

Learning About Local Government at the Public Library

Overview

In this activity, ideally conducted during a visit to the public library, students will learn about the services and relevance of city and county government through discussion and role plays.

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

- ““Who You Gonna Call?”” role play assignments
- Local government representative, such as a city or county manager, council member or commissioner, etc. (optional but highly recommended)
 - Contact the local government official several weeks in advance to explain the activity and to ask for assistance in providing students knowledge about the services, importance and relevance of local government. (It is important this person does not come to give a “speech,” but rather is prepared to engage with the students as they prepare and present their role plays, and participate in dialogue with the class when debriefing each role play. Ideally students will also be given time to engage in Q & A with the visiting person.
- *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>

Duration

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

Procedure

Local Government – Exciting, Boring or Somewhere in Between?

1. Let students know that today they are going to be learning about local government. Ask students what their initial reaction is when hearing this. Does it sound exciting, boring, something else...and why? Provide a few minutes students to share their initial thoughts about local government, allowing them to vent honestly if they feel that it’s a boring topic. Provide follow up questions based on student comments, such as:
 - So, you think local government is uninteresting or boring – why? (Or, if you are lucky enough to have a student note that it’s interesting, ask them to also share why.)
 - Do you feel local government is more exciting or less exciting than national/federal government? Why?
 - What do we mean by “local government,” anyway? What is a “county?”
 - 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

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state requirements but they also have the authority to take on additional roles above and beyond these basic services.

- What is a “city?” (Or a “town” or “municipality?”) Can anyone explain? Why do you think the concept of a city even exists?
 - 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.
- Who is in charge of city and county government? Which offices can voters vote for?
 - 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.
- Is local government important? Does it impact you? Explain.

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

3. Let students know 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.
4. 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

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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.)
 - Does anyone know which particular county department would handle a situation like this? (animal control)
- Role Play 2:
 - 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.)
 - 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:
 - What should this family do/who should they contact? (City government deals with urban growth. However, counties are often also involved in the deliberation and decision-making process of development. The family should start with their city council and/or county commissioners. Usually, decisions like this involve public hearings where community members can share their opinions and concerns.)
 - Why can development such as this be so controversial? What are the pros and cons?
 - What city department deals with zoning for development? (planning department)
- Role Play 4:
 - Which local government would you call if you had concerns over your water? (Counties are usually responsible for water supply, treatment and protection, though it is also important for cities to play a role in conservation and curbing pollution.)
 - If you think your water supply is unsafe in some way, who should you contact?
 - What do you think the Jackson family should do and why?
 - Teachers can use this scenario to discuss the [Flint Water Crisis](#).
- Role Play 5:
 - Who would Kevin need to contact in order to set up an appointment for his vaccinations? (Counties are responsible for public health services.)
 - 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:
 - Which local government should Courtney contact to inquire about a speed bump in her neighborhood? (Cities are responsible for traffic control.)
 - What are some other ways cities can help control neighborhood traffic? (post signs, construct roundabouts, etc.)
- Role Play 7:
 - 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:

- 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.)
- 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:
 - Which local government is responsible for community colleges? (Counties are responsible for providing community college services.)
 - What are some ways a community college can benefit a county?
- Role Play 10:
 - Which local government is responsible for elections and voter registration? (Counties are responsible for overseeing elections.)
 - 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.)
- Role Play 11:
 - Which local government is responsible for providing free internet to the public? (Counties or cities, depending on who funds the public library.)
 - What other services do public libraries offer to people? (Free books, classes on a wide variety of topics, free internet, public meeting space, etc.)
- Role Play 12:
 - Which local government is responsible for public schools? (Counties in most cases, but cities can be responsible for schools as well.)
 - Who is responsible for setting the local teacher supplements? (County Commissioners or City Councilmembers control the budget. The Board of Education can make budget recommendations and requests to the Commissioners.)
- Role Play 13:
 - Which local government is responsible for jails? (County. The jails are usually maintained by the sheriff's department.)
 - What's the difference between a jail and prison? (Jails hold people awaiting trial or people convicted of minor crimes. Prisons are for people who commit serious crimes and are sentenced for more than a year. They are also run by the state or federal government.)

➤ **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.

Optional Culminating Activity: Researching Local Government Officials

5. Assign each student the job title of a local government official, from city council member to library director to town engineer. Have students research the position and ideally, 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. Once all students have given their presentations, close with the following discussion questions:
 - Based on your interviews, what did you learn about working in local government in general?
 - What are some qualities and characteristics of local government officials?
 - What type of skills and personality do you think a person needs to successfully fulfill the job you

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researched?

- What are some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of working in local government?
- Would you ever consider being a local government official? Why or why not? If yes, what roles would you be interested in?
- If you are interested in a career in public service, what department or division interests you most?

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 |

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|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| 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 |

“Who You Gonna Call?” Role Plays

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 fence gate and close it behind them just before being attacked. They stood paralyzed as the dog, still foaming at the mouth, began charging the gate. They were safe, but the dog was still roaming the neighborhood.



2. Elton, nervous about his job interview that morning, decided to leave extra early to give himself plenty of time to get downtown, where his interview was. After putting on his tie and giving himself a wink in the mirror, he arrived at the city bus stop by his house 40 minutes early to ensure he wouldn’t miss it. His neighbor, who relies on the bus to get to and from work each day, was waiting at the stop when he arrived. She said she’d already been there 15 minutes and hadn’t seen any buses. They complained to each other about how even though the bus was supposed to stop there every 20 minutes, often the bus seemed to run off schedule, arriving early or late. After waiting for 40 minutes, no bus had arrived and Elton started to panic. If the bus didn’t show up soon, he would be late for his interview and then there would be no way he’d get the job! And his neighbor was already late for work.



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. While having breakfast with his family one morning, Chris was browsing through the newspaper. He saw a headline talking the town’s plans to annex the land right behind his house, which they intended to clear-cut and build a new shopping mall. He and his family started to debate the situation. His sister loved the idea of having a mall that close, but Chris felt like he’d much rather have the woods he’d grown up with. His parents expressed concern about the traffic a large mall would cause and worried about what it would do to property values. They wondered what they could do or where they could go to express their concern.



4. The Jackson family was cleaning up after dinner and expressing concern for two of their children. Jose had been in bed for two days with an upset stomach and now Elaina had a cough, muscle pains, and a headache. While discussing whether or not to take Elaina to urgent care, they heard the news say that there was an emergency and mandatory “Do not drink” order for their city’s water supply. Evidentially, high levels of lead had been found in the water.



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.**



6. Courtney was very protective of her 5 year old 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.



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 counselor, 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?
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11. Tonya is a veteran who just returned home from overseas and she's currently looking for work. After she gets though paying for his utility bills, health insurance premiums, food and other necessities she doesn't have any money left over to pay for a computer, smartphone, or internet access. She's tried looking for work in newspapers, but a lot of companies are shifting all their job posting online. Where can Tonya go to find a computer with internet access for free?

12. One day, while scrolling through Twitter, Carl and his girlfriend, Harriet, saw some of their teachers calling for a walk out due to low salaries at their school. Some of their teachers were upset that their salary supplement wasn't as high as other schools in the state. Due to cost of living increases and a lack of raises from the state, it was getting harder and harder for many of their teachers to make ends meet. Carl and Harriet both thought that their teachers work hard and deserve a raise. They decided that they were going to get together with their friends and family to advocate for a increase to the local teacher supplement.



13. This morning, Kenny received a call from a friend telling him that he was at a party last night with his younger brother, Justin. The party was in the local park and there was some underage drinking going on. One of the neighbors must have complained because the cops showed up out of nowhere. Kenny's friend was able to outrun the cops, but Justin wasn't so lucky, and he was arrested by law enforcement for underage drinking, resisting arrest, and trespassing. Kenny needs to find out what happened to his brother. Who's he going to call?