

Legislative Program

Topics of Interest

The Indiana General Assembly debates a wide range of bills each year from education, to health, to criminal laws. Many bills are introduced for several years before they garner enough support and attention to be passed into law. Bills can be introduced for a number of reasons. Many bills are introduced in an effort to impact a specific public policy issue. Some bills come about in response to an issue that has impacted a legislator or his constituent personally. Some bills are filed to repeal or amend current law.

For example, in the 2005 session, Sen. Vi Simpson filed Senate Bill 142, which would have required the installation of carbon monoxide detectors in any structures either built or remodeled beginning in 2006. This would apply to buildings with gas utilities or an attached garage, because carbon monoxide is present in the air as a result of burned fuel from household appliances. This is an important policy issue, as the Journal of the American Medical Association reports that carbon monoxide is the number one cause of poisoning deaths in the United States. This bill was passed by the Indiana Senate, but did not receive a hearing in the House of Representatives.

Legislation introduced as a response to a specific problem is very common. House Bill 1776 was introduced by Rep. Lawrence Buell to address how weapons can be seized from a mentally ill person, and the process by which those weapons may be returned. This bill was written to address loopholes in the Indiana law that led to the shooting death of an Indianapolis police officer by a mentally ill individual who was able to possess firearms. This bill became law.

To generally change current law, Sen. Greg Server filed Senate Bill 217, which raised the speed limits on parts of Indiana interstates to 70 miles per hour and on some divided state highways to 60 miles per hour. Indiana law previously limited speeds to 65 miles per hour on interstate highways and 55 miles per hour on other roads. This bill also became law.

Students are encouraged to look at their local community to determine if there are laws that should be enacted to prevent activities from occurring or to encourage other activities, laws that should be changed, or repealed altogether. Once ideas have been identified, the student should research the issue and ask himself if this is something that the state government should be regulating. Sometimes, the answer is that the matter is a federal issue that the state has no control over, like national defense, or that it is a local issue that does not impact the entire state and should be addressed by local governments, like new sidewalks.



The below referenced websites will provide students and advisors with resources to identify potential topics and to research background data.

Websites of interest:

State of Indiana www.ai.org

Indiana General Assembly www.in.gov/legislative

National Conference of State Legislators www.ncsl.org

Council of State Governments www.csg.org

United States Congress www.thomas.loc.gov

Stateline www.stateline.org

Introducing and debating bills

The students' experience is dependent upon the level of effort put into this project prior to the mock legislature weekend. If students are ill-prepared for their own bills, they are less likely to interact with other students on their bills. Advisors should work with students to help them research ideas and data, and prepare how to present a bill.

Students should use common speech parameters when formulating arguments for introducing a bill. In its most basic form, this includes the following rule: Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them.

For instance, if a bill is introduced to change the kindergarten cut-off date from June 1 to August 1 (which occurred in the 2005 legislative session and became law!) the following argument can be formulated:

Tell them what you're going to tell them: Early childhood education has been proven to be one of the most effective tools for student achievement. Indiana has one of the latest kindergarten start dates in the country. As a result, my bill requires students who turn five by August 1st to start school. Current law prohibits students who turn five after June 1st from enrolling in the upcoming school year.

Tell them: By the time a child turns five most of his brain is developed. By barring entry to kindergarten for students who turn five by August 1st, as many states do, Indiana is preventing an estimated 12,000 students a year from getting the same start on their education. If these students have to wait until they are age six to start kindergarten, they are already behind their peers in other states that are the same age. By moving the date that a student can start kindergarten from turning five by June 1st to turning five by August 1st, we are giving Indiana children the same education opportunities as most

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other states give their children. This will lead to higher student performance in later school years.

Tell them what you told them: Indiana has one of the earliest kindergarten cut-off dates in the country, preventing thousands of children from starting their education at the same time as children in other states. Since early education is a factor in later educational achievement for students, I am asking you to support my bill to change the kindergarten cut-off date from June 1st to August 1st.

In debating bills, it is important to try to identify points that those on the opposing side will make. To be well prepared, students should research both sides of the issue. With the above example, one would expect to hear the following counterpoints: moving the kindergarten enrollment date will add 6,000 new kindergartners statewide to potentially overcrowded schools. This will add roughly \$6.5 million in state funding annually to schools in an already strapped financial situation, to say nothing of the costs to individual school corporations, many of whom have recently had to lay off teachers due to a lack of funding.

How does one react to such statements? Do you feel strongly about why this change in law needs to occur? Can you support your position? These are all things to consider.

Student Ethics and behavior

Students are expected to behave in a professional and mature manner. The legislative and judicial branches have graciously allowed us the use of their facilities and expect to find them in the same order in which they were left. Students are not to open desks or files, move about in office areas, or use office equipment. Students are not to chew gum, eat, or drink in any of the chambers, galleries, or committee rooms. Students are to clean up their work areas at the end of each session and to leave the offices the way they found it.

In the past, there have been incidents where these rules were violated. Violations of these policies risk the use of the State House in future years. Bad behavior will not be tolerated. The YMCA Youth and Government program relies on advisors to act as partners in ensuring that rules are followed and that students display the appropriate behavior during the weekend.