

## Students Try to Cut Federal Budget in Online Game

*This story comes from VOA Special English, Voice of America's daily news and information service for English learners. Read the story and then do the worksheet of activities at the end.*

This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

Some people think of politics as a game. But an online game lets people think of themselves doing one of the hardest jobs in American politics: cutting the federal budget. The game is called Budget Hero.

Students in Los Angeles and other cities have been playing it. Budget Hero lets them decide how they want to spend federal tax dollars.

STUDENT: "A simplified tax code and a tax code that more fairly and correctly taxes the wealth in this country is obviously preferable."

The game uses information from the Congressional Budget Office. It shows what effects each cost-cutting proposal would have.

High school student Dory Bennett says she thinks spending cuts are needed to keep the economy growing and keep the American dream alive.

DORY BENNETT: "I want to grow up, go to college, get a good job, have kids maybe, a dog and a house."

The students consider the same issues facing lawmakers in Washington.

The game was developed in two thousand eight. In the newest version, students make decisions about what spending is important to them. Do they want to reduce taxes? Spend more on environmental protection? What should they do about defense spending? Making these decisions helps clarify their goals.

A former Democratic representative from California offered students some ideas. Jane Harmon served in Congress for almost twenty years. She now heads the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, which helped create Budget Hero. More than one million people have played it so far, she says, and she thinks they have learned at least two things.

JANE HARMON: "One, how hard it is, but two, that it can be done if there's a will to do it."

Student Jeffrey Burke agrees.

JEFFREY BURKE: "The hardest thing for us to figure out was the little cuts like the gas money and stuff, increasing taxes on gas, because we felt it would have effects everywhere from the truck drivers shipping our stuff across the country or when you order from [online seller] Amazon or whatever, to you drive when you're going to work. I think we need to look at the little things and realize that just because they're small money doesn't mean they're small effects."

Another student, Harry Kidd, says defense spending caused a lot of debate.

HARRY KIDD: "Because at the same time, you've got, 'Oh, we're going to freeze military spending,' but then we're like, 'What is that going to do to jobs?' But then the other half was, 'Oh, we can take troops out of Iraq and we all agreed on that.'"

Joaquin Alvarado at American Public Media, an organization that also helped create the game, says many of the players leave comments.

JOAQUIN ALVARDO: "And they will literally in the comments ask that Congress play this game to just get a little rational around the questions that have to be answered."

Ms. Harmon says the students are having more success than Congress at cutting the budget.

JANE HARMON: "Kids, and actually adults too who play this game, have open minds. They want to learn what the facts are. And sadly, a lot of Congress is a fact-free universe, and that is tragic for our country, for our country's reputation, and for our economy and the livelihoods of millions of people who are presently out of work."

(You can watch a video version of this story at [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com).)

*Now do the worksheet ...*

**Level: intermediate - advanced**

**Time: 30 - 40 minutes**

**This worksheet will help you learn new vocabulary about the government. You will answer questions about the federal budget, and write a short paragraph about how you budget your own money.**

1. Match the words on the left with the words on the right to make four phrases from the article. Write the phrase on the line.

a. federal	1. proposal	_____
b. cost-cutting	2. cuts	_____
c. spending	3. spending	_____
d. defense	4. budget	_____

2. What does *cut the federal budget* mean? Check the correct answer.

- reduce the money the country can spend
- increase the money the country can spend

3. Look again at the title of the article: *Students Try to Cut Federal Budget in Online Game*. What is the article about?

- A game that can also be used as scissors.
- A game that teaches about government spending.
- A game where you can win a lot of money.

4. Read the sentence below. Is it *true* or *false*? If it is false, correct the sentence.

Budget Hero is the name of an online game that lets students decide how they want to spend federal tax dollars.

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5. Why does Dory Bennett think spending cuts are needed?

- to keep the economy growing
- so she can run for President
- so she can play more online games
- to keep the American dream alive

6. In the game, what things do students make decisions about? Check the correct answers.

- Do they want to reduce taxes?
- Should they spend more on environmental protection?
- Do they want to win money?
- Should they study to become doctors?
- Do they want to have children?
- What should they do about defense spending?

7. Who is Jane Harmon? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Who said that defense spending caused a lot of debate?

- Jeffrey Burke
- Harry Kidd
- Joaquin Alvarado

9. Who said: "I think we need to look at the little things and realize that just because they're small money doesn't mean they're small effects"?

- Jeffrey Burke
- Harry Kidd
- Joaquin Alvarado

10. Complete the following sentence with *more* or *less*.

Ms. Harmon says the students are having \_\_\_\_\_ success than Congress at cutting the budget.

### OVER TO YOU

What do you know about the budget in your country? Use the internet to search for more information.

How do you budget your own money? Write 5 sentences explaining your answer.

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## **ANSWER KEY**

1. federal budget, cost-cutting proposal, spending cuts, defense spending
2. reduce the money the country can spend
3. A game that teaches about government spending.
4. true
5. to keep the economy growing, to keep the American dream alive
6. Do they want to reduce taxes? Should they spend more on environmental protection? What should they do about defense spending?
7. A former Democratic representative from California; She now heads the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, which helped create Budget Hero.
8. Harry Kidd
9. Jeffrey Burke
10. more

## **ANSWER KEY**

1. developing countries, land rights, economic growth, food production
2. papers that show you own a home
3. A property ladder is good because it can help poor people buy land.

4. false; Less than a third of people in developing countries own the land they live on.
5. They want to help secure land rights for millions of people.
6. to reduce poverty, to increase food production, to increase economic growth
7. establishing property lines and recording land is expensive.
8. \_\_\_4\_\_\_ A community decides to allow individual ownership of the land.  
\_\_\_3\_\_\_ Over time they get greater rights.  
\_\_\_1\_\_\_ People receive a simple document to the land they are on.  
\_\_\_2\_\_\_ Now they cannot be forced off the land.
9. Ethiopia has already provided twenty million land certificates on the lower end of the property ladder for about one dollar each.
10. They destroyed land records and forced communities from their land.