

Who Are The Players In Local Government And How Can You Get Involved?

A. WHAT STUDENTS WILL LEARN IN UNIT THREE

Students will understand the process of decision-making at the local level, and how groups and individuals influence that process. Students will be able to:

- Identify the principal elected and appointed office holders and describe the primary duties of these major office holders in local government.
- Describe the function of boards and commissions at the city and county level and explain how commissioners differ from elected officials and full-time employees.
- List several non-governmental groups in the community which influence local government decisions and describe the basis of each group's power.
- Explain what processes should be followed for an individual to effectively influence the way decisions are made at the local level.

B. ADDITIONAL STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Have individual students in your classes shadow local city or county officials or staff for a day, and then report to the whole class on this experience. Have those students reproduce the official's daily calendar and compare it with a class-developed daily schedule.
2. Develop a youth-in-government day program in your school district. Students could be assigned city or county counterparts, deal with several issues and hold a mock council hearing. Models of this type of program are available from the League of California Cities or the Citizenship and Law-Related Education Center. (See the resource section at the end of this teacher's guide.)
3. Invite the newspaper reporter who covers your local governing body. Have the reporter share with the class positions taken by different community groups in the recent past. What posi-

tion did the reporter's paper take on the issues, if any? What arguments and tactics were used by different groups? Have the reporter critique showcase activity three, which has the class debate having a professional football team come to their community.

4. Have students conduct a survey to determine which adults have the greatest influence. Which groups in your local community wield the most influence on policy-makers? Does a single company dominate, or the business community at large? Are there groups in your community beyond those shown in Unit III?
5. Using class sets of newspapers (Newspaper in Education projects) or newspapers from home, students can track one or more community groups over a period of several weeks to determine what impact these groups have on a community issue.
6. Individuals or groups could each be assigned one of the city or county officials and prepare a presentation, which would include job requirements, expertise needed to qualify, salary and a listing of duties on a daily basis as well as overall responsibilities. This information could be prepared on a chart for class display or for a presentation to parents.

C. UNIT THREE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of electing council members at-large? What compromise has been developed in some cities? How are your council members or county supervisors elected?

Possible student responses

- a. *Advantages are that voters may have more options and the focus of the elected official can be city- or countywide, rather than restricted, at times, to a smaller district. The disadvantages are that council members may all reside in one area of a city, and that running a campaign throughout an entire city or county is more expensive than one in a smaller district. It may also be more difficult for ethnic minority members to be elected.*
- b. *Candidates represent specific geographical districts, but are elected citywide or countywide. This addresses several issues, but not the cost of campaigning.*
- c. *Answers will vary. In some communities, voters have switched back and forth on the issue over the years.*

Question 2. Which of the following groups have the most influence over the way your community government makes decisions: Education leaders, developers, large employers, labor unions, news media, religious leaders? Explain your choice.

Possible student response

Answers will vary by community. A point of emphasis for the teacher would be that sometimes the most influential groups will change, based on the particular issue. However, land developers and real estate persons are often important players because so many issues at the local level deal with land use questions.

Question 3. What are the most efficient ways of having your voice heard on issues facing your local government agency? Rank the strategies according to effectiveness in your own community.

Possible student responses

- a. *Know the issue, present good information, make personal contact, meet with staff, talk with the media, anticipate the opposition, remember there is strength in numbers and use good sense.*
- b. *Answers will vary by community and individuals. The point is to have students analyze the strategies and their own community. You may develop a class ranking for additional discussion and analysis.*

D. INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Unit III offers an opportunity for:

- language arts or English classes to work with students on letter writing to public officials, an opportunity found in the other units as well.
- business or language arts classes to practice business letter writing skills (which helps meet California’s education reform requirements).
- science students to present information on recycling in your community, if that is an activity chosen in the Unit III section on Making Your Voice Heard in City Hall.

E. CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Unit Three: Who Are The “Players” In Local Government And How Can You Get Involved?

Answer Key to Questions on Page 46

- 1. What will the ballot and voter pamphlet NOT tell you about any candidates for local government offices?

Their party affiliation

- 2. Why can the mayor be called “first among equals” in most cities?

They have few powers beyond those of other council members.

- 3. In most California cities, who elects the mayor?

The city council

- 4. What two California cities elect a mayor who does not also serve on the city council?

Los Angeles and San Francisco

- 5. What is the minimum number elected to most boards and councils in California local governments?

Five

- 6. Which voters do you seek when you run in an “at-large” election?

All voters in the area covered by the election

- 7. As of 1994, how many cities elect council members by district?

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- 8. Why can district elections open up the process to more potential candidates?

It’s cheaper to campaign.

- 9. Why did a federal court find the city of Watsonville’s at-large system to be illegal?

A substantial ethnic minority of the community was not represented on the city council.

- 10. Who is responsible for presenting a proposed budget to the city council in most cities?

The city manager

11. With whom do you file your campaign expense reports when you run for city council?

The city clerk

12. If you sue your city government, who is likely to oppose your attorney in court?

The city attorney

13. Whose job is it to determine whether a city's revenues will be sufficient to meet expenses?

The finance director and/or city treasurer

14. What arm of city government is often considered to be a springboard for running for city council?

Boards and commissions

15. Who elects the presiding officer of a county board of supervisors?

The other supervisors

16. What decisions do school board members make that might make them key players in their community?

Complete authority over the school system

17. Name an issue that usually draws a crowd to a school board meeting.

Which subjects should be taught in the classroom

18. Name at least two county office holders — other than supervisors — who are elected by the voters.

Sheriffs, coroners, district attorneys, auditors, tax collectors, assessors, county clerks

19. What is a possible negative effect of electing council members by district instead of "at large"?

May discourage a citywide view on the part of council members

20. Which industry normally is the most directly dependent on the actions of a city council or county board of supervisors?

The real estate development industry

21. Which unions usually have the most influence over the actions of a city council?

Those representing city employees

22. In your community, do you believe that newspapers, radio or television give local government issues more coverage? Explain your choice.

There are often too many local governments within a media market to get TV or radio coverage.

23. What is the Golden Rule as applied to political debate and lobbying?

Don't do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.