



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Introduction to Active Citizenship

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Introduction to Active Citizenship Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: Government, Activism; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing.

Duration: 4 class sessions

Description: This lesson provides students with an overview of activism in government and communities. Students will identify and discuss methods of citizen participation, create and express possible policy solutions for local issues of concern, and address policy concerns to actual decision-makers in government.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards:

1. **Social Science:** 14D, 18B; and
2. **English/Language Arts:** 1B, 1C; 3A, 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B; 5A.

Objectives:

1. Identify the many ways citizens may participate in government;
2. Identify and suggest democratic tools that can be used in a particular situation;
3. Create and express policy positions on issues of local importance;
4. Research a public official's position on an issue; and
5. Write appropriate letters to a local representative on a specific issue.

Materials:

1. Pens and paper;
2. Chalkboard/Overhead;
3. "Letters to Elected Officials" Handout (one per student).

Instruction and Activities:

Day 1:

1. Ask students if they or their parents have ever voted in an election. What or who were they voting for? Do they think voting is important? Voting is one way citizens can participate in a democracy, and is often the activity we think of first, but there are many other ways citizens can participate.

2. Have students brainstorm a list of ways they can participate in government (local, state, and national levels). Write ideas on the board and have students write down the methods as well. Compare their results to the list below. Is anything missing?

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Examples of Ways Citizens Can Participate

- Reading different sources of news: newspapers, magazines, reference material;
- Voting in school or classroom elections;
- Running for office or holding public office;
- Holding a group discussion about an issue;
- Trying to convince someone to vote a certain way;
- Drafting a petition or signing a petition for a cause;
- Wearing a button with a political message or putting a sticker with a political message on your bike or car;
- Giving money to a cause;
- Writing a letter to a public official;
- Campaigning for a candidate;
- Writing a letter to the editor of your school paper or local newspaper;
- Attending a government meeting;
- Making a public comment at a government meeting;
- Organizing an after-school group to discuss issues;
- Volunteering;
- Disobeying laws and accepting the consequences to show that a law or policy is unjust;
- Participating in a protest march or boycott; and
- Joining an interest group.

3. How many students have participated in ways that students brainstormed? Having all the students sitting, start going through the list. Students who have participated in the activity named should stand. How far down the list did you go before everyone was standing? Ask the students the following questions:

- Are you surprised by the results? Why or why not?
- Of the list of ways to participate, which would you be most likely to engage in? Least likely to engage in? Why?

4. Have students take the list home and interview a family member as to which of the activities they have participated in. When did they engage in the activities, do they still participate, what keeps them from participating more (if this applies), and which methods of participation do they think are most advantageous or desirable and why? Students should write out their answers to turn in.

Day 2:

Have students discuss their results from the assignment in the large class setting. What methods of participation have their parents engaged in? Who was surprised by the amount of participation? Which methods did parents like the most and why?

Day 3:

Activity: Campaign Committees

1. Tell the students that now it's time for the students to think of specific local issues they care about. What kind of issue would motivate them to take action? Have students brainstorm a list

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of five or ten items. For example, school issues like dress code, prayer in school, lunch concerns, community service requirements. Encourage students also to think outside of their school community to address issues such as local curfew laws, skateboard parks, students riding in cars with other students under age 18.

2. Split students into small groups. Each group represents a campaign committee for a local mayoral candidate. Have each group pick one student to be the candidate. What results would each group like to see to the issues raised, how would the results address the concerns raised, and how would their solutions address everyone's concerns, not just theirs? Each group should draft policy statements which should include answers to the following questions:

- 1) What is the policy and why is it important?
- 2) Why is this policy good for the entire community?
- 3) What are the steps that need to be taken to implement this policy?

3. Have each mayoral candidate and/or members of each campaign committee present the drafted policies to the class. Have the class take a vote to see which candidate would win if the mayoral race depended on the policy positions given. Why did students vote for one candidate over the others and why did the winner prevail?

4. Assignment: Have each group pick one issue they focused on in the last activity and investigate what their city officials' (whether it be the mayor or school board president) actual stance is and why. This information may be found in local papers, on the web, or students may need to contact the appropriate official. Give students one week to gather the information.

Day 4:

Activity: Writing to a Representative

Now that the students have gathered the information on a local issue, have them draft a letter to their local official agreeing or disagreeing with the position. Letters should 1) convey their opinion, 2) list three reasons supporting their opinion, and 3) ask for a response. Students should peer edit their letters before sending them out.

Sources consulted:

www.civnet.org

Clayton DeKorne and Yasmin Chen Eisenhauer, "Defining Issues" The Learning Network: Teaching and Learning with the New York Times, May 9, 2002.

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2002/05/09/defining-issues/>

LETTERS TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

One way to address an issue is to write a letter to the editor of local or area newspapers. Even more crucial, though, is that you contact your public officials. Make them aware that you are a knowledgeable and involved citizen. Put forth your views concerning the issues and request their support. Do not forget to remind your public official that you expect them to reply.

The following is a sample format for a letter to your State Representative or Senator.

Date
The Honorable _____ Address of Home Office
Dear Honorable _____:
[Jump into your letter: who are you and what do you want, i.e., you are a voter in her district and you want her to support House Bill XYZQ, the “title of the legislation” bill.]
I am a registered voter in your District, and I want you to vote yes on HB XYZQ, “The _____ Act.”
[What is your concern? Your letter need not be a scholarly exposition of the issue—a short paragraph will do.]
[What do you want your representative to do? For example, introduce or support legislation, hold public hearings, meet with you, etc.]
Please keep me informed of your efforts toward reform and vote yes on HB XYZQ. I look forward to your response.
Sincerely,
Your name Title/Affiliation Address Phone Number (Some elected officials will call you)