

TAKE A STAND-THE AMERICAN DREAM

There is no right or wrong response when it comes to what people believe. Getting students to hear their own thinking, voice their thinking, listen to and consider what others are thinking, is the point of this activity. Students take a stand and defend it.



30
MINUTES

SUPPLIES
a line in
the middle
of a room

A SAMPLE ACTIVITY FROM *CREATED EQUAL*

PROCESS

Ask students, *What is the American Dream?*

From Wikipedia: “The American Dream is a national belief of the United States in which freedom includes a promise of the possibility of prosperity and success... regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the United States Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that ‘all men are created equal’ and that they are ‘endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights’ including ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’.” Or more simply put, anyone can achieve financial success and stability if they hard work. The most common image portrayed of the American Dream is a straight, nuclear family with two kids, a middle-class income, a modest suburban home, and two cars.

Ask students to think about whether they agree or disagree with the statement: *If you work hard you can get ahead.*

Before they share their thinking out loud, give them a few minutes to access their own thoughts and feelings (they can draw, write or think about them). Most students cannot develop their own thinking if they are listening to others. When everyone seems ready, ask each person to take a stand on the line, which acts as a continuum:

strongly agree ___ **agree** ___ **undecided** ___ **disagree** ___ **strongly disagree**

Some students will stand right in the middle because they cannot decide or because they both agree and disagree and that’s fine. Ask a few students to volunteer why they are standing where they are; ask what they know that supports their position, the reasons behind what they are thinking. It could be personal experiences, facts they know, stories they have heard, what they learned in other classes, something they’ve seen on TV or learned on the internet etc. For example, “I agree with the statement because my parents work really hard and...” OR “I disagree because in Social Studies we learned that farm workers earn less than minimum wage and they work hard...”

STUDENTS WILL

- respect other people's experiences and perspectives, which are likely different from their own.
- understand that when dealing with complex issues there are often competing truths, and each person in a group holds a piece of the truth.

Facilitator's note: Understanding the diversity of experiences of a population of people takes everyone's contribution, so what each student knows matters. There are students for whom this is a challenge, to state an opinion and defend it. For students who can only respond, 'I don't know why I think this, I just do', this is an opportunity to develop their thinking about an issue. Hopefully other students will model how to do this. For those who have strong opinions about things, the opportunity to hear why people think what they think helps them to grow. As each student shares, everyone else is asked to really consider each point of view.

The twist: If a student hears a perspective that they agree with, one that causes them to reconsider their own perspective OR one that adds a complexity to their thinking, they can move to another position on the line. (Sometimes we expect young people to have an opinion before they're ready to and gives them a chance to go back and forth while they are figuring it out.) Students may change positions multiple times. Each time they do, they will be asked to share what piece of information or story added to their understanding and made them reconsider their position. For example, "I initially thought what I did because my parents both work hard, but after hearing____ I'm thinking..." This is an opportunity to explore points of view within the group as well as those within themselves.

Facilitator's note: Google images for The American Dream. There are interesting visual commentaries, political cartoons, and art on this theme.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What have you learned about our national belief, about us as a group of students, or yourself?

Do we all agree? If not, why not?

Facilitator's note: It's likely that there will not be agreement among young people and that the more diverse the group the more disagreement there will be.

Encourage students to talk about what they notice about differences in access and privilege that they or members of their group have in comparison to others.

How do you figure out what you think about a complex or controversial issue?