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Title: **What's it like to be president? Kids can find out**

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A solemn group gathers in the White House Situation Room, the wood-paneled nerve center of presidential predicaments since the days of John F. Kennedy. A crisis is afoot. There are no easy answers. A decision needs to be made - and fast.

But these decision-makers aren't national security officials. They are schoolkids. And the windowless room isn't in Washington. It's a reconstruction of the actual Situation Room, which was transformed into a high-tech classroom at the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

"Kids can come in and have a situation. They can see what they would do if they were president," said Laura Bush, a former teacher and librarian and the wife of former President George W. Bush.

With a library, a museum and a policy institute, the Bush Center focuses on teaching future generations of leaders even as it highlights ideas and policies from the recent past.

Nearly 500,000 people are expected to visit in the center's opening year. With school groups fueling a lot of that attendance, two state-of-the-art classrooms run by the National Archives and Records Administration will get heavy use.

The goal is for students to move beyond textbooks to participate in historic scenarios.

"We're giving them the experience of going through additional presidential records," said Heather Nice, an education specialist at the Bush Library. "And rather than students being passive readers, they can take on more of a detective mind-set."

The Situation Room has long been mythologized in TV shows and movies. It dates to the aftermath of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, and presidents have used the communications complex in the White House's West Wing basement ever since.

The Bush Center's version - obtained and preserved when Bush renovated the White House space in 2006 and 2007 - will allow students to test their decision-making skills on events like 9/11 by using documents, artifacts and an interactive video board.

Bush officials loaned another part of the Situation Room, which is actually a group of rooms, to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, Calif. The rooms will someday connect by video teleconferencing or other technology so students can work on scenarios together.

One wall of the Bush Center's Situation Room opens to a second classroom to accommodate larger groups. The second room has other teaching tools, such as books and games, to help students better understand the rest of the center.

The lessons align with state teaching standards. There are hopes for everything from a once-a-month reading program focused on Laura Bush's favorite books to programs for pre-K students and their parents.

National Archives employees are already taking the Bush Center's educational opportunities to the community by hosting teaching workshops and loaning teaching materials, lesson plans and other tools to schools.

"We're focusing on how teachers can access primary resources through NARA [National Archives and Records Administration], and how they can teach their students how to use it effectively," Nice said.