

SEAL-EARNING UNIT

Unit 5: The Legislative Research Project (Civic Knowledge)

Subject	Government, Research, History, Economics, Academic Writing
Grade Level	10-12
Possible Seal Credit	New York Research Project, 1 point (Civic Knowledge column). Can serve as portfolio evidence of civics proficiency in Connecticut. Strengthens any Rhode Island civics project it accompanies.
Time Allotment	6 weeks, one 45-minute class or delegation meeting per week plus independent research and writing.
Youth and Government Process Practiced	The research behind a serious bill: finding and reading the original law, tracing its legislative history, comparing other states, analyzing fiscal impact, and writing the memorandum of support that accompanies a bill into committee.
The Project Standard	New York's Research Project earns 1 Civic Knowledge point for a civics research project approved by the District's Seal of Civic Readiness Committee. Students examine a question through the lens of civics, use varied sources, and present in written, audio/visual, oral or multimodal form. This unit produces a written paper. This unit produces a 2,000 to 3,000 word research paper and a memorandum of support, both built on primary legal sources. Confirm the committee's own length and format expectations before Week 1.

Learning Objectives:

- ▶ Students will be able to turn a policy issue into a research question that a paper can answer.
- ▶ Students will be able to locate and read primary legal sources: the current statute, the bill that created or last amended it, its sponsor's memorandum, and committee or floor records where available.
- ▶ Students will be able to find and compare how at least three other states or jurisdictions address the same issue, using credible secondary sources.
- ▶ Students will be able to analyze fiscal impact with real budget figures and state the assumptions behind an estimate.
- ▶ Students will be able to write a documented research paper with a thesis, evidence, counterargument and conclusion, and distill it into a memorandum of support.

Materials:

- ▶ Handout: "Research Question Builder" (Supporting Document 1)
- ▶ Handout: "Primary Source Finder for State Law" (Supporting Document 2)
- ▶ Handout: "Comparative Jurisdiction Table" (Supporting Document 3)

- ▶ Handout: "Fiscal Analysis Worksheet" (Supporting Document 4)
- ▶ Handout: "Research Paper Outline" (Supporting Document 5) and the Research Paper Rubric (see Assessment section)
- ▶ Memorandum of Support template (Unit 2, Supporting Document 2)
- ▶ Access to the state legislature's website (bill text, sponsor memos, votes), the state budget, the National Conference of State Legislatures, a library database, and a citation style guide (the school's choice)

Pre-Planning:

- ▶ Seal Committee approval of the topic and the format (paper length, citation style) in Week 1.
- ▶ Individual work. The paper is the student's own; a bill team may share the topic but each member writes a separate paper on a different research question.
- ▶ Students who are also doing Unit 1 or Unit 2 use the same issue; the paper becomes the evidence base for the bill.

▲ Week 1: From Issue to Question (45 minutes)

1. **(10 minutes) Why research comes first:** Show a sponsor's memorandum from the state legislature. Point out that every claim in it is sourced. A bill is only as strong as its memorandum.
2. **(25 minutes) Research Question Builder:** Students move from a topic ("school start times") to an issue ("state law leaves start times to districts and most start before 8:00") to a researchable question ("What have states that set a minimum high school start time seen in attendance and cost, and would a similar law work in our state?").
3. **(10 minutes) Submit the question and proposed format** to the Seal Committee for approval.

▲ Week 2: Primary Legal Sources (45 minutes)

1. **(15 minutes) Finder walk-through:** Using the Primary Source Finder, locate the statute, the bill that created or last amended it, the sponsor's memorandum, and the vote. Model it live on a legislative website.
2. **(25 minutes) Reading the law:** Students read their section and the sponsor's memorandum and write a one-page brief: what the law requires, why the sponsor said it was needed, what has changed since, and what questions the memorandum did not answer.
3. **(5 minutes) Citation set-up:** Start the bibliography in the chosen style with the primary sources first.

▲ Week 3: Comparative Research (45 minutes)

1. **(10 minutes) Credible sources:** The NCSL, state legislative research offices, state agencies, university research centers, major newspapers, peer-reviewed journals. What is not a source: an advocacy group's claim without data, a social post, an AI summary.

2. **(30 minutes) Comparative Jurisdiction Table:** At least three other states or jurisdictions: the law, year, key provision, reported results, and the source. Note where results conflict.
3. **(5 minutes) Thesis draft:** One sentence that answers the research question.

▲ **Week 4: Fiscal Analysis (45 minutes)**

1. **(15 minutes) Reading a budget:** Find the state or local budget line that funds the area in question. Show where a fiscal note on a bill comes from.
2. **(25 minutes) Fiscal Analysis Worksheet:** Who pays now, what the proposal would cost or save, the assumptions behind the estimate, and what another state's fiscal note said. Every number gets a source; every estimate gets its assumptions stated.
3. **(5 minutes) Outline check:** Students map evidence to the paper outline.

▲ **Week 5: Write (45 minutes plus homework)**

1. **(10 minutes) The outline:** Introduction and thesis; the current law and its history; the problem with evidence; what other jurisdictions did and what happened; fiscal analysis; the strongest counterargument and a response; conclusion with a specific recommendation.
2. **(35 minutes) Draft in class;** finish at home. Target 2,000 to 3,000 words with at least eight sources, four of them primary or governmental.

▲ **Week 6: Revise, Distill, Submit (45 minutes)**

1. **(20 minutes) Peer review** with the rubric: every claim sourced, counterargument fair, recommendation specific.
2. **(20 minutes) Distill to the memorandum:** Turn the paper into a two-page memorandum of support for the bill that would carry out the recommendation. This is the document the student brings to committee.
3. **(5 minutes) Submit** the paper, bibliography and memorandum to the Seal Committee with the advisor's rubric.

▲ **Assessment: Research Paper Rubric (100 points)**

- ▶ **Research Question and Thesis (10):** Answerable; thesis answers it directly.
- ▶ **Primary Legal Sources (20):** Statute, originating or amending bill, sponsor's memorandum and vote located, read and used accurately.
- ▶ **Comparative Research (20):** Three or more jurisdictions with credible sources; conflicting results acknowledged.
- ▶ **Fiscal Analysis (15):** Real figures with sources; assumptions stated; another jurisdiction's fiscal note used.
- ▶ **Analysis and Argument (20):** Evidence supports the thesis; strongest counterargument stated fairly and answered; recommendation specific.
- ▶ **Writing and Citation (10):** Clear organization; correct and consistent citation; within length.

- ▶ **Memorandum of Support (5):** Faithful two-page distillation; every claim traceable to the paper.

▲ Differentiation:

- ▶ **Support:** Provide the statute and sponsor's memorandum for a short list of topics; reduce the comparative table to two jurisdictions; allow 1,500 words.
- ▶ **Challenge:** Require an interview with a legislative staff member or agency analyst, a review of court decisions interpreting the statute, or a fiscal model with a sensitivity check (what changes if the key assumption is wrong).

▲ Supporting Documents

1. Research Question Builder

Topic (one or two words): _____

Issue (one sentence with a fact in it): _____

Research question (must be answerable with evidence and must point to a policy choice): _____

What I would need to find to answer it: the law __history other states costs people affected

Seal Committee approval (date, signature): _____

2. Primary Source Finder for State Law

1. The statute: find the consolidated or general laws on the legislature's site; record chapter, article, section, and the official citation.
2. The bill: most statute sections list the chapter or bill that enacted or amended them; search the bill number and year.
3. The sponsor's memorandum or bill analysis: attached to the bill page in New York (memo) and produced by the Office of Legislative Research in Connecticut (bill analysis); Rhode Island bills carry an explanation by the Legislative Council.
4. The vote: committee and floor votes are on the bill page.
5. The fiscal note: New York bills carry a fiscal implications statement in the memo; Connecticut has an Office of Fiscal Analysis note; Rhode Island provides fiscal notes on request.
6. Court decisions: search the statute citation in a case law database; note any decision that interprets the section.

3. Comparative Jurisdiction Table

Columns: Jurisdiction. Law (citation and year). Key provision. Reported result (with figures). Source. Reliability note.

4. Fiscal Analysis Worksheet

Who pays for this now (budget line, amount, source): _____

What the proposal would cost or save per year (estimate):

Assumptions behind the estimate (unit cost, number affected, phase-in):

What another jurisdiction's fiscal note said: _____

Who would bear the cost (state, locality, families, employers):

What would change the estimate most: _____

5. Research Paper Outline

Introduction and thesis (one paragraph). The current law and its history (what it requires, when and why it was enacted, how it has changed). The problem (evidence from data and from people affected). What other jurisdictions have done and what happened. Fiscal analysis. The strongest counterargument and a response. Conclusion with a specific recommendation and the first step to carry it out. Bibliography.