



Local Government

On a cold January morning in Philadelphia a massive snowstorm blankets the city. The men and women working in the city's Highway and Sanitation Division know that they will be busy around the clock salting and plowing Philadelphia's 2,290 miles of streets. Later that morning, in Sacramento, the fog lifts and a mother and her three-year-old daughter prepare to take their black Labrador Retriever to play at Partner Park, a beautiful 2.5 acre dog park with lights, benches, water and doggie waste bag dispensers. In San Antonio that afternoon, two 10th grade students walk to their local library to work together on a world history project due later that week. They will stay late at the library that day because a Medieval and Renaissance ensemble is performing early music from the time of Robin Hood in the library's auditorium. And that evening, in Williamsburg, Virginia, two friends set out for the recreation center to play in a highly contested pick-up basketball game.

All of these relatively routine life events are under the control and direction of local governments. The scope of local government is vast. As these few examples illustrate, local governments are responsible for such diverse matters as public works, neighborhood services, education, supporting art and culture, and recreational activities. In other words, it is in local government where we are most likely to interact with government officials and employees. It is local governments, not state governments or the federal government, which are likely to have the most visible presence in our daily lives.

Governance at the local level centers on individuals working and communicating face-to-face. A candidate for office will walk door-to-door through a neighborhood seeking votes. An irate citizen might merely call the home of a city official to voice a complaint. Small meetings held in town halls or school auditoriums are used as places for local officials to hear suggestions and get input from the citizens they represent.

The purpose of this investigation of local government is to provide students with knowledge of how they are affected by the decisions of local officials and to give students the tools to influence public policy. It is also intended to demystify the political process. In doing so, we hope that the learning activities provided encourage students to participate in civic life and become politically active in their own communities.

Overview of the *Local Government Unit*

This curriculum is intended to provide teachers with a framework to deliver an intense examination of local and community governance. The curriculum can be used by an entire school or school district involved with *Student Voices*, or it can be used by a solitary teacher looking for a series of academically rigorous learning activities that students will find highly engaging.

This curriculum intentionally relies upon the wealth of resources available on the Internet. At present, there exists an incredibly rich array of documents, video clips, archival materials, sound recordings and demographic data accessible online through the *Student Voices* Web site. We make use of these resources here. We also provide teachers with a step-by-step guide to finding and using such materials in class. The curriculum assumes that teachers are moderately familiar with using digital technology, but we provide detailed instructions so that teachers who are novice Web users can gain access to the enhanced learning these resources provide. While these materials are best used by students who have dependable access to computers, we also provide suggestions for teachers on how to prepare materials ahead of time for classrooms or schools that lack high-speed Internet access.

Local Government features four primary modules:

- In the first module, *Livable Communities: What Are They? How Do We Create Them?*, students reflect on what makes a community a good place to live. Students also are introduced to ways of participating in civic life both individually and collectively. Finally, students begin to confront the question: “How can I, working with a small group of like-minded people, bring about meaningful change in my community?”

- In the second module, *Understanding How Local Government Works*, students receive an overview of the commonalities in both aims and methods of operation in general-purpose governments. Students are then asked discover the exact duties, purposes and methods of decision-making of the local government that they are studying.
- The third module, *The Many Participants in Local Government*, focuses on various participants in local government. Sometimes the participation is at the individual level; sometimes organized groups of people sharing a common view may get together to try to influence public policy. Accordingly, in these lessons students strive to understand the roles and levels of influence of various participants.
- In the final module, *Making Your Voice Heard*, students present their culminating project, the Youth Issues Agenda, and reflect on what they have learned about local government and the work they accomplished.

Learning to Think

As teachers, most of us require students to utilize a variety of skills. Listening is an essential skill in almost every setting. In the world of politics and government, an additional sense-based skill is looking. Learning to listen and observe carefully—to examine the details of proposals that are being made and the images that are used to persuade—provides necessary information for subsequent critical thinking. After careful listening and looking, we are able to make informed analysis of the facts of an issue or the possible consequences of a particular policy; and by using skills of interpretation, understand the importance of a particular political position on our own self, family or culture. We can then use our communication skills (talking and writing) to share our insights with others. Learning to look, listen, analyze and interpret is at the heart of the learning activities in *Student Voices*. Employing communication skills successfully is central to our assessments.

There are a number of valuable online resources on critical thinking, including: [The Critical Thinking Community \(http://www.criticalthinking.org\)](http://www.criticalthinking.org), [Critical Thinking on](#)

[the Web \(http://www.austhink.org/critical/\)](http://www.austhink.org/critical/), and [The Thinking Classroom \(http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/index.cfm\)](http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/index.cfm).

Teaching for Understanding

Local Government is presented using the [Teaching for Understanding \(http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/tfu/\)](http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/tfu/) framework. The Teaching for Understanding framework includes four key ideas—1) generative topics, 2) understanding goals, 3) performances of understanding and 4) ongoing assessment. *Teaching for Understanding* is a set of general guidelines developed by researchers at Harvard University in the 1990s that links pedagogy to planning and instruction. In this framework there are four questions that always need to be asked when teaching:

- What topics are worth understanding?
- What about these topics needs to be understood?
- How shall we foster understanding?
- How can students and teachers assess what students understand?

Flowing from these four questions are the essential elements of the *Teaching for Understanding* framework:

1. *Generative Topics*: These topics of exploration have multiple connections to students' interests and experiences and can be learned in a wide variety of ways. They are central to the discipline, engaging to both students and teachers, and build on previous topics.
2. *Understanding Goals*: Statements or questions that express what is most important for students to understand during the period of a unit, a course or over a school year.
3. *Performances of Understanding*: Activities that both develop and demonstrate students' understanding of the understanding goals by requiring them to use what they know in new ways.
4. *Ongoing Assessment*: The process by which students get continual feedback about their performances of understanding in order to improve them.

The lessons that follow are organized around this framework.

Structure of the Lesson Plans

In *Teaching for Understanding* performances of understanding occur throughout the unit from beginning to end. Performances are learning activities that allow students to reshape, expand on, extrapolate from and apply what they already know. The purpose of performances is to chart students' learning processes. Our lessons (performances) are of three types:

- a) *Exploratory/introductory* - lessons that utilize an introductory performance to introduce a topic and allow for initial student engagement. Frequently, these performances allow the teacher to gain insight into students' current understanding of a topic, and at the same time create a connection between students' personal interests and the topics.
- b) *Guided inquiry* - lessons that require full engagement of the student and lead to students developing an understanding of key problems of the generative topic. Guided inquiry performances typically occur in the middle of units.
- c) *Culminating performances* - lessons that are more complex and provide an opportunity for students to reveal how they have synthesized key concepts and earlier performances of understanding.

We structure our lesson plans so that the connection between the performance and the ongoing assessment is obvious. We also highlight the skill strands that are essential to the performance of understanding. These may be intellectual skills (e.g., crafting a logical argument) or technical skills (creating a blog, collaboratively writing a wiki).