Counties and Municipalities: What's the Difference?

Overview

While counties and municipalities both provide services to their residents, they are formed in different ways, have a different basis for providing services, and exercise their authority differently. In this lesson, students will learn about the basis of county and city government and, through role plays, will explore some of the major differences between counties and municipalities.

NC Essential Standards for American History: The Founding Principles, Civics & Economics

- FP.C&G.2.1 - Analyze the structures of national, state and local governments in terms of ways they are organized to maintain order, security, welfare of the public and the protection of citizens
- FP.C&G.2.2 - Summarize the functions of North Carolina state and local governments within the federal system of government
- FP.C&G.2.6 - Evaluate the authority federal, state and local governments have over individuals' rights and privileges
- FP.C&G.2.7 - Analyze contemporary issues and governmental responses at the local, state, and national levels in terms of how they promote the public interest and/or general welfare

Essential Questions

- How are counties established?
- How are cities incorporated?
- What types of services do cities and counties provide?
- What are the roles of elected officials and staff?
- What is the council-manager form of government?
- In what ways do cities and counties cooperate?

Materials

- "Counties and Cities, What's the Difference? PowerPoint"; available in Carolina K-12's Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format) at:
    - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click "View" in the top menu bar of the file, and select "Full Screen Mode"
    - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu
- Poster board or chart paper
- Access to computers or computer lab
- Venn Diagram Template, attached
- "Who You Gonna Call?" role play assignments
- *Local Government in North Carolina* (optional online resource). Available here: https://www.sog.unc.edu/publications/books/local-government-north-carolina-fourth-edition-2012-0
- Sample test questions, attached
- Local government resource person(optional)

Duration

- 60-90 minutes for PowerPoint overview and role plays
- Additional time required if choosing to do optional culminating activity

Procedure

Basis of County Government

1. As a warm-up, project slide 2 of the "Counties and Cities, What's the Difference?" PowerPoint and ask students what they think of when they hear about "**local government**." Facilitate a brief discussion based on students' prior knowledge of local government. Continue through the PowerPoint to explain the basis and history of counties in our government:

   - Our oldest unit of local government is the **county**. Rooted in England, the county form of government came to North America with the English colonists. Colonies were divided into counties to carry out laws in rural areas. Because farmers lived far apart, county business was done at a place most people could reach within a day's wagon journey. This distance to the '**county seat**' set the boundaries of many counties. Today, most counties help state governments keep law and order and collect taxes. Counties may also offer many other services, from libraries to health care.
   - Counties were established by the **North Carolina General Assembly** to make basic government services more readily available throughout the state. **County lines** were drawn and redrawn from 1776 to 1912, when the last of the one hundred counties was created. Counties continue to carry out state requirements but they also have the authority to take on additional roles above and beyond these basic services.

2. Stop on slide 6 of the PowerPoint and arrange students in groups of three and give each group a piece of chart paper or poster board. Give groups 5 minutes to brainstorm different services they think are provided by county government. Tell them they are in competition to see who can think of the most. After 5 minutes, have a representative of each group go before the class with their group's list. Quickly go through each list checking that services are, in fact, provided by the local county government (as opposed to city, state or national government). After congratulating the group that came up with the most correct answers, continue with slides 7-11 of the power point, referring back to student lists when possible. (See the attached list for additional county/municipality services.)

   Optional: Hand out the attached Venn Diagram on which students can write down the final list of correct services.

Basics of City/Municipal Government

3. So what do cities do? Continue on to slide 12-18 of the PowerPoint, explaining to students that cities, or municipalities, are "**incorporated**" within counties because the people living there want a more "local" provision of public services, a means for providing public order and improving the community, and the right to participate in local decision making. Municipalities must be incorporated by act of the General Assembly, which defines the geographic boundaries of the municipality and approves its charter. The **charter** may call the municipality a city, a town, or a village; in North Carolina, these terms carry no special legal meaning and are not tied to the population of the municipality as in some other states.

   Also, explain that cities are not *mandated* to provide any services at all, though they do have the authority to provide certain services under an act of the General Assembly dating to 1855. Over time, individual municipalities and groups of municipalities have been given additional authority. Still, because basic needs are fairly consistent from one municipality to another, the larger cities and towns provide many of the same services: water supply, wastewater treatment, police and fire protection, garbage collection, planning and zoning, and building inspection. Some municipalities operate additional services, such as airports, auditoriums, bus systems, cemeteries, electric or gas systems, parks and recreation programs, public housing, and traffic control. *Oftentimes, counties and municipalities will work together to coordinate for the most efficient provision of services.

4. *Optional Activity:* Using your school's computer lab, have pairs of students work together to explore services their county and/or municipality specifically provide by going to your county/municipality website. The following link may be helpful for finding county websites:
   https://www.sog.unc.edu/resources/microsites/knapp-library/counties-north-carolina

Again, using the attached template, have students create a Venn Diagram that shows different services provided by each local government, and responsibilities shared by each (if applicable). Once students have had ample exploration time, return to class and discuss students' findings.

5. Next, ask students who they think is "in charge" in North Carolina local government. Answers are likely to include citizens, the mayor, the manager, council members, commissioners, etc. Explain that authority is different at the county and municipal levels. They differ accordingly:
   - **Counties**: Voters in each county elect a board of county commissioners, a sheriff, and a register of deeds. While the board of county commissioners has general responsibility for county government, this board shares authority for setting county policy with other officials — state officials, the sheriff, the register of deeds, and independent county boards that oversee elections, mental health services, public health services, social services, and alcoholic beverage control. However, funds to support these services must be raised by the board of county commissioners and the budgets must be approved by the board of county commissioners, giving the board of county commissioners the potential to influence these programs as well.
   - **Municipalities:** Voters in each municipality elect their own governing board, called a council, board of aldermen, or board of commissioners. In some municipalities, a mayor is elected separately from other members of the governing board, while in other municipalities, citizens elect members of the governing board and then the governing board selects a mayor from within the group. The governing board makes all official decisions for the city, including setting the local tax rate, adopting the budget, making policies for services, passing ordinances to regulate behavior, and entering agreements on behalf of the municipality. Advisory boards — made up of citizens appointed by the governing board -- often offer recommendations in areas such as planning and parks and recreation, but nearly all final decisions are made by the municipality's governing board.

County or Municipal Government Role Plays – "Who You Gonna Call?"

6. Stop at slide 19 and explain to students that they will receive a scenario involving an issue or problem that a local government would be responsible for addressing. In groups of 3, they must figure out how to stage the scenario into a scene they will act out, communicating all relevant details. Tell students that they should be creative and they are allowed to deviate from the role play as it is written as long as the main points are made clear to the class. After each scene, the audience will determine whether the county or municipal government is most likely responsible for addressing the scenario, answering the question "Who you gonna call?" They should use their notes and/or the "Services Provided by Municipalities and Counties" list, attached, as a guide. Remind students that a great deal of overlap can occur, as county and municipality responsibilities and relationships can vary greatly by county.

7. Distribute the scenarios (attached) and give students around 10 minutes to stage and practice their scenes, which should last around 2 minutes each. Tell students they may use anything within the room as a prop, and they may also use narration at the beginning of their scene to set the stage if needed. Tell students to make their role plays as specific and detailed as possible so that the class can accurately guess which local government, county or municipality, is most likely to be responsible for "answering the call." Remind students that their main concern is whether the local government entity that would be involved in addressing the situation presented in the role play is county, municipal, or both. Teachers can then discuss which individual departments would be involved in the debriefing questions below. Once students have had enough time to prepare, discuss your expectations for student behavior during presentations, and randomly select groups to present. After each role play, discuss what occurred with the class:
   - Role Play 1:
     - If you are threatened or attacked by a loose animal such as this, is the issue one to be handled by the city or county in which you live? (Counties are usually responsible for animal control and animal shelters. If assistance is needed within city limits, county animal control divisions are likely responsible, but they may receive assistance from the municipal police department.)

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- o Does anyone know which particular county department would handle a situation like this? (animal control)
- Role Play 2:
  - o If you need to learn about public transportation options and schedules in your area, should you contact the city or county in which you live? (Cities are usually responsible for providing public transportation to citizens.)
  - o Unfortunately, government services cannot be perfectly efficient all the time. Has anyone had an experience similar to Elton's? Can anyone describe a time they were particularly pleased with a city service? (for example, fare free bus service)
- Role Play 3:
  - o If you wanted to engage in discussion with local elected officials about annexation and/or development in your area, would you speak with city council members or county commissioners? (City council members; city government deals with urban growth. However, counties are often also involved in the deliberation and decision-making process.)
  - o Does anyone know what city department deals with zoning for development? (planning department)
  - o What would you prefer near your house, a mall or woods? Why?
- Role Play 4:
  - o Which local government would you call if you had problems with your water? (Counties are usually responsible for water supply and protection, though it is also important for cities to play a role in conservation and curbing pollution.)
  - o What are some ways you can conserve water during a period of little rain? (turn water off when you brush your teeth, take shorter showers, only flush when necessary, etc.)
- Role Play 5:
  - o Who would Kevin need to contact in order to set up an appointment for his vaccinations? (Counties are responsible for public health services.)
  - o Does anyone know of any other public health services counties provide? (restaurant inspections, health education, healthcare for people who cannot afford a private provider)
- Role Play 6:
  - o Which local government should Courtney contact to inquire about a speed bump in her neighborhood? (Cities are responsible for traffic control.)
  - o What are some other ways cities can help control neighborhood traffic? (post signs, construct round-abouts, etc.)
- Role Play 7:
  - o If Jason decides Lance needs professional help, which local government would he contact to learn about services? (Counties are responsible for mental health services and often substance abuse issues.)
- Role Play 8:
  - o If you were concerned about the lack of street lights in your neighborhood, which local government would you contact? (Cities are responsible for street lighting.)
  - o What are some reasons street lighting is important? Why do you think some residents don't want better or more street lights in their neighborhood?
- Role Play 9:
  - o Which local government is responsible for community colleges? (Counties are responsible for providing community college services.)
  - o What are some ways a community college can benefit a county?
- Role Play 10:
  - o Which local government is responsible for elections and voter registration? (Counties are responsible for overseeing elections.)
  - o Under what circumstance can you register to vote when you are under 18? (If you will be 18 at the time of the election, you can register when you are 17.)

➢ **Variation:** If class time does not permit having students act out the scenes, provide a scenario to each group and have them discuss the scene and whether this issue would fall under the county, city, or both. Students can then simply summarize their scenario to the class, share their answer, and discuss the same questions above as a class.

8. For homework, assign the attached sample EOC questions based on material covered within this lesson.

Optional Culminating Activity: Exploring the Roles of "Public Servants"

9. On slide 20, explain that while elected officials are responsible for making many of the important decisions in counties and municipalities, they rely on staff for day-to-day operation of the locality. Ask students to think about local "**public servants**" in their county/city. Discuss some of these roles and their importance in local government. (Hopefully they'll remember public school teachers!). Use the following information to guide discussion:

   • **Role of staff:** The services provided by county and city governments are delivered by local government employees. These employees report to a department head, who plans and coordinates their work and handles budgeting and reporting duties. In every North Carolina county, and in all but the smallest municipalities, a *professional manager* serves as the chief executive for the local government; this is called the *council-manager form of government*. The manager is responsible for carrying out the governing board's policies and for running the local government's operations, including coordinating the work of departments, advising the board on policy issues, proposing a balanced budget, and monitoring the adopted budget throughout the year. Managers also hire and fire department heads, except for the county's sheriff and register of deeds, who are elected by the voters. Managers serve "at the pleasure of" the governing board, which means that he or she can be fired at any time whenever a majority of the board decides they want a new manager. [The relationship between the manager and the governing board is much like the relationship between the school superintendent and the school board.] In the smaller municipalities that do not have a manager the governing board participates more directly in running the day-to-day operations of the municipality.

10. Assign each student the job title of a local public servant. Give students 3 weeks to schedule and conduct an interview (over the phone or in person) with a person of that title. The purpose of the interview is to find out exactly what the requirements of the position are, and to find out some of the pros and cons of working for local government. (Be sure to go over proper interview etiquette with students and have them turn in interview questions to be checked prior to their interview.) Have students prepare a brief presentation for the class based on their findings.

11. Once all students have given their presentations, close with the following discussion questions:
   • Based on your interviews, what did you learn about public service in general?
   • What are some qualities and characteristics of public servants?
   • What type of personality do you think a public servant should have?
   • What are some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of working as a public servant?
   • Would you ever consider being a public servant? Why or why not?
   • If you are interested in a career in public service, what department or division interests you most?

➢ **Variation:** Call at least ten days in advance and invite both a county and a municipal elected official to your classroom; the county and municipal clerks to the board should be able to help you schedule these visits. In advance, advise each elected official of your time frame and ask each to discuss a few specific topics, such as:
   o how he/she became involved in local government
   o a list of departments and the number of staff for each one
   o how the board makes decisions (i.e., how information is provided, whether or not other individuals or boards make recommendations, what other input the board seeks out, how the vote is taken at public meetings)
   o the toughest decision he/she has faced in this position

- o   the one or two biggest issues facing the local government this month

Allow some time for your students to ask their own questions. Afterwards, discuss with your students the similarities and differences in the two boards and the two types of local government.

➤ See also Carolina K-12's lesson *Rotating Interviews with Local Government Officials*, available in the Database of K-12 Resources or by sending a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu.

Services Provided by Counties and Municipalities

Airports	County or city
Ambulance service	County or city
Animal shelters	County or city
Art galleries and museums	County or city
Auditoriums/coliseums	County or city
Building inspections	County or city
Buses/public transit	City
Cable television regulation	County or city
Cemeteries	City
Community appearance	County or city
Community colleges	County
Cooperative extension	County
Court facilities (space only)	County
Economic development	County or city
Elections	County
Electric systems	City
Emergency management	County or city
Environmental protection	County or city
Fire protection	County or city
Forest protection	County
Garbage and yard waste collection	County or city
Gas systems	City
Historic preservation	County or city
Human relations	County or city
Jails	County
Job training	County or city
Law enforcement	County or city
Libraries	County or city
Mental health services	County
Parks and open space	County or city
Planning and zoning	County or city
Public health services	County
Public housing	City
Public schools	County
Recreation programs	County or city
Register of deeds	County
Rescue squads	County or city
Sidewalks	City

Social services	County
Soil and water conservation	County
Storm drainage	County or city
Street lighting	City
Streets	City
Traffic control	City
Veterans services	County or city
Wastewater collection and treatment	County or city
Water supply and protection	County or city
Youth detention facilities	County

1. Anita was enjoying her walk home from school. It was a beautiful Friday afternoon, she was listening to her favorite singer's new album on her iPod, and she didn't really have much homework for the weekend. It seemed as though it was going to be the perfect afternoon. As she turned the corner on her street, however, she noticed a couple of younger boys running toward her up the sidewalk with terrified looks in their eyes. Then she realized why. They were being chased by a large dog that was barking ferociously and foaming at the mouth. Luckily, Anita and the boys were able to open the nearest neighbor's front gate and close it just in the nick of time. They stood paralyzed as the dog, still foaming at the mouth, began charging the gate. They were safe, but trapped.

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2. Elton, nervous about his job interview that morning, decided to leave extra early to give himself plenty of time to get breakfast at the diner right up the street from where his interview was. After putting on his tie and giving himself a wink in the mirror, he strolled out to his car to find that it had a flat tire. His parents were gone for the day, and his only other friend who had a license was on vacation with her parents. Luckily, the public bus that went downtown where his interview was stopped right near his house every 20 minutes. After waiting for 40 minutes, no bus had arrived. Knowing that being tardy to an interview would severely limit his chances of getting the job, he was very angry and felt he had to lodge a complaint.

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3. For his whole life, Chris and his little sister Tymira loved playing in the woods behind their house, which was right on the edge of town. They would ride bikes, build forts, and in the summer go wading in the stream. In fact, all the neighborhood kids loved playing in the woods and their parents loved having a relatively safe place for their children to play. One morning during free-read time in English class, Chris was reading a newspaper. He learned that the town was planning on annexing the land right behind his house, which they intended to clear-cut and build a new shopping mall. While he thought it might be cool to have a mall that close, he decided he'd much rather have the woods he'd grown up with. That evening at the neighborhood softball game, he learned that almost everyone else felt the same way.

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4. While most of her friends loved sodas, Carrie's favorite drink was water. She found it far more refreshing, plus she didn't care for the extra calories and carbohydrates in soda. Recently, though, she'd noticed a difference in the water that came from her faucet. When she would shower in the morning, she noticed a slight smell to the water. It was not pleasant but it didn't really bother her too much – she thought it might actually be the new all-natural hair conditioner she was using. For the time being, she shrugged it off. However, one day she got home from a jog extremely thirsty, and when she turned on the faucet the water that came out was brown and smelled of rotten eggs.

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5. Over the summer before the 9th grade, Kevin received a letter in the mail from his high-school-to-be which stated that before he could be enrolled he needed to have certain vaccinations. His mother explained that the purpose of the vaccinations was to ensure that he was not susceptible to certain sicknesses like measles, mumps, or tuberculosis. At first he thought this sounded weird, but then he remembered how when he was little he had to get similar shots before he could start kindergarten. He didn't like having to get shots, but he was pretty excited about starting high school.

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6. Courtney was very protective of her younger brother, Thomas. She always stuck up for him at school, and even defended him when he was in trouble with their parents. A few weeks after a neighborhood boy (who Courtney was not very fond of to begin with) got his driver's license, she noticed he would zip up and down the street way over the speed limit whenever he was leaving from or returning to his house. This probably wouldn't have bothered Courtney so much if Thomas didn't play hockey in the street as often as he did. "We need a speed bump," she thought to herself.

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7. Jason and Lance, who were 15 years old, had been best friends for as long as either of them could remember. They had gone to school together until high school when his mom moved away and Lance had to move in with his dad in the next county over. Jason and Lance still managed to hang out several times a week. After a few months, Jason began to notice some changes in Lance. He didn't seem to have the same pep he'd once had. Over time, the situation seemed to worsen. Lance began to seem more and more depressed and even began experimenting with drugs. After about a year at his new school, Lance told Jason the last time he was using, he'd gotten really down and seriously thought about killing himself.

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8. Amelia and Kim were twins who played basketball at their high school, which often required afterschool bus rides to nearby towns to compete. Games usually started around 6:00 PM and ended at 7:30 PM. Depending on how far away the team had to travel, the twins might not get back to the school until 9:00 or sometimes even later. Amelia and Kim's mom worked nights at the hospital, and when they couldn't get a ride from a friend they had to walk home. The twins didn't live far from school, their town was pretty safe, and of course they didn't have to walk alone. Nevertheless, the road from school had very few street lights and they wished there were more.

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9. Sasha was pretty close to graduating from high school. She'd always wanted to go to college, and she certainly had the grades. Money, on the other hand, was a different story. After talking to her guidance councilor, Mr. Weber, she learned about an opportunity she definitely wanted to pursue. If she attended the community college for 2 years and finished with an "A" grade point average, not only would she be guaranteed acceptance into any state school she wanted to finish up her college degree at, but she'd also received financial assistance. She wanted to learn more.

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10. Casey had always been interested in politics and closely followed national, state, and local elections. He'd even gone to rallies with his dad when politicians they both liked came to town and helped work on campaigns to get his favorite candidates elected. Casey couldn't wait until the day he turned 18, which meant he would finally be able to vote. Since he'd worked on "Get Out the Vote" campaigns to get more people registered to vote, he knew exactly what he needed to do to register. When he finally turned 18, he registered and received his voter registration card in the mail. A week before the next election he went to his desk to look for it because he couldn't remember where his polling station was, only to find he had misplaced it. How would he figure out where to go to vote?

Sample Test Questions

1. What is the oldest unit of local government in North Carolina?
   a. Cities
   b. Towns
   c. Counties
   d. Villages

2. Who sets the boundaries of counties, cities, and towns in North Carolina?
   a. The counties, cities, and towns
   b. The NC General Assembly
   c. The Governor
   d. The Federal Government

3. In order for a municipality to officially become a city, town, or village, the NC General Assembly must accept the municipality's:
   a. charter
   b. code of ordinances
   c. Council members
   d. size of its population

4. Which of the following county officials are NOT elected by the citizens?
   a. County Commissioners
   b. The Register of Deeds
   c. The Sheriff
   d. The County Manager

5. Municipalities in North Carolina are *mandated* to provide which of the following services?
   a. Public housing
   b. Fire protection
   c. Garbage collection
   d. Municipalities are not mandated to provide any services

6. Independent boards within counties oversee mental health services, local elections, and alcoholic beverage control. Which of the following is another service typically overseen by a county board?
   a. Public school services
   b. Street lighting services
   c. Public transportation services
   d. Public housing

7. Municipal governing boards make all of the following official decisions for a city EXCEPT:
   a. Setting local tax rates
   b. Adopting an annual budget
   c. Passing ordinances for regulating behavior
   d. Issuing a charter to the local community college

8. The local government of Orange County, NC has a chief executive who carries out the day-to-day operations of the county. The executive is not an elected official, but has the authority to hire and fire department heads and make significant changes to the organization. The type of local government that best describes Orange County is:
    a. Strong mayor form of government
    b. Council-manager form of government
    c. Weak mayor form of government
    d. Government of appointed boards

9. How old must one be in order to register to vote?
    a. 18
    b. 17, if the person will be 18 by the time of the election
    c. 21
    d. 16

Answer Key

1. C

2. B

3. A

4. D

5. D

6. D

7. B

8. A

9. B

County

Municipality