

# Virtual Capitol Lessons

## Classroom Government

Authors	Cherie Scholten and Sally Ganem
Editor	Karen Graff, Ed.D.
Grade Level	Fourth
Class Period(s)	2

This lesson is designed to precede or follow a field trip to Lincoln or a virtual field trip (<http://nebraskavirtualcapitol.org>) to the Nebraska Capitol.

### Nebraska Social Studies Standards

**SS 4.1.1 Synthesize and justify the structure and function of Nebraska's government.**

SS 4.1.1.b Analyze the origin, structure, and function of Nebraska's state government.

SS 4.1.1.c Communicate how a bill becomes a law in the Nebraska unicameral.

SS 4.1.1.d Investigate and summarize the roles that leaders and other citizens serve in Nebraska to equitably represent all residents in the state.

**SS 4.1.2 Investigate how different perspectives impact government decisions at the state level.**

SS 4.1.2.a Identify and model rights and responsibilities of citizens at the state level.

SS 4.1.2.d Identify and engage in opportunities to serve the state.

### Nebraska Language Arts Standards

**LA 4.1.5 Vocabulary: Students will build and use conversational, academic, and content-specific grade level vocabulary.**

LA 4.1.5.c Acquire new academic and content-specific grade-level vocabulary, relate to prior knowledge, and apply in new situations.

**LA 4.2.2 Writing Modes: Students will write in multiple modes for a variety of purposes and audiences across disciplines.**

LA 4.2.2.a Communicate information and ideas effectively in analytic, descriptive, informative, narrative, poetic, persuasive, and reflective modes to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats.

### Overview

This lesson will make government more relevant and more concrete to enable students to understand the importance of government and how they are a part of it. They will learn how to create change in their community and their state by learning how public policies and laws can be changed. They will conduct their own classroom government and have the chance to participate in running for an office, talking with constituents and senators, and also earning money for working in their "community". This lesson should follow "How a Bill Becomes a Law".

### Key Vocabulary

**Amendments**-a change in wording or meaning especially in a law, bill, or motion

**Constituents**-a voting member of a community

**Laws**-a rule of conduct or action created and enforced by the supreme governing authority (as the legislature) of a community or established by custom, with consequences for violations

# Virtual Capitol Lessons

**State senator**—a person elected to represent the views of the people in their district to give them a voice in government

## Materials

- play money or tokens (optional)
- *The Nebraska Adventures* by Jean A. Lukesh (optional)
- *Student Atlas of Nebraska* by Dr. Randy Bertolas

## Procedures

### SESSION ONE

1. Help students build background knowledge about how the legislative branch works. If available, use *The Nebraska Adventure* written by Dr. Jean Lukesh. Refer to Chapter 12 (pp. 236-253). Lesson 1 provides an overview of the federal government while Lesson 2 (pp. 244-249) covers state government. Also consider using “Unicam Kids!” published by the Unicameral Information Office, Clerk of the Nebraska Legislature. A PDF copy is provided in this lesson folder or it can be found online.

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/about/unicamkids.pdf>

### SESSION TWO

1. Introduce the classroom government to the students. The classroom government can be run throughout the school year at the teacher’s discretion.

Think of your school as the country. Your principal is the president, and teachers each govern their classes (states). Students are residents of the state and can run for election to the Unicameral (your “state” is Nebraska) or may choose to be responsible citizens/voters/constituents if they prefer not to be candidates. Depending on class size, decide on a reasonable number of senators (maybe 25% of the class), length of their term (several weeks perhaps—Nebraska has term limits so you may allow them to run for a second term), and when the Unicameral will meet (maybe once each week at recess or lunch). Elections may be as elaborate as you wish. However, it would be a good exercise for student candidates to be required to give a campaign speech and create a poster before the election.

Once elected, senators should meet with their constituents throughout their term to determine their constituents’ needs and desires for life in their state. Senators should communicate concerns and ideas to the governor and craft bills for legislation. Of course, the governor has veto power.

If you have some type of “payment” system in your classroom, such as tokens or play money, for positive behavior or task completion students might be required to pay taxes for the services they receive. Senators will need to decide on the tax rate and how money will be spent. The constituents will surely want to provide input.

There are countless ways to establish a classroom government including the creation of a constitution and perhaps a Supreme Court. Your class size and curriculum will dictate the amount of time and sophistication of the government.

## Assessment

Depending on the length of time the classroom government operates, ask students to explain the system in an expository essay. They should be able to compare their roles and procedures with that of the Unicameral. You might also seek their input for modifications of the government for future classes.

# Virtual Capitol Lessons

## Extensions

None-Any extensions will likely be modification of the classroom government to suit your needs.

## Sources/Resources

Virtual Capitol Tour Website

<http://nebraskavirtualcapitol.org/>

*Student Atlas of Nebraska* by Dr. Randy Bertolas

Page 46 shows Congressional Districts and page 48 has a map of Legislative Districts.

If you are using the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Atlas, refer to pages 50 and 52.

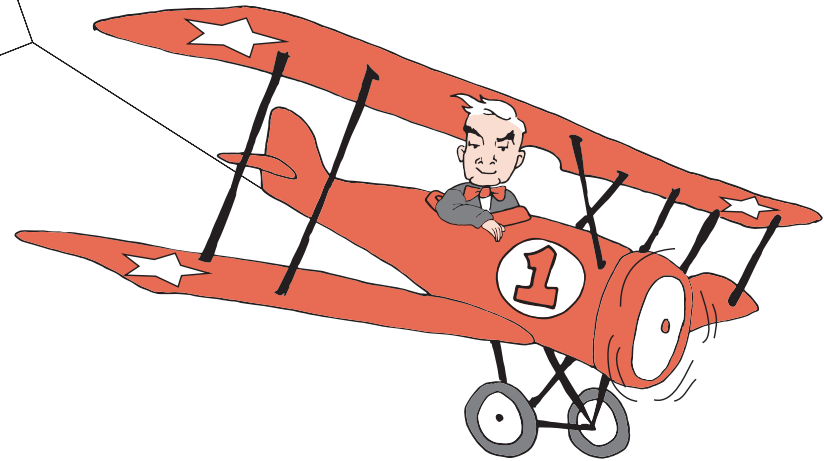
“Unicam Kids!” is a downloadable booklet where George W. Norris explains the function of the unicameral.

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/about/unicamkids.pdf>

The Unicam Kids site is an interactive experience to teach students about the legislature and the legislative process. It includes information on how to contact senators, diagrams, and coloring pages.

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/uk/?page=home>

**UNICAM KIDS!**



## **A Visit to Your Nebraska Legislature**

**guided by George W. Norris,  
“the Father of the Unicameral”**



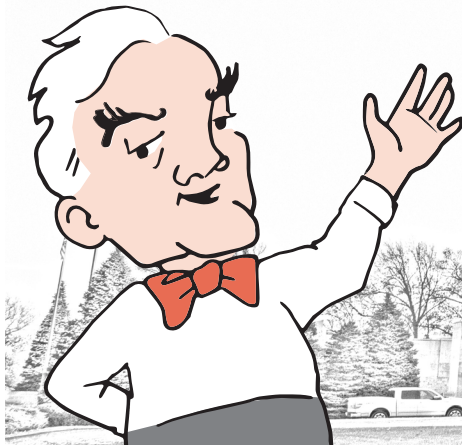
## UNICAM KIDS

**H**il I'm George Norris. I represented Nebraska in Congress from 1913 to 1943. Many people call me the father of Nebraska's unicameral Legislature.

A **unicameral** is a legislature made up of just one group of people who make laws. Nebraska has the nation's only unicameral, which meets here at the Capitol in Lincoln to make laws for the state.

I believed this would serve Nebraskans better than a **bicameral**, or two-house system, found in every other state. Nebraskans voted to change to a unicameral in 1934 and the first unicameral met in 1937.

Let's go inside. I'll show you around!



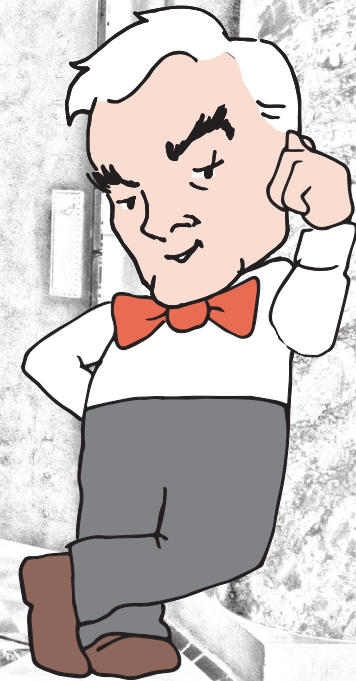
*Nebraska is unique for its unicameral and also its unusual Capitol building. Architect Bertram Goodhue wanted the Capitol's design to reflect the spirit of Nebraska's people. The words and pictures on the outside of the building show Nebraska's place in the history of law and democracy. The Capitol took 10 years to build and was finished in 1932. The tower rises almost 400 feet and is topped by a 19-foot bronze statue of a man planting seeds called "The Sower."*

## A VISIT TO YOUR NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE

**M**y experience as a law-maker made me wish for a smoother process to make laws. I encouraged Nebraskans to vote for a new, smaller legislature so the process would be simpler and allow for more public input.

Some Nebraskans worried about becoming the only unicameral. They thought having fewer steps to pass laws might not allow for enough discussion on bills.

But supporters said three rounds of debate on a bill would be plenty. In the end, there was enough support to adopt the new unicameral!



*The unicameral Legislature meets in the room through these doors. The room, or chamber, contains the same wooden desks and leather chairs that were built when the Capitol was constructed. The voting board at the front of the chamber lists all the senators' names and displays their votes — green for "yes" and red for "no."*

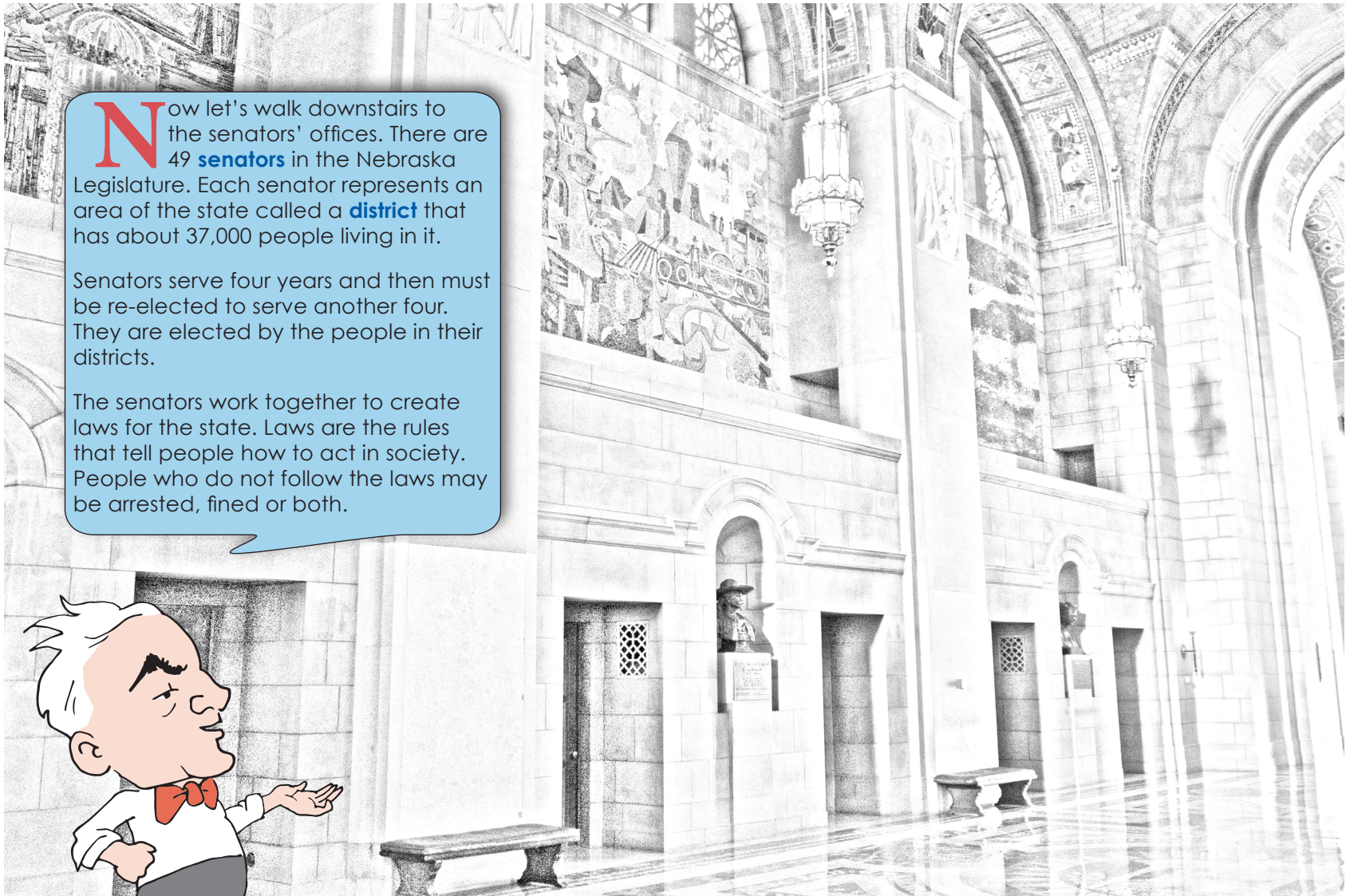


## UNICAM KIDS

**N**ow let's walk downstairs to the senators' offices. There are 49 **senators** in the Nebraska Legislature. Each senator represents an area of the state called a **district** that has about 37,000 people living in it.

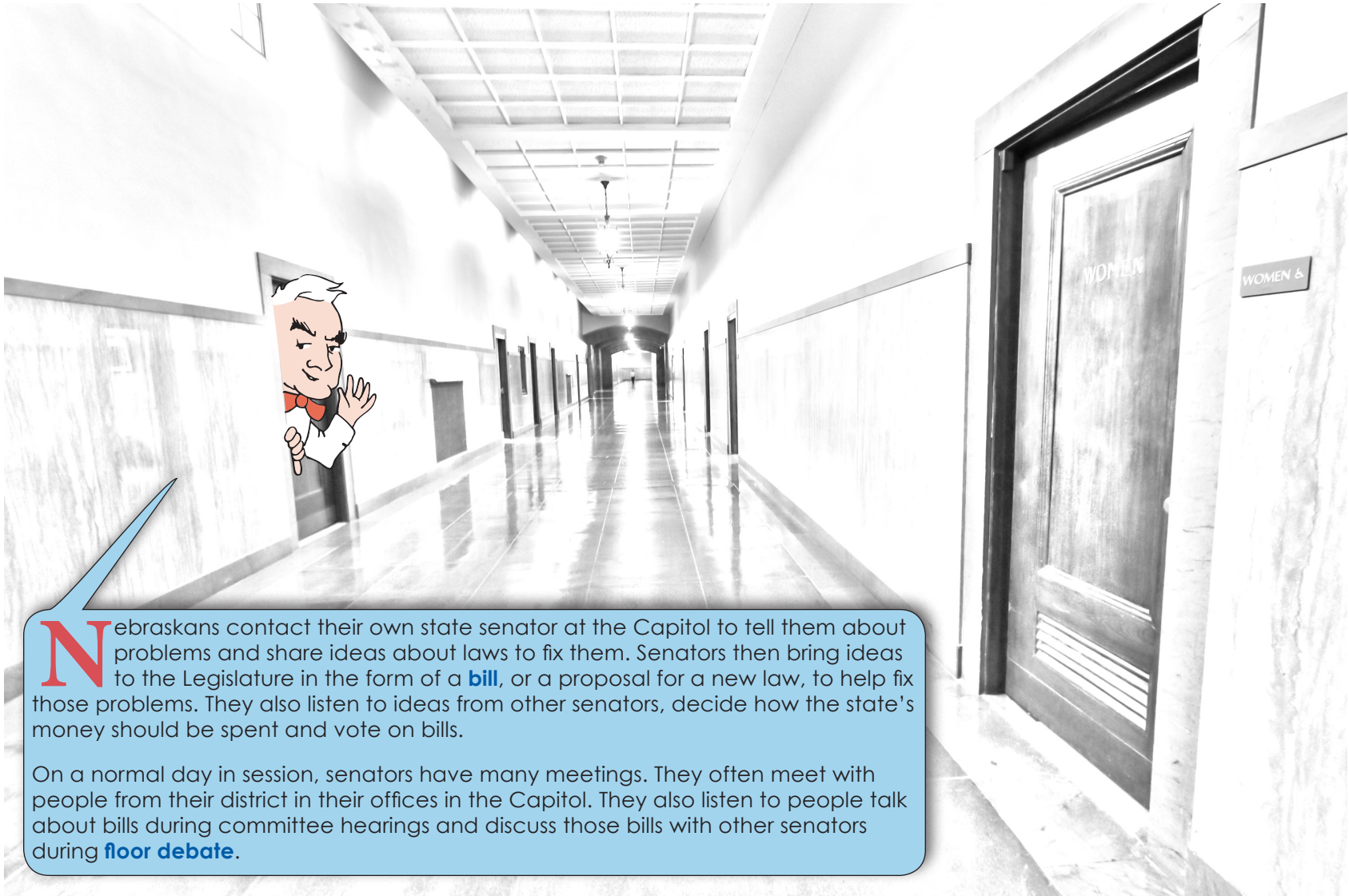
Senators serve four years and then must be re-elected to serve another four. They are elected by the people in their districts.

The senators work together to create laws for the state. Laws are the rules that tell people how to act in society. People who do not follow the laws may be arrested, fined or both.



*This is the Great Hall that leads to the legislative chamber. The six murals on the wall, along with the other artworks in the Capitol's interior, represent the relationship between Nebraska's people and their environment. "The Blizzard of 1888," a mural by Jeanne Reynal, shows a Nebraska teacher leading her students to safety during the worst snowstorm in the state's history. Artist Hildreth Meiere designed the marble murals on the floor.*

## A VISIT TO YOUR NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE



**N**ebraskans contact their own state senator at the Capitol to tell them about problems and share ideas about laws to fix them. Senators then bring ideas to the Legislature in the form of a **bill**, or a proposal for a new law, to help fix those problems. They also listen to ideas from other senators, decide how the state's money should be spent and vote on bills.

On a normal day in session, senators have many meetings. They often meet with people from their district in their offices in the Capitol. They also listen to people talk about bills during committee hearings and discuss those bills with other senators during **floor debate**.

*The Nebraska Legislature meets for four or five months at the beginning of every year. Having a part-time legislature allows senators to live most of the year in their districts, talking with the people who live there. Most of the senators have other jobs outside the Capitol, such as farming, running a business, teaching, banking or practicing law.*



## UNICAM KIDS

**E**very bill introduced has a **public hearing** in a committee. A **committee** is a small group of senators. Public hearings give people the chance to tell senators what they think about the bill. This helps senators decide whether the bill should be passed and how it should be written.

If the committee thinks the bill is good, it votes to send it to the floor for a full debate among all the senators. What's the floor? Come on, I'll show you.



*The senators sit at the front of the room listening to the person speaking into the microphone. The people watching the hearing are waiting for their turn to speak in support of, or against, the bill. Notice the media is there to report on the hearing. Many students have spoken at committee hearings about issues affecting schools, safety and the environment.*

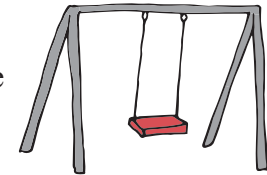
## LAWS MADE BY KIDS

Students all across the country have brought ideas for bills to their state legislature to address a problem they see in their community. Here are some inspiring examples of bills that were suggested by students and made into law.

**B**ullying is a big problem for many kids. A group of students at Mansfeld Middle School in Tucson, Arizona decided to speak up for victims of bullying. They wrote a bill that would require every school district to have anti-bullying rules. Their state representative introduced the bill for them and it became a law.



**D**rug-free zones around schools and parks help keep kids safe by increasing punishments for drug use near places where children gather. In Nebraska, however, parks without playground equipment were not made drug-free zones. Students at Omaha's Alice Buffett Magnet Middle School wanted to protect these areas, too. They talked to their state senator and he introduced a bill for them, which was passed into law.



**T**he cost to provide electricity to Twinfield Union School in Vermont was very high and the school needed to save money. A group of eighth-graders learned about a renewable source of energy that uses water, called hydropower. The students testified at a state senate hearing to support a bill that would make it easier to use this cheaper form of energy at their school. Lawmakers changed the process to allow smaller projects like this to be more easily approved.



**A**ir drying laundry on a clothesline saves electricity and also is good for the environment. The state of Colorado did not allow people to have clotheslines until students at Basalt High School took action. They supported a bill in the Colorado Legislature and also convinced their town council to support the bill.





## UNICAM KIDS



**W**hen a committee votes to send a bill to the floor, it comes here next. This is the west chamber, also called the George W. Norris Legislative Chamber — after yours truly.

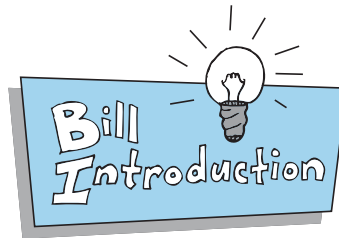
All the senators meet here to discuss ways to improve bills before voting on them. During three rounds of debate, senators often must **compromise** to come to an agreement. Then the bill goes to the governor for approval.

*The gold leaf scenes painted on the wooden ceiling beams show the European cultures that settled in Nebraska. The public can come anytime and watch their senators from the balconies above the floor. Under the balconies, you will see senators' staff and members of the media who report the Legislature's actions to the public.*



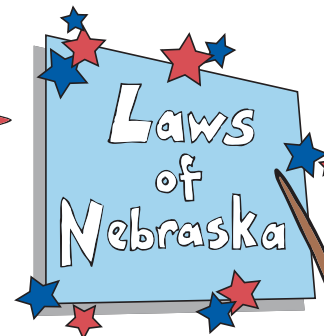
## REVIEW: HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

**1** When the Legislature is not meeting, senators research ideas that have been brought to them. They work with staff to write a bill that will solve the problem.

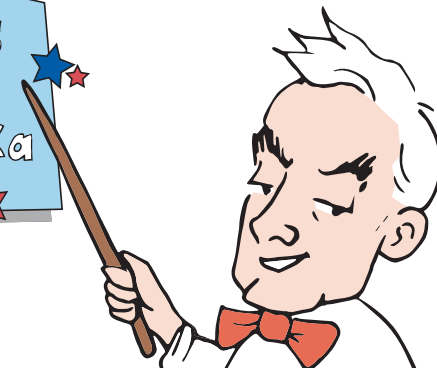


**3** There are three rounds of debate on each bill. It takes at least 25 senators' votes — just over half of the 49 senators — to change a bill or move it to the next round. If a bill gets at least 25 votes on the last round, it is passed.

**2** After a bill is introduced, it is given a public hearing. If the committee thinks the bill is a good idea, it sends it to the floor for debate. If there is not support for the bill, it stays in committee or is killed.



**4** After a bill is passed, it goes to the governor for approval. He or she can sign the bill or **veto** it. If a bill is vetoed, senators can still try to make it law, but it takes 30 votes to do it.



## UNICAM KIDS

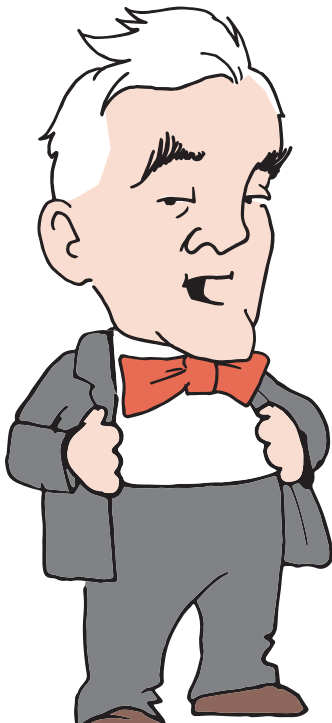
**S**ee how simple that was? If we had a bicameral system, the process would be twice as long! There is so much to learn about our Legislature and our Capitol that I couldn't possibly cover it all in one tour.

You can learn more about our unique unicameral at [NebraskaLegislature.gov](http://NebraskaLegislature.gov). Visit [capitol.nebraska.gov](http://capitol.nebraska.gov) to learn more about our beautiful Capitol. Read more about my public service at [NebraskaHistory.org/sites/norris](http://NebraskaHistory.org/sites/norris).

Or, when you are in downtown Lincoln, stop by to see for yourself where our unicameral meets.

Tell them George Norris sent you! Until then, let's review some vocabulary that will come in handy.

## Glossary



**unicameral:** a legislature in which one group of people makes laws

**bicameral:** a legislature in which two groups of people make laws

**state senator:** a person elected to serve in a legislature

**district:** an area of the state represented by a state senator

**bill:** a proposal for a new law

**legislature:** a group of people who make or change laws

**committee:** a group of people chosen to study and make decisions on a certain subject

**public hearing:** a meeting in which all people have the chance to give their opinion on a bill

**floor debate:** senators' discussion in which they share opinions and ask questions

**compromise:** a way of reaching an agreement in which each side gives up something it wants

**veto:** the right of the governor to decide that a bill will not become a law

Published January 2016 by the  
Unicameral Information Office  
Clerk of the Nebraska Legislature  
P.O. Box 94604 • Lincoln, NE • 68509  
402-471-2788  
[NebraskaLegislature.gov](http://NebraskaLegislature.gov)

