



# CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

## Fitness Plan for Democracy

### LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITY

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Funding for lesson plans was provided to the Citizen Advocacy Center by the McCormick Foundation.

## **Fitness Plan for Democracy** Lesson Plan and Activity

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**Grade Level:** 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

**Subject(s):**

- Social Studies: United States Government, State Government, Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing.

**Duration:** 1-3 class sessions with periodic follow-up throughout the semester/school year.

**Description:** This lesson gives students the opportunity to assess their level of involvement in their local communities and beyond. It also provides a series of questions, the Fitness Plan for Democracy, to guide them to greater civic involvement.

**Goals:**

Illinois Learning Standards

**A. Social Science:** 14A, 14B, 14C, 14D, 16A, 16B; and

**B. English/Language Arts:** 1B, 1C; 3A, 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B.

**Objectives:**

1. Evaluate students' level of activity in their local community; and
2. Exercise students' civic muscles by having them become actively engaged in their communities.

**Materials:**

1. Paper
2. Pen
3. Dictionary
4. "Active Democracy Quiz" Handout
5. "Fitness Plan for Democracy" Handout

**Instruction and Activities:**

**"Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their government, for whenever things go so far wrong to attract their notice, they can be relied on to set things right." Thomas Jefferson**

**"A popular government without proper information or the means of acquitting it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy – or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power with knowledge gives." James Madison**

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**Questions for students:**

What do these quotes mean to you? Are they accurate? Do you agree?

Are you informed about what is happening in your community? Do you feel that other community members are informed?

Do the people rule in your community – your school district, your neighborhood, your town, and the country? Are the governors or elected officials accountable to the governed? Do you need to build more democracy?

A well informed citizenry needs to be able to ask and answer some preliminary questions. A democratic community needs to have answers that satisfy the residents.

**Activity One**

The “Active Democracy Quiz” on pages 4-5 will help students assess how informed and involved they are in their communities. Hand out the quiz for students to complete. After you have reviewed their answers, divide the unanswered questions between students. Each student should be responsible for finding the answers to his/her assigned questions by looking on public body websites on the internet, calling local government and press offices, and attending public meetings. Review students’ answers and how they acquired the information.

**Activity Two**

Now that your students have identified what they know about the community around them, develop a “Fitness Plan for Democracy” for each student. Use the handout provided on pages 6-7 as a guide. Have each student take prolonged, sustained steps toward becoming an active member of their community throughout the semester/school year.

1. Have students chronicle their Fitness Plan in a weekly journal.
2. Evaluate students’ progress and reactions to their Fitness Plans periodically throughout the semester/school year.
3. Do they feel as though they are better educated about community events? Do they feel as though they are contributing to society? Do they feel empowered to do more? What is their next step?

# ACTIVE DEMOCRACY QUIZ

## Who runs your community?

1. How many taxing bodies exist in your community or take money from it?
2. Who are all of your representatives at the federal, state, and local level?
3. How often are those folks elected?
4. What services does each level of government provide?
5. Are elected positions contested?
6. Are candidates subject to any financial disclosure or campaign finance limitations?
7. Does each entity have a binding and enforceable ethics code?
8. If so, who is covered by the code? Appointed as well as elected officials?
9. Under what circumstances does the public body take a roll call vote?
10. How many constitute a quorum?

## Public Access

11. How often do your representatives meet?
12. Are those meetings open to the public?
13. Do public officials allow public comment at their meetings?
14. Are the public meetings shown on cable access television channels or on the internet?
15. Does the press regularly cover all of the public bodies' meetings?

## Public Records

16. How do you get record information from a public body?
17. Does the public body make materials such as meeting minutes and exhibits available on the internet?
18. How long does the public body have to respond to a freedom of information act (FOIA) request?
19. How much does the public body charge for each page of information requested?
20. Does the public body grant fee waivers or reduce the fees for a request?

## The Press

21. How many newspapers serve your town?
22. Who owns the local paper or papers?
23. What is the letter to the editor policy for each local paper?
24. If you have written letters, have they been printed?
25. Does the press provide accurate coverage of local government issues and events?
26. How often are reporters who cover your town rotated or “turned over.”
27. Does your town’s paper or papers engage in investigative reporting?
28. Will your town’s paper or papers print hostile letters to the editor that are critical of its coverage/reporting?

## The Public

29. How many people show up for meetings of each public body?
30. How many young people regularly attend public meetings?
31. Is there an impartial observer always there from the press or the League of Women Voters, for example?
32. Do all people feel welcome to make a public comment?

# FITNESS PLAN FOR DEMOCRACY

## Take Stock of Your Civic Health

- Are all members of my family, including myself, registered to vote at our current address?
- Do I know who is elected or appointed to represent my interests at all levels of government and when they come up for re-election or reappointment?
- Do I know how to participate on issues that are important to me?

## Warm-up on a Daily Basis

- Did I read the newspaper today?
- Do I know what is going on in my world locally, nationally and internationally?
- Did I make a phone call or send a letter or an email for democracy today?
  - To my public officials
  - To/for organizations in which I participate
  - To my friends and associates
  - To a radio show or newspaper
  - To mobilize others

## Follow Proper Technique

- Am I familiar with how to request government-held information?
- Do I know about the Open Meetings law?
- Do I go to any public meetings?
- Do I have the facts? Have I read or heard information from more than one source?
- Have I reached an educated opinion?
- Do I have my own specific recommendations?
- Have I made my opinions known to those responsible for the situation?
- Have I volunteered publicly?
- Have I told others about the issue?
  - Have I called in to radio programs?
  - Have I written a letter to the editor?
  - Have I volunteered on a cable access shows?
  - Did I send mail?
  - Have I circulated or signed a petition?
  - Did I become a member of any civic organizations?

## Build Endurance

- Have I set an example for others?
- Have I organized and inspired others to become active?
- Have I made a contribution of time, money, or ideas to organizations dedicated to my concerns?
- Have I encouraged others to become leaders?

## Evaluation of Program

- Have I followed through on my vision?
- Do I need to make revisions to make participating on a regular basis possible?
- Am I happier leading an active civic life?
- Have I made a contribution to my community, my country and my world?