The Fairness Menu

Design a fair rule for an everyday classroom decision — then discover that two equally reasonable definitions of fair can send the same students to different outcomes.

AGE BAND	DURATION	GROUP SIZE	CONCEPT
Ages 10–14	25 minutes	Small groups, then whole class	Justice

Learning objective

Students can name at least two different, legitimate definitions of 'fair' and explain why a rule can satisfy one while disappointing another.

What you need

- Scenario cards: lunch line order, sports team picks, library hold queue
- A whiteboard or chart paper

Why this works

Kids are taught that fairness has one definition, and that disagreements about it are just someone being unreasonable. This activity shows something closer to the truth: equal treatment, need-based priority, and first-come-first-served are all genuinely fair principles, and they routinely point in different directions on the same decision. Naming that disagreement — rather than resolving it — is the actual skill.

How it works

1. Give each group one everyday scenario and ask them to design a rule that decides the order fairly.
2. Groups present their rule and the reasoning behind it: equal treatment, most need, or first come, first served.
3. Reveal that two groups' equally reasonable rules produce different winners for the exact same students.
4. As a class, sort the fairness principles that came up into categories on the board.
5. Vote — without being told there's a correct answer — on which principle fits the scenario best, and sit with the disagreement that follows.

Talk about it

- Can a rule be fair and still leave someone feeling it wasn't? Are both of those true at once?
- Who decides which definition of fair gets used for a given decision — and should they be allowed to change it later?
- Where have you seen adults disagree about which kind of fair to use?