



California Cities Helen Putnam Award for Excellence Carlsbad - Introduces Students To City Government

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The City of Carlsbad, recognizing an opportunity to create a connection between the municipal government and residents through its children, developed the CityStuff elementary school curriculum for third-graders, who were not being taught about local government in the public schools.

Carlsbad students typically learned about federal and state government functions but were taught little or nothing about local government, despite the fact that it's the level of government closest to the people. However, third-graders studied Carlsbad history, making a program about city government a natural tie-in with the regular curriculum.

Three school districts maintain elementary schools within the city limits, where the population grew from 65,331 in 1992 to 88,013 in 2002. As a result, many families who were new to the area did not identify naturally with Carlsbad or have a connection with the city.

Putting the Program Together

In 2002, Carlsbad committed funds and staff resources to develop an academic program that addressed this issue. The city partnered with the business community and Junior Achievement (JA), a nonprofit worldwide organization that seeks to educate and inspire young people to succeed in a global economy, and the three school districts agreed to participate in the project.

In five years, the CityStuff program has grown from its modest beginnings of 240 students in two schools to more than 1,340 students in 61 classrooms in 14 schools. Although the format and materials have been continually enhanced, the framework that was set in the beginning still stands. Each trained volunteer (or two-person team), provided with materials, visits a third-grade classroom one hour a week for six weeks. Thanks to corporate sponsorship and a growing base of volunteers, the program costs the city approximately \$120 per class.

How It Works

Using hands-on activities, CityStuff teaches how Carlsbad government functions and helps students and their families explore opportunities to participate in the local government process. The first four lessons, which are part of the JA curriculum, help students learn about building and maintaining a city, and about the businesses that are part of the city. Volunteers share knowledge, display city officials' photos and discuss their roles. They also bring in guest speakers from the city and local business community. Students learn the Carlsbad Government Rap, which explains the process of local government in a fun and memorable way.

The fifth and sixth lessons focus on the city as a living democracy. Volunteers use three books developed specifically for CityStuff to teach students how every vote counts and that just one vote set the wheels in motion for the city's incorporation in 1952. They learn about the city seal and create their own, depicting what Carlsbad represents to them.

The sixth lesson offers a memorable exercise: Each class visits the city council chambers and conducts a scripted mock council meeting. Parents are invited to attend. Every student plays a role as the mock council ponders whether to save or cut down a beautiful old tree whose roots are growing through a sidewalk. The mock meeting is conducted like a genuine council meeting. Two families speak on opposing sides of the dilemma. After a motion is made, the mock council votes, deciding whether to allow staff to cut the tree down or respond to the community members who want the tree saved.

CityStuff concludes with a visit from a council member or city official who speaks with students and parents. The students learn that everyone has a voice in local government and that elected officials make difficult decisions based on fact-finding and on what is best for Carlsbad, while setting aside their personal beliefs.

Program Generates Enthusiasm

Some parents and teachers say the mock council meeting marks their first visit to Carlsbad City Hall, and most say it won't be the last. Several students have announced they intend to run for city council when they grow up.

CityStuff's popularity has enabled the city to expand the number of volunteers and classrooms as well as the amount of sponsorship. The involvement of supportive city council members has paid off in ways that are inspiring and sometimes humorous. On one visit, Carlsbad Mayor Bud Lewis shook each child's hand, causing one boy to declare, "I'll never wash my hand again!"

The public is informed about CityStuff through the city's publications, videos and website. The program also generates positive news stories about the city.

CityStuff engages city residents as volunteers in the classroom. The group's dynamic mix of seasoned and new volunteers has included school district trustees, a retired principal, parents, teachers, a city attorney, city staff, a newspaper editor, business owners and community leaders. The volunteers have said that they enjoy the program and learn as much as the students they are teaching.

The CityStuff website (<http://ci.carlsbad.ca.us/chall/citystuff3>), created in 2005, has been a boon to volunteer solicitation and an ideal vehicle for disseminating information. People can learn about the program, download materials and obtain answers to their questions online.

CityStuff comments show the program has effectively reached its targeted audiences. Teachers and principals praise the program and offer suggestions for improvement, which the city has incorporated. One teacher commented, "CityStuff brings social studies to life." A principal wrote, "This program has been a delight. The presenters were well prepared, the activities are engaging and the correlation with state standards is spot-on."

Steve Ahle, principal of the Pacific Rim Elementary School, observed, "As the program builds the kids' knowledge of city activities and government, they become good citizens. CityStuff educates the kids, who educate their parents."

One student wrote to her CityStuff teacher, "I loved doing the rap after every lesson. I went home and told my parents everything." Another student wrote, "My favorite thing was when the police came and we got to sit on their motor bikes."

Volunteers relish the opportunity to participate; some say the experience has changed their life. Charlotte Wells, a volunteer since 2004, said, "The children refresh and energize me. They make me refocus on the things in life that are really important." The program has also provided a great morale boost to city staff who participate, freeing them to move beyond their job descriptions and grow professionally and personally.

Whether working in partnership with an educational nonprofit organization like Junior Achievement or beginning from scratch, CityStuff demonstrates that it's possible to develop an engaging, interactive curriculum that enables students and parents to bond with their home town, learn about their community and discover how democracy functions at the local level.

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