Explain Yourself

One student is 'the system' and makes five decisions using a secret rule. Everyone else has twenty yes-or-no questions to reverse-engineer why — practicing the real skill of demanding an explanation from something opaque.

AGE BAND	DURATION	GROUP SIZE	CONCEPT
Ages 9–14	15–20 minutes	Pairs or small groups	Governance

Learning objective

Students can distinguish between a decision they're allowed to question and one they aren't, and can practice the specific skill of asking productive questions to reveal hidden reasoning.

What you need

- A set of decision scenarios (which backpack gets approved, which team gets the field)
- Scrap paper for secret rules

Why this works

Asking “why” of a system that won’t answer directly is a specific, learnable skill — not a personality trait. Twenty questions is a tight enough budget that students have to think strategically about which question narrows the possibilities fastest, which is exactly the discipline real oversight of an opaque system requires.

How it works

1. One student secretly writes a one-sentence rule and uses it to make five quick decisions on a scenario — for example, which of these backpacks would you approve for a class trip.
2. The rest of the group has up to twenty yes-or-no questions to work out the rule.
3. The group guesses the rule; the “system” reveals whether they were right.
4. Rotate roles and repeat with a new scenario.
5. Debrief on which questions did the most work toward the answer.

Talk about it

- What’s the difference between a rule you’re allowed to question and one you aren’t?
- If you’d only had three questions instead of twenty, how would your strategy have changed?
- Should every important decision come with the right to ask “why,” even if the answer might be disappointing?