at the Federal Level?</th>
<th>How Would Decriminalizing Marijuana Affect the State Government?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, early in 2013, two bills were introduced that would change federal law having to do with marijuana. Representative Jared Polis (D-Colorado) proposed a bill that would remove marijuana from the federal Controlled Substances Act. States could decide how to handle marijuana within their borders. Representative Earl Blumenauer (D-Oregon) has proposed a bill that would levy taxes on the sale of legally grown marijuana. Polis and Blumenauer believe Congress must act to end conflict between states and the federal government.</td>
<td>Issuing tickets for marijuana possession may raise revenue. Many marijuana cases involving possession of small amounts are dropped. The government does not collect any fines. With the issuing of tickets, fines would be collected. In Chicago alone, as many as 18,000 people annually are arrested for possession of a small amount of marijuana. This could generate millions in fines. In addition, each arrest requires up to four hours of police time. Issuing a ticket and testing the drug would require only about a half-hour. Thus, the police should have additional time available.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Is Medical Marijuana?</th>
<th>Does Decriminalizing Marijuana Increase Drug Use?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical marijuana is marijuana prescribed by a doctor to treat certain illnesses. For example, marijuana has been used to treat glaucoma, nausea caused by stomach disorders or chemotherapy, chronic pain, and seizure disorders. Medical marijuana is legal in 17 states and the District of Columbia. Medical marijuana laws vary widely from state to state. Possessing marijuana is a federal crime even if the marijuana is for medical use. In the case of Gonzales v. Raich (2005), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld enforcement of U.S. drug laws in states that have legalized medical marijuana.</td>
<td>This question is hard to answer with certainty. Some studies seem to show that drug policy—whether strict or lenient—has little effect on the percent of people who use drugs. But a study from Alaska in the 1970s through 1990s, when the law changed several times, suggests that stricter drug laws do cut down on drug use.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3F: Activity: Analyzing Arguments for and against Decriminalizing Marijuana

Objective
In this activity, students take on the roles of staff to a member of the Illinois Senate. They read interviews with a supporter and an opponent of decriminalizing marijuana. In small groups, they decide on the three strongest arguments on each side of the issue.

Procedures
1. Draw students’ attention to the class lists of pro and con arguments and tell them they are going to be adding to the lists and evaluating the arguments today.
2. Distribute Handout 3G and go over the directions with students. They will be acting as staff for a member of the Illinois Senate, who has asked the staff to identify the three strongest arguments on each side of the physician-assisted suicide bill. The staff has done research and interviewed advocates on both sides of the issue. In groups of four or five, students should read the interviews (Reading 3H) and then discuss the arguments on both sides of the focus question. They can refer to their notes from the previous activity.
3. When groups have completed their work, ask each to report on the arguments they identified as being the strongest. Tally the “votes” on the class lists of arguments.
4. Tell students that they will put the work they have done today in practice in the next activity, when they are “promoted” to members of the Illinois Senate.
**3G: Handout: State Senate Staff Assignment**

**Directions:** You are on the staff of Illinois State Senator Carolyn Johnson. Senator Johnson has not decided to vote on decriminalization of marijuana. She has asked the staff to come up with a list of the three strongest arguments for decriminalizing marijuana and the three strongest arguments against. She has also said the staff can weigh in on how they think she should vote.

The staff has done a lot of research on the issue. You have read background information, attended public hearings, and conducted interviews.

Once you have read through the interview notes, you and the other staff members must come up the three strongest arguments on each side of the issue. Record the arguments your group agrees on below. Then discuss how you think Senator Johnson should vote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongest Arguments for Decriminalization</th>
<th>Strongest Arguments against Decriminalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Staff Recommendation:
3H: Reading: Interviews with Advocates

Interview with M. McCall, Committee for Drug Law Reform

Staff: Mr. McCall, why do you support decriminalization of marijuana?

McCall: The most important reason for my position is the idea of proportionality. That is, the punishment should fit the crime. In the case of Weems v. United States, the Supreme Court has upheld the idea that proportionality is part of our Eighth Amendment protections. The Eighth Amendment says that “excessive fines” shall not be imposed. It also bans “cruel and unusual punishment.” The fines and jail sentences levied against people who have been in possession of a small amount of marijuana are definitely excessive. Plus, a criminal conviction for something so minor can ruin a person’s life. Possessing and using marijuana hurts no one.

Staff: Doesn’t marijuana use hurt the user? And isn’t it a gateway drug, leading to use of more serious drugs.

McCall: I don’t believe it does. Tobacco, alcohol, and fast food are certainly more harmful. According to the National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws, “Around 50,000 people die each year from alcohol poisoning. Similarly, more than 400,000 deaths each year are attributed to tobacco smoking. By comparison, marijuana is nontoxic and cannot cause death by overdose. According to the prestigious European medical journal, The Lancet, ‘The smoking of cannabis, even long term, is not harmful to health . . . It would be reasonable to judge cannabis as less of a threat . . . than alcohol or tobacco’.” In very rare cases, marijuana may have some bad effects on the user, but in general it does not. As to the “gateway” argument, research suggests the opposite may be true. When you can buy marijuana legally, you’re not out on the street buying drugs from a dealer who can also offer you meth, cocaine, or other dangerous drugs. A study compared drug use in Amsterdam, where marijuana is legal, and in San Francisco, where marijuana remains illegal (except for medicinal use). The marijuana users in San Francisco were much more likely to use cocaine, meth, and opiates than the marijuana users in Amsterdam. And by the way, teen use of marijuana in the Netherlands, where it is legal, is lower than in the United States.

Staff: Does decriminalization lead to more use of marijuana?

McCall: The studies I’ve seen say no. Studies in states that have decriminalized marijuana show little increase compared to the rest of the country. That’s probably because most people who don’t smoke marijuana don’t want to. Only a few stay away from marijuana because they fear breaking the drug laws.

Staff: What other reasons are there to support decriminalization?
McCall: The so-called “War on Drugs” is immensely costly. In 2005, a panel of esteemed economists wrote to President Bush, Congress, governors, and state legislators. The panel included several Nobel prize winners. They advocated legalizing marijuana and estimated it would save $7.7 billion per year in state and federal law enforcement costs. Given the tight budgets governments face today, those savings could help keep more important programs—including drug education and rehab—going. In addition, allowing farmers to grow cannabis legally would provide jobs in depressed rural areas.

Another problem related to the “War on Drugs” is the overburdened court system. Decriminalizing marijuana could ease some of the pressure on the courts.

Also, we know that drug trafficking is the underlying cause of a lot of violent crime in our country and in Mexico. Decriminalizing marijuana could decrease drug trafficking and violence. Those are goals everyone can get behind.

Staff: Do you see this has a question of individual freedom?

McCall: Yes, I do. I personally do not smoke marijuana. But I do believe that criminalizing possession of a substance like marijuana is a violation of individual rights. And there is another rights issue. Marijuana laws allow police officers to use marijuana possession as a “wedge” to arrest people they want to get off the streets. This strategy is most often used against minorities. Thus, the enforcement of marijuana laws violates equal protection.

Interview with B. Lang, Project SAM

Staff: Ms. Lang, why do you oppose decriminalizing marijuana?

Lang: Our organization believes that drugs are a plague on our society. Many of our problems today result from drugs and the drug trade. Any policy that encourages drug use is not good for Illinois.

Staff: Supporters say marijuana is not harmful and that tobacco and alcohol are worse. Why do you think marijuana is harmful?

Lang: First of all, marijuana is a gateway to use of other, more harmful drugs. Once you’ve tried marijuana, it’s only a small step toward trying cocaine or meth. A report by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse stated that marijuana users are 85 times more likely than non-users to try cocaine. Also, I would dispute the argument that marijuana itself is not harmful. People who use marijuana are more likely to drop out of school, miss work or perform badly, and have relationship and health problems. For teenagers, whose brains are still developing, there can be long-term effects on the structure and function of their brains. These effects last even when the people quit smoking marijuana as adults. Like smoking
tobacco, smoking marijuana can also have effects on the heart and lungs. Smoking marijuana can lead to addiction, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Decriminalizing marijuana will suggest to young people and others that these health risks are not important.

Staff: What do you say to the people who say that decriminalizing marijuana would reduce other crimes?

Lang: I don’t believe that argument is valid, and neither does the Drug Enforcement Administration. There would still be a black market for marijuana to serve those under the age of 18. In addition, other drugs would still be illegal. Thus, illegal drug trafficking and the violence that goes with it would still remain.

We also argue that decriminalization will not create farming jobs. Production is not being legalized. If it were, pot-growing would come out in the open and a small number of “factory farms” would be able to meet the demand at a fairly low price. Small, illegal marijuana growers might actually lose their jobs with decriminalization—not that we care about that.

Staff: Don’t you think that the penalties for possessing marijuana are out of proportion to the crime itself? Doesn’t this violate basic notions about fairness?

Lang: People who use marijuana know that it’s illegal, and they can easily find out what the penalties are. So I don’t think that is unfair—they knowingly take the risk when they use marijuana. On the other hand, strong penalties can give the justice system leverage. At-risk youth may agree to enter rehab if threatened with time in juvenile jail.

Staff: What other reasons are there to oppose decriminalization?

Lang: We believe decriminalization will lead to more use of marijuana. It’s only logical that people who are afraid of being arrested will use marijuana when that fear is gone. In Alaska, marijuana was legal between 1975 and 1990. Use of marijuana increased when it was decriminalized. When it was criminalized again, use fell.

Also, even if this bill passes, possession of marijuana will still be illegal under federal law. Illinoisans would still be subject to federal prosecution. And all aspects of selling drugs would still be illegal, so where will people get their “legal” marijuana? It just doesn’t make sense. Change needs to come at the federal level, if it comes at all.
3I: Activity: Making the Case: A State Senate Debate

Objective
Students take on the roles of members of the Illinois Senate, deciding how they will vote on the bill decriminalizing possession of small amounts of marijuana for people over the age of 18. Each student prepares and presents a 90-second speech explaining their planned vote. If persuaded by another Senator that they are wrong, however, students can change their minds before the final vote taken at the end of the debate.

Procedures
1. Tell students that in this lesson they are changing roles, becoming members of the Illinois State Senate preparing to vote on decriminalizing possession of small amounts of marijuana for people over the age of 18.

2. Distribute Handout 3J, and go over the directions. Students are to prepare 90-second speeches that present their position and give the most important reason(s) for their vote. Allow time for students to prepare their speeches.
   Note: You may wish to assign students a role as an actual state senator (a list with links to brief descriptions of the currently serving Senators is available at www.ilga.gov/senate/). If you do assign roles, you may want to have a brief discussion about how a senator’s political party might affect his/her vote. As was highlighted in one of the cards in the Each One Teach One activity, liberals are more likely to favor legalization than conservatives. However, party membership does not dictate one’s position on the issue. Some Republicans do favor decriminalization, while some Democrats oppose it. If you assign roles, an interesting follow-up would be for students to contact their assigned Senators to share their views and find out what the Senators think about decriminalization.

3. When students have written their speeches, have them present on the “floor” of the Senate. Inform students that they can change their minds before the final Senate vote, so they should listen carefully to see if any of their colleagues can sway them. If you have assigned roles, alternate between Democrats and Republicans. Hold strictly to the 90-second limit on speeches.

4. Hold a floor vote and record the results. Declare the bill passed or failed.

5. Debrief the activity by discussing which arguments emerged as the most convincing on both sides of the issue.
You are a member of the Illinois State Senate. Tomorrow, the Senate will be voting on a bill that would decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana for those over the age of 18. You must decide how you will vote and prepare a 90-second speech explaining your vote.

You will not have time to explain all the reasons for your position. Focus on the most important reason—one that you think could convince others to vote with you. If you have time, you may want to refute an opposition argument.

Keep the following guidelines in mind as you write your speech:

- Start by clearly stating your position.
  Example: I rise to oppose decriminalizing marijuana possession.

- State the most important reason for your position. Provide evidence, a quotation, or a story that brings your reasoning to life.
  Example: I oppose this measure because I believe marijuana is a harmful drug. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, marijuana causes a variety of problems, some similar to the health problems caused by smoking tobacco, and can be addictive.

- If time allows, refute the opposition's position. Demonstrate that you can counter their best argument. But be brief and fair.
  Example: The supporters say that marijuana is not harmful, but I have seen young marijuana users in my district who are not succeeding in school or in their careers. Their parents are terribly concerned that these problems are not temporary. Research shows the effects on the brains of young people who use marijuana can persist into adulthood—even if they stop smoking pot.

- Close by asking your audience to vote with you. Appeal to the interests and concerns of those you think can be swayed.
  Example: I ask you to join me in saving young minds by voting against this bill.
Decriminalizing Marijuana: Selected Resources

Sources


**Court Cases**

*Gonzales v. Raich*, 545 U.S. 1 (2005)

*Weems v. United States*, 217 U.S. 349 (1910)

**Information and Analysis**
