



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Municipal Government: The Most Local Form of Government and Where Citizens Can Have the Greatest Impact

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: U.S., State and Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing.

Duration: 2-3 class sessions

Description: This lesson provides an overview of municipal government in Illinois, the most local form of government and where citizens can have the greatest impact.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14A, 14D; 16A, 16B, 16C; 18B, 18C; and

B. English/Language Arts: 3A, 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B; 5A, 5B, 5C.

Objectives:

1. Understand the concept of municipal government;
2. Identify the functions of municipal government and how it affects daily life; and
3. Identify ways in which residents of a municipality can influence municipal government actions.

Materials:

1. Paper/pens;
2. Access to library or internet research resources; and
3. Copies of recent editions of local newspapers from municipalities where students live.

Instruction and Activity

Lecture:

A municipality is a defined geographic area with a common governing body. There may be other government bodies within a municipality, such as school districts, park districts, and library districts, but a municipality is a government body that specifically addresses the general residential needs. Under the Illinois Constitution, municipalities are “cities, villages and towns.” There are over 1,200 municipalities in Illinois. What makes a given municipality a city,

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village, or town depends on the specific government structure. For example, cities have mayors whereas villages have presidents. Municipal government has many functions that impact the day to day life of residents, such as defining building regulations, implementing and enforcing parking rules, and determining how local tax payer dollars are spent.

Municipal Government Meetings

City councils or village boards meet at regular times each month. These regular meetings are open to the public as required by the Illinois Open Meetings Act, a state law requiring that the public be notified of government meetings and permitted to attend. Most city and villages allow members of the public to speak at the meeting. When the public has the opportunity to speak at government meetings, it is referred to as “public comment.”

Question: What are some examples of local municipalities? What are some examples of what your municipality does versus a school or park district?

Forms of Municipal Government

Each municipal government has a central governing body known as a city council or village board that must perform a number of tasks, falling into three categories: 1) legislative; 2) executive and administrative, and 3) financial. Every council or board is responsible for the legislative and financial management of the municipality, but there are differences in the way executive and administrative tasks are handled. Those differences depend on the form of municipal government. In Illinois, there are three forms of municipal government: 1) commission, 2) managerial, and 3) strong mayor.

The **Commission** form of municipal government consists of a mayor and four commissioners elected from the entire community, or at-large. Each commissioner serves as the head commissioner of one of the following: accounts and finances, public health and safety, streets and public improvements, or public property. In this form of government, the mayor and commissioners share the executive and administrative tasks.

The **Managerial** form of municipal government may consist of a mayor and aldermen elected at-large, or a mayor and aldermen elected by wards. In this form of municipal government, the council is responsible only for creating legislation, meaning the local ordinances and resolutions. The city manager, who is an employee of the city and not an elected official, is responsible for all administrative and executive functions.

The **Strong Mayor** form of municipal government has a mayor and aldermen elected by wards. There may also be a City Clerk and/or a Treasurer elected at-large. The mayor has managerial powers and can appoint or remove heads of departments or members of commissions without council approval. In this form of government, the mayor is responsible for executive and administrative tasks.

Functions of Municipal Government

The primary function of a municipal government is to tax residents to generate revenue, to regulate the activities that occur within its boundaries, and to determine how to spend taxpayer dollars to meet the financial needs of the municipality.

Regulation

Ordinances are the local laws of a town, city or village that are voted on by city council and the mayor. If an ordinance passes, it becomes law and is usually part of what is known as the city “code.” The code contains all of the ordinances that the municipality has passed.

Resolutions: A resolution is not a new law. Rather a resolution expresses an opinion on behalf of the municipality or commits the municipality to a potential future course of action.

Spending

Budget: Budgets list all tax income and other sources of revenue and detail how the municipality intends to spend the revenue over the course of one year.

Taxing

Municipalities determine how much each person who owns property within a municipality must pay. The “levy” is the tax amount that must be paid.

Activities:

1. Municipal Government Research: Who are the local decision makers in your municipal government? Students will conduct research to find information about their municipality’s government. Note: For students that live in unincorporated areas, have them do the assignment on the municipality closest to where they live.

Assignment: Research the answers to the following questions. Do your research by using the internet or library resources or interviewing a local official.

- a. What municipality do you live in?
- b. Who is the mayor or president of your municipality?
- c. How many members sit on your city council or village board?
- d. Do members of your city council or village board represent the entire city as at-large representatives or do they represent just a part of the city, such as a district or ward?
- e. Is your municipal government organized as a commission, managerial, or strong mayor form?
- f. When are local elections? Who can vote in them?
- g. On what day and time does your city council or village board meet?
- h. Where are council or board meetings held?
- i. Does the board allow the public to speak? What are the rules?
- j. Name one item on the most recent agenda of your city council or village board.
- k. What are some of the functions of your local government?
- l. What are 3 activities done by your municipality that you think are important?

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Follow-up questions for class discussion:

How difficult or easy was it to get this information on your local government?

What were the best sources?

Has anyone ever attended a city council or village board meeting? Has anyone ever spoken or given public comment at one of these meetings?

What are the most important functions of municipal government?

2. Meet local decision makers.

Assignment: Divide students into small groups. Each group should look through recent local newspapers and identify an issue that has been discussed, or brainstorm and research an issue of concern that they identify. Have each group make arrangements to meet with a local public official to interview them about the issue. The students should draft five to ten interview questions to help them learn the public official's position on the issue. Groups can then report back to the class.

3. Attend a municipal meeting: How do citizens interact with municipal government?

Assignment: Ask students to attend an upcoming municipal meeting. To prove attendance, students should collect an agenda sheet and have the city clerk sign it. Alternatively, arrange with a city clerk or other official to collect attendance. Have students write a report about what occurred at the meeting, addressing the following points in two to three paragraphs each:

- a. Describe one item on the agenda that the council members discussed before voting.
- b. Did any citizens address the council or board during a public comment period? If so, describe one commenter's speech to the council. If you wanted to speak during a public comment period, would you be able to? What would you speak about?
- c. Identify an agenda item that impacts your daily life in some way and describe how that item affects you. Be creative.