

Federal Budget Lesson Plan:

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Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media have created Budget Hero, an engaging online [game](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/2008/05/budget_hero/) that challenges users to balance the federal budget (http://minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/2008/05/budget_hero/). The game relies on numbers and budget forecasts from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and offers users options for balancing the budget like cutting aid to foreign governments or increasing the retirement age to 67.

The game has fun, colorful graphics and sound effects. Each portion of the budget (Defense and Diplomacy, Schools and Kids, etc.) has cards that users can play. A card is a portion of the budget that a player can either add or subtract to the budget. Each card lists the pros and cons of funding the project as well as the likely impact of playing the card.

Players choose three badges, or issues, to support. I chose competitive advantage (education), economic stimulus, and energy. Players can choose badges for the environment, defense, and health, too. Also listed are John McCain and Barack Obama. Since the [election](#) results are in, students who choose these candidates to support are really choosing Republican or Democrat agendas.

Play this game to introduce the idea of federal spending or as a culmination for the federal budget unit. Playing it twice to get a better score is a worthwhile goal. The game introduces budgetary silos and fiscal spending issues, so students will have a hands-on learning experience.

The game admits that its scheme does not take into account the recent Wall Street bailout, but the makers write that they will adjust the game when new data becomes available.

The game has sound and interactive graphics; sound is important to this interactive game, so plan on asking students to bring headphones to the computer lab if you use this lesson. Plan a two-day lesson (45-minute periods) for this activity.

Objective: Explain how federal budget choices impact the nation's policies and national debt.

Materials:

- A computer with sound and the latest version of Flash for each student or each pair of students.
- Headphones for each student.

Procedure:

1. As a whole class, run the introduction and click Get Briefed for the introduction. Click on the Help tab above the game to help students understand the importance of the badges, policy cards, and budget bust points. Be sure to review the When am I done? section and the What do I do when I'm done with my budget? section.
2. Assign students computers and allow them the rest of the class period to play the game.
3. On a separate sheet of paper, ask students to record their three badges, their top three budget cuts and their top three spending priorities. Students should come to class the following day prepared to defend their choices.
4. At the end of class, ask students to submit their budgets and record the debt in 2018, the budget bust year, and the size of the government in 2018 (in dollars). Students should circle the badges they achieved with their budgets. If time and resources permit, ask students to print their budget results.
5. Second day: List the possible badges on the board. As students enter the classroom, ask them to make a hash mark for each badge they selected.
6. Discussion: Which badges are the most popular? Do you agree with these priorities? Which parties lean toward these priorities? Did you have many opportunities to make budget cuts in these areas?
7. On an overhead transparency, list the budget areas: Defense and Diplomacy, Schools and Kids, Science and Nature, Housing and Living, Miscellaneous, Infra-structure, Health Care, Social Security, and Taxes. By a show of hands, write the number of students who had cuts in each of those areas. Again, by a show of hands, record the number of students who had budget increases in those areas.
8. Discussion: What did you find the easiest area to cut? Where is the easiest area to spend?
9. Line-up. Ask students to arrange themselves in the order of most debt to least debt. Re-arrange according to who delayed the budget bust the

longest, and who shrank the government the most. Ask the crowd to raise hands if they achieved one badge, two badges, or all three.

10. Assignment:

- **Create a poll.** Using the data we recorded in class about our budgetary preferences, create a poll designed to discover the class's ideas about personal fiscal responsibility. Is there a connection between the class's personal fiscal responsibility and their federal choices? Prepare a visual and a brief speech (3 minutes) to explain your results.
- **Support your cause.** No one is for out-of-control government spending, but lots of us support ideas like universal health care and aid for the poor. Choose the badge that you support the most and justify your spending in three key areas. Write a letter to the editor supporting your cause and the extra spending for it in the budget.
- **Gravy for all.** This game doesn't take into account the recent financial bail-outs for Wall Street and others. Were these bail-outs smart or are we racing toward the budget bust date? Find out and explain it to the rest of us.
- **Town hall meeting.** With a partner, pick a representative or senator from both sides of the aisle and an issue you and your politician feel strongly about. Prepare the debate and stun us with your persuasive skills. Be prepared to answer questions from the citizens in the audience.