The File Says You Failed

Race, proof rules, and the evidence a committee uses

Learning goal. Explain how a paperwork rule can distribute case closures unequally, how officials can interpret those closures, and how a separate test could study staff decisions.

Set up the case

Students are aides to a fictional U.S. state legislative committee. All eight parents qualify for the same cash assistance program and miss an appointment after a qualifying shift change. Each submits verifiable evidence within seven days. The office has enough capacity to verify each submission under either rule.

A work schedule with a date and time is available to parents in four files. They cannot get an employer's signature by the deadline. This proof pattern is built into the case so students can trace its effects.

Files	Signed employer note	Timestamped work schedule
Black parents	R01	R02, R03, R04
White parents	R05, R06, R07	R08

Apply both rules to the same files

Signed employer note only. Keep signature cases open. Close the four schedule cases for missing the required signature. **Either work record.** Accept either proof and keep all eight cases open.

Proof rule	Black parents	White parents	All cases
Signed employer note only	3/4 closed (75%)	1/4 closed (25%)	4/8 closed
Either work record	0/4 closed (0%)	0/4 closed (0%)	0/8 closed

The signature-only rule produces a 50-percentage-point closure gap in these files. Accepting either form of proof brings both rates to 0%. Because the replay uses the same parents, proof, deadline, and capacity, it isolates the proof rule **within this model**. The counts alone leave staff motives and how often this pattern occurs in real offices open to investigation.

Connect the steps

Proof requirements create an official category, **closed for missing proof**. A campaign treats that category as evidence about parents' behavior. Ask students to trace who made each decision and what evidence each actor could see.

Assess the reasoning

Four Class responses total at least 230 words. Score each response from 0 to 3 for a total of 12.

> **3** Complete, accurate reasoning with the requested evidence. **2** Sound main claim with a missing condition, comparison, or limit. **1** Relevant starting idea with little usable evidence or confused reasoning. **0** Missing or off-topic.

Rule and forecast / 20 words

Full credit. States the chosen rule, gives a reason, and links the first prediction to access to proof. Count a reasoned “I need more information” as a forecast. For example, the aide could ask who can get a signed note within seven days.

Finding from the files / 65 words

Full credit. Cites an original file, gives closures out of cases reviewed for both groups, compares the rules, and evaluates the campaign’s claim. **Example.** R02 submitted a verified schedule on time and was closed for missing a signature. Three of four Black cases and one of four White cases close under the signature rule. Either-proof closes zero in both groups. The file supports a missing-proof finding. A finding of refusal would require evidence of a refusal.

Hearing record / 65 words

Full credit. Explains both agenda choices and uses an added piece of evidence and both parents’ accounts. **Example.** With the signature-only results, totals alone lead to a 2-to-1 vote to investigate claimant compliance. With the same totals, closure reasons, and an original file, the deciding member votes to investigate the proof rule, also 2 to 1. A hearing vote assigns oversight. Jordan (R02) has help appealing and testifying. Sam (R08) faces lost wages for taking time off. Those costs and resources shape which experiences the committee hears.

Audit in a new state / 80 words

Full credit. Computes both rates, distinguishes counts from rates, identifies what each audit could test, gives a result that would support the chosen explanation, and uses the selected research note to identify evidence to collect or a question the test leaves open. Tie any conclusion to the conditions of the test. **Example.** Black parents have more closures, 3 of 12 (25%). White parents have the higher rate, 2 of 4 (50%). For a proof audit, hold files and deadline fixed and change accepted proof. Fewer schedule cases closing supports a proof-access explanation. For a staff audit, hold the rule and file facts fixed and randomly vary cues for perceived race. A difference in decisions supports an effect of the cue in that test. Ray, Herd, and Moynihan’s note suggests asking what proof each parent could obtain by the deadline, so include that information in a proof audit.

Run the activity

Assign 50 to 60 minutes solo or use the 50-minute classroom hearing below.

Set up solo Class play

Share the HTML and Start Here sheet. Students open the extracted HTML in a browser and select For Class. They type or dictate and can paste text copied within the same answer while they stay in that field. For Fun offers optional writing and a backup.

Use **Save & pause** to return in the same browser. To move, use **Save progress backup** and **Open a progress backup** with the JSON file. At Finish, students enter their name and course, choose **Print or save as PDF**, check the PDF, and upload it to Canvas themselves. They can review first with **Open Class report**.

Run a 50-minute hearing

Time	Activity
0 to 6 min	Read the scenario. Have students choose a rule, write a first forecast, and name the proof they would need.
6 to 17 min	Pair up. Each pair applies both rules and cites a file to explain each group’s closure count and denominator.
17 to 30 min	Compare both hearing packets using the signature-only outcomes. Read Jordan and Sam’s accounts. Discuss whose evidence reaches the committee.
30 to 44 min	Compute the new-state rates in pairs. Each pair chooses an audit and states what it would change, hold fixed, and measure.
44 to 50 min	Write an exit answer that distinguishes a closure, a claim about a parent, and a vote on what to investigate.

Have students discuss the fictional files as committee aides. Offer the printed counts and case IDs, and let individuals write instead of speak. Leave the four Class responses for independent work when running the short hearing.

Research for teaching

Ray, Herd, and Moynihan (2023). Use racialized burdens to ask who bears the time, information, and paperwork costs of an office procedure. DOI 10.1093/jopart/muac001

Michener (2019). Use racialized policy feedback to connect public policy to political voice and participation. DOI 10.1111/psj.12328

Schram, Soss, Fording, and Houser (2009). Case-manager vignettes varied client cues and prior sanctions. Use them to design a matched test of recommended penalties. DOI 10.1177/0003122409074003O4

Rodems and Shaefer (2016). Early U.S. unemployment insurance excluded agricultural and domestic work. Compare their argument about policy diffusion with another account of why the rules took shape. DOI 10.1017/ssh.2016.11