

Lesson Title: Taking Political Action in Your Community

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Lesson Outcomes:

- Identify a public policy issue that is important to them in their community
- Identify which level of local government would handle the particular issue
- Research the public policy issue and identify possible solutions
- Research what government office can help change the public policy
- Write a letter to a locally elected official in support of or against the public policy issue they have researched

Alignment to New York State Social Studies Framework:

12.G4 POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION: There are numerous avenues for engagement in the political process, from exercising the power of the vote, to affiliating with political parties, to engaging in other forms of civic participation. Citizens leverage both electoral and non-electoral means to participate in the political process.

12.G4e Citizens participate in civic life through volunteerism and advocacy, including efforts such as contacting elected officials, signing/organizing petitions, protesting, canvassing, and participating in/organizing boycotts.

Alignment to New York State Social Studies Practices:

F. Civic Participation

2. Participate in activities that focus on a classroom, school, community, state, or national issue or problem
4. Identify, describe, and contrast the roles of the individual in opportunities for social and political participation in different societies.
5. Participate in persuading, debating, negotiating, and compromising in the resolution of conflicts and differences.
6. Identify situations in which social actions are required and determine an appropriate course of action.
7. Work to influence those in positions of power to strive for extensions of freedom, social justice, and human rights.

Lesson Materials and Procedures:

Materials:

- Appendix A: [Who's Who in your Our Local Government](#)
- Appendix B: [Who's Who in New York City Government](#)
- "[Citizen Lobbyist](#)," League of Women Voters' Brochure
- Appendix C: Citizen Action Plan
- Appendix D: [Political Action: Letter Directions](#) and sample letters

- Access to the Internet
 - Local Municipality and County Websites

Lesson Procedures:

1. As a class discuss/brainstorm some public policy issues that are affecting your local community
 - a. Examples: things that are relevant to students, financial aid for college, local parks, school aid, minimum wage, job opportunities, medical facilities, social welfare programs, access to proper healthcare, women's health issues, green spaces, drug treatment facilities, road and bridge conditions, prisons and prisoner treatment, recycling, garbage removal, stop lights/signs or street lights
 - b. As a class, you may decide to narrow this list down to projects related to students' community service interests, or to allow groups or individual students to investigate problems that are of interest to them. Students will need to complete research on the issue in order to make recommendations for solutions. With the help of their teacher, students will need to research different solutions and who (i.e., governmental agency, non-governmental agency, politician, lobbyist, advocacy group) is the most appropriate to address their issue. This will take time for students to complete. At this point in the process, consider inviting in guest speakers from the community from different governmental and non-governmental agencies to address students on the function of the agencies.
2. If the problem can be addressed by government, students can complete the graphic organizer on "Who's Who in Our Local Government" (or "Who's Who in New York City") to research the appropriate level of government and which agency within government would address these problems. In New York, many jurisdictions have comprehensive websites.
 - a. Be sure to note how to discern between a local municipality, a county department or a state governmental agency.
3. Once students have identified appropriate solutions to the problem, they will need to decide what action to take. Feasibility and/or cost-benefit analysis can be conducted. A sample worksheet, listing steps in developing a citizen action plan, is included as Appendix C.
4. After students have researched the problem and identified the solutions they would like to share with the elected officials, they can present their solutions to their class, members of the community, or to the actual governmental officials. As a class, discuss why it is important to communicate with elected officials about public policy issues. Discuss other ways to participate:
 - a. Volunteering, signing petitions, attending public meetings, running for office, making phone calls, protesting
5. Or, they can be assigned to write a letter to the official(s). Distribute the assignment sheet, and review the proper way to format the letter
 - a. Review the example of the Political Action Letter
 - b. It is helpful to assign students to write a rough draft that will be reviewed for proper grammar, spelling and formatting, as the final draft should be a clean copy that can be mailed/emailed
 - c. Decide whether it will be more persuasive to email or mail the letter to the elected official(s).

Check for Understanding:

- Check graphic organizer for the proper information in your particular village, town or city
- Grade the final copy of the letter

Extensions:

- Have students follow up by speaking at a public meeting of the government group (i.e., Board of Education, City Council, County Council) they researched to present their solution.

Appendix A

Name _____

Who's Who in Our Local Government

County Government

There are 62 counties in NYS. In which county do you live? _____

The elected leader of each county is a County Executive. What is the name of your County Executive?

How many County Legislators are in your County Legislature? _____

How often does it meet and where? _____

Are they elected by district or at-large? _____

Name your County Legislator _____

Local Government

Within each county, there are cities, towns, or villages. In what sort of municipalities do you live (could be more than one)? _____

Name your local government (city, town and/or village – could be more than one)

What sort of elected leader does your municipality have (mayor, town supervisor, town manager, village manager, etc.)? _____ *The name of that person is _____

The daily operations of many local municipalities is performed by a person appointed/hired by the local government. Does your municipality also have an appointed leader (town manager, town supervisor, town administrator, etc.)? _____ Title of that person is _____

*The name of that person is _____

The legislative branch of your municipality is a (town council, town board, village council, etc.)
_____. There are _____ (number) members.

It meets how often and where _____?

My elected local legislator is named _____.

How many departments are there in your local municipality(ies)? _____

The agenda and minutes of your county and local legislature are often posted on the respective websites. Can you find them? _____

Is there a time on the agenda for "Public Comments?" _____

Appendix B

Name _____

Who's Who in New York City Government

Who is the current **Mayor of New York City**? _____

The mayor is the chief executive officer of the city. The Mayor appoints the deputy mayors and the heads of most city agencies and proposes the budget

Who is the **Public Advocate**? _____ The Public Advocate first in line to succeed the Mayor. The office serves as a direct link between the electorate and city government, effectively acting as an ombudsman, or "watchdog," for New Yorkers. The Public Advocate monitors citizen complaints and may investigate patterns of complaints.

Who is the **City Comptroller**? _____ The Comptroller is the caretaker of the city's money and can audit and investigate all matters relating to city finances. The comptroller is responsible for auditing the performance and finances of city agencies, making recommendations regarding proposed contracts, issuing reports on the state of the city economy, marketing and selling municipal bonds, and managing city debt

Name the 5 Boroughs of NYC.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Who is your Borough President? _____ **Borough Presidents** monitor city services in their boroughs and have input into how city funds are spent in their boroughs. They each appoint one member of the City Planning Commission, one member of the Panel for Educational Policy and all the members of the community boards in their boroughs. They generally act as advocates for their boroughs to mayoral agencies, the city council, the New York State government, public corporations, and private businesses

All of these officials serve 4 year terms and are elected in the year following a Presidential election.

The Legislative branch in New York City government is the **City Council**. How many members are in the City Council? _____ (They are limited to serving 2 terms.)

City Council members have oversight over city agencies and pass the Mayor's budget. They can pass city ordinances which may be subject to review by the New York State Legislature. The Council serves as a check and balance with the mayor.

Who is your City Council member? _____

Do you have **participatory budgeting** in your district? ____ (You only have to be 11 years old to submit a proposal and vote on proposals, for example local playground improvements or new bike lanes.)

The **New York City Charter** has established the framework of our City government. It covers the laws, codes and rules for the city. It may be revised or amended.

The New York City **Campaign Finance Board** may provide candidates for public office with public matching funds. For every dollar raised, a candidate may receive a match of (2, 3, 5, 6 or 10) to one. (Which number?)

NYC has 59 **Community Boards** which vote on land-use proposals and other community issues. Who appoints Community Board members? _____

What city issues do you care about most? _____

Which governmental official would you approach first about the issue that is most important to you? _____

Where can you locate information?

The League of Women Voters of New York City publishes a Directory of Elected Officials called *They Represent You*. You can find most of the answers to the above questions there. A free App, called *Voices*, can connect you to your elected representatives.

Citizen Action Plan

1. Describe the societal issue in detail.

2. State the reason(s) why this is an important issue in our society.

Historical background of the issue:

Stats that prove it's important:

Does it affects rights and freedoms of citizens, etc.? (If so, how)

Other reasons it's important:

Some **Citizen Action Plans** may include, but are not limited to, one or more of the following:

- lobbying
- organized demonstration
- petition
- letter writing campaign
- newspaper articles
- letters to the editor
- rally
- door-to-door campaigning
- social media campaign
- sponsored social events

3. Who are the stakeholders (people/groups affected) in this issue?

4. Take and defend your position on the issue.

a. Is there a current law, policy, ruling, or judicial precedent that is related to this issue?

b. What would be some possible solutions to this problem?

c. List pros and cons of your position

Pros (Reasons People Should Support Your Position on the Issue)	Cons (Reasons people/groups might be against your Position on the Issue)

5. Present a Citizen Action Plan - original OR one that is advocated by an existing group or organization that will address the issue.

a. Who are the players, the people or institutions that influence policy related to the issue, in the Citizen Action Plan?

b. Which level(s) of government or government agency will your citizen action target? (local, state, national)

c. What actions will you take to draw attention to your issue? Explain why you chose these actions (i.e., protests, etc.).

6. Discuss why you think your policy will be effective and feasible. In other words, why is your citizen action plan likely to succeed? Prove it would draw the attention of the government, and citizens of the area it affects.

Appendix D

Participation in Government Political Action Letters

As a citizen of the United States of America, it is not only a right, it is a responsibility to participate in the political process. Being able to petition our lawmakers is one of the greatest responsibilities that we have as Americans.

Write a letter to your local NY state representative/state senator or county executive detailing a policy, law or spending practice that you would like to support or change. You may have to research the issues and where the office holder stands on that issue to become informed.

Part 1:

- Think about an issue that is important to you, your family or your community
 - Could this issue be improved by government intervention?
 - What are some solutions you can think to improve the issue?

Part 2:

- Do some research to find answers to the following questions:
 - What government agency can help you improve the issue?
 - Who is in a position of authority within that agency?
 - Determine who to write the letter to.

Part 3:

- Write a letter to the person or people that can help improve the issue you have chosen.

Letter Criteria:

- In proper business letter format
- Addressed to a specific local NY government official
- Well written, have correct spelling and grammar
- Detail the policy in question
- Clearly outlines why you support/don't support the policy
- Any ideas of how to change the policy

Some ideas on how to come up with a topic for your letter:

- What is an issue that you feel is unfair to a person your age?
- Do you have a job? Do you wish there were more jobs? How do you feel about the minimum wage? What about the number of hours you work? Do you feel that health and safety practices are important in the job that you have?
- Do you plan to go to college? How are you going to pay for it? Do you think that financial aid is acceptable in New York? Are there things you would like to see changed?
- Is there a public health issue in your area? Drug problems? Mental Health issues? Lack of adequate medical facilities or access to medical facilities?
- How is crime in your area?
- Are there green spaces, parks or sports complexes?

The letter needs to be in proper form and typed, it will be graded and then you have the option of e-mailing or sending it to the proper government agency.

Business Letter Format

Date September 28, 2018

Sender's Judy L. Jones

Address Social Studies Department
Susquehanna Valley CSD
1040 Conklin Rd
Conklin, NY 13748

Inside Mr. Clifford Crouch

Address 1 Kattelville Rd Suite 1
Binghamton, NY 13901

Salutation Dear Mr. Crouch:

Body Text **Do Not** indent the body of the text, and skip lines between paragraphs. Be sure
Be specific in what you are writing for, why you support such an idea and how you
Would like to see it changed. Use proper grammar and spelling, no shortened words
“texting “ lingo and no profanity.

Closing Finish off the letter with a heartfelt plea, or your contact information.

**“Call to
Action”**

Signature Sincerely,
Block

Leave space for your signature

Judy L Jones

Example of a Political Action Letter

September 3, 2018

Judy Jones
Susquehanna Valley High School
123 Main St
Everytown, USA 12345

Jason Garner
Town Supervisor
1 State Street
Conklin, NY 13901

Dear Mr. Garner:

I live on Conklin Rd in the town of Conklin and there is a serious issue with the intersection of Conklin and Pierce Road. When you come to the stop sign on Pierce Road the brush and bushes are so overgrown is it virtually impossible to see the oncoming traffic from Conklin Road. This is very dangerous for vehicles on both roads. I respectfully request that you look into this town road and have the transportation department cut back the bushes. Furthermore, please keep up with the maintenance of this intersection over the summer so it does not grow back.

Thank you for your consideration in this manner.

Sincerely,

Judy Jones