

“No Vehicles in the Park” is a classic lesson in the law-related and civic education field which has its roots in a debate between a couple of scholars in a 1958 Harvard Law Review article (see Bernard W. Bell, “No Vehicles in the Park”: Reviving the Hart-Fuller Debate to Introduce Statutory Construction, *Journal of Legal Education*, Volume 48, Number 1 [March 1998], p.88). Variations of the lesson have been taught at every level from elementary school to law school by thousands of teachers. Yet, for both the student just experiencing the lesson for the first time and this lawyer/educator who has taught the lesson more than 1000 times, it remains a most involving means of entry into the world of laws.

Although the ways real-life courts interpret actual laws vary rather significantly at times from the analysis third graders and first-year law students undertake, this lesson allows students to gain an understanding of the process of statutory interpretation that is vital to their appreciation of the role and function of both the courts and the way the three branches of government interact. The “No Vehicles in the Park” lesson involves a law that declares that, due to past problems in the park, there will be no vehicles allowed in the park. I always start this lesson by asking students if they understand what the statute means (and I steal from my wife’s teaching file a small bit where I show the Statue of Liberty and reinforce for the students the difference between a Statue and a Statute—spell checker fails to pick up that mistake in their papers) and ask the students what are the elements they think a good law needs. My students usually conclude that rules should be clear, enforceable and fair. Depending on the time and my purpose in teaching this lesson, examination of what makes a good law is either explored in depth or stopped at this point. Know that there is a great teachable moment (or more) here.

When I give the students the fact pattern which consists of the law, a brief description of how the law came about (here is a great place to teach about the concept of legislative history) and the potential cases that might arise under the law, I usually take some time to review the three branches of government and their roles. Again, that is a longer or shorter lesson which depends on my goals for this lesson. Usually, I follow this by putting students into small groups, sometimes triads where two can take the opposite sides with the third student being the judge, sometimes in mini-city councils to review each application for possible exceptions and changes to the law. Once in awhile, I deputize a police chief to enforce the laws and have the class serve as a jury of each defendant’s case (if the chief arrests—here is an opportunity to teach about police discretion), appointing prosecutors and defenders to conduct mini-trials of each case (I serve as the judge both to fulfill my black robe dreams and to eliminate unnecessary legal maneuvering by the designated attorneys who often try to get a fast one past the bench (since all have been trained, whether third graders or law students, by the courtrooms of Judge Judy and her peers).