

Local Leaders in the Classroom Kit

Overview:

The new **Colorado Social Studies Standards** call for all students to be active citizens appropriately engaged with government. Local government brings this idea right into their backyard. Real leaders in your classroom can make local government come to life for your students. Some simple planning tips can make the difference between a successful, stimulating visit and a dull, dreary day.

Most leaders love the idea of being invited to visit classrooms. They rightfully see students as the next generation of citizens and voters. However, they are not teachers and can benefit from some teacherly advice and a well-prepared classroom.

We asked teachers and leaders for their best advice on how to make leader visits successful. Special thanks to State Senate President Brandon Schaffer, St. Vrain Valley School Board President John Creighton, and Firestone Mayor Chad Auer for their suggestions.

Our focus is on the four types of local government: Counties, Cities, School Boards and Special Districts. But the ideas can apply also to leaders from the federal and state levels of government.

Colorado Civics Standards- Prepared Graduate Competencies:

*Analyze and practice rights, roles, and responsibilities of citizens

*Analyze the origins, structure, and functions of governments and their impacts on societies and citizens

Local Leader Classroom Visit Kit Contents:

- **How to Contact a Leader**
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How to contact a leader:

Finding Names and Contact Information. Contact information is usually easy to find on the government's web site. [You can find most government links here](#). Often both emails and phone numbers will be available. Sometimes local news papers will have the contact information as well. [Click here for links to local newspapers in your area](#). Facebook pages for leaders and governments are becoming more and more prevalent.

Getting in Touch and Planning Ahead. A phone call and/or email will provide the quickest way to get in touch. Leaders are used to hearing from people and welcome citizen contact. You will most likely get a quick response. However, because most local leaders do all their own work and do not have a staff working for them, it may take awhile. In fact, most of them have a "day job" in addition to serving as a leader. This means you will want to be thoughtful and patient when contacting leaders. You may wish to contact several leaders to find one who can arrange their schedule to make it to your classroom. Planning several weeks in advance will help to make this easier. That being said, some leaders will make last minutes appearances.

Setting the Agenda. When you email or phone leaders, ask if they like to do classroom visits. Ask if they have done so before and what the visit was like. They may have a made many visits and know exactly what they want to do, or this might be their first time and will need your guidance. Be clear about the day and time. Let them know how many students to expect and agree on the purpose of the visit and a few issues that may be of interest to both the leader and your students. Sharing a set of questions for the leader to address is often welcome.

How to Prepare Your Students and Classroom: Local leaders, while very committed to working with students, are not teachers and are likely to need some help with a real classroom full of students. Please don't anticipate just turning your class over to the leader without any preparation. That would be unfair to the students and the leader. Taking some time to help kids learn about the leader, the type of government she/he represents and introducing some appropriate issues or topics is a great way to start.

Name tags for students and the leader make communication more personal. Please use the leader's official title e.g. Mayor Jones, City Council Member Smith, County Commissioner Martinez, etc. A 3x5 card folded like a tent with the student's name on it will help the leader call students by name.

Classroom visits work best when students are well prepared.

- ✓ Provide the students with a short biography of the leader and a job description. Many leaders will have blogs or Facebook pages with biographical details.
- ✓ Providing maps that describe the geographic area encompassed by the government and the region represented by the leader adds map skills to the mix.
- ✓ Spending some time with the government's web site will provide lots of information. Basic knowledge about what kinds of powers and duties the leader has will help students to ask questions that relate directly to the leader. A quick scavenger hunt on the government's web site will provide background information and will generate specific questions for the leader. Good scavenger hunt items include: an agenda for a recent meeting, a list of services and departments, a copy of the budget with revenue sources and expenditures, and citizen contact information.
- ✓ Identify a local issue or several issues that can serve as a focus for the visit. Local newspapers can be a great resource. Often the reader comments at the end of articles can help students see a wide variety of opinions relating to the issue. Try to find issues that relate directly to the students. Again be sure the issue is one of the responsibilities of the leader.
- ✓ Encouraging students to attend part of a government meeting or watching on the local government channel can help them be prepared. If they go to the meeting they may even get on TV themselves!

Typical local issues that leaders may address:

1. Parks and recreation opportunities
2. Relationships with police and other authorities
3. School related issues: funding, sports, and special programs.
4. Vandalism
5. Transportation
6. Encouraging local business
7. Fire prevention and protection
8. Safety issues

Local issue questions by grade level:

Elementary:

1. What equipment should be put on a playground? Which groups would like each type of equipment?
2. What programs exist to help keep us safe? How can we get more?
3. If we had more money in the budget, what school programs would you add? If we had less money, what would you take away?

Middle School:

1. What can be done to help limit the amount of vandalism in our community? Why do teenagers get blamed so much?
2. What new recreational programs are being funded to give students fun things to do and to help those who are struggling with school?
3. What programs do you think could be cut to save money? What new programs would you like to add? How should they be paid for?

High School:

1. What programs should be created to improve relationships between police and students?
2. What can government do to help provide more jobs for teens in our community?
3. What can government do to help prepare more students for college both academically and financially?

Sample questions students may ask leaders:

1. Why did you want to become a leader?
2. How did you get people to vote for you?
3. Have you ever lost an election? What did you learn?
4. What is the most common problem or issue you deal with?
5. What have been your greatest accomplishments in government?
6. What is the most common issue people contact you about?
7. What have been the most difficult choices you have had to make?
8. What was the most surprising part of your job?
9. What parts of the budget demand the most attention?
10. What do you do with all our tax money?
11. How does the government collect taxes?
12. Do you get along with the other people that you serve with?
13. What should citizens and students know about your job?

Student reflection questions for after the visit:

What kind of person is the leader?

What does the leader do on a typical day?

What people skills does a leader need?

What makes the leader's job hard? Easy?

What did the leader say about our community?

What do you know now that you did not know before the leader came in?

What is your opinion of our local government?

Do you trust this leader to do his/her best to make our community a better place?

Do you think you would make a good leader?

What do you think people living in our community should know about our leaders?

What are the responsibilities of people living in our community toward government?

Where does the leader get information? Where can citizens get information about our city?

A Sample Note Taking Form For A Local Leader Visit:

5 things I know about this government before the visit:	Leader biographical details:	Issues facing this government:
Questions I wish to ask the leader:	Geographic area served by this leader:	5 things I learned during the presentation:
Questions other students asked:	Budget and tax information:	Quotes:

Advice for Local Leaders visiting classrooms:

Teachers---You may wish to send these in an email to the local leader before their visit.

How to prepare the leader:

Be sure to provide directions to your school and parking advice. Remind them to check in with the office upon arrival. It is best to let the office know about the visit, as well. Your principal or other administrators may provide an official welcome.

Local newspapers often like to cover these events. Discuss with the leader beforehand to see if they would like media coverage and let them know if the media will be coming. A friendly email reminder the day before the event is often welcome by busy leaders.

Hopefully, when you contacted the leader you had some conversations about the purpose of the visit. An agreed upon agenda for the visit will help both of you feel more comfortable. Here is one suggestion.

- *Welcome and Introductions: 3 minutes
- *Leader biography: 5 minutes
- *Leader/Government Duties and Responsibilities: 5 minutes
- *Discussion of local issues and topics with students: 10 minutes
- *Open question and answers: 10 minutes
- *Closing and thank you: 2 minutes

Things leaders may wish to bring:

- A map showing the boundaries
- A list of duties, responsibilities and services provided by your government
- An overview of the budget showing major expenditures and revenue sources
- Some of your election campaign brochures or mailings

Do's and Don'ts for leaders visiting classrooms:

Do: Engage students with local issues. Students have opinions and love to share them, especially with people in power. Have a few issues in mind that may be of interest to students. Parks and recreation issues, school issues, vandalism, and public safety are usually tops on student lists. Discuss with the teacher what issues are best for the classroom.

Do: Arrive early and check in with the office

Schools have strict bell schedules and you will want to avoid the halls during passing periods when teachers often have duties. Upon your arrival, check in with the office; schools have safety regulations for visitors.

Don't: Plan a long lecture or presentation. 10-15 minutes is plenty long for an introduction and brief presentation of your duties and responsibilities. Reserve most of the time for interaction with students.

Don't: Be afraid to show how complex of issues and viewpoints can be. Quickly informing students of multiple viewpoints and constraints will help them develop their own complex opinions.

Do: Remind students of the various levels and types of government. You may be familiar with federalism, and relationships among various local governments, but students are not—in fact many teachers are surprised by this information as well. A quick reminder of your constitutional/charter responsibilities and limitations will help keep that you cannot send troops to war and the president is not in charge of local traffic will help student.

Some sample questions students may ask during the Q & A time.

1. Why did you want to become a leader?
2. How did you get people to vote for you?
3. Have you ever lost an election? What did you learn?
4. What is the most common problem or issue you deal with?
5. What have been your greatest accomplishments in government?
6. What is the most common issue people contact you about?
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Ready to go Lesson for Local Leaders:

Overview: This lesson can help you make connections with a classroom full of kids. We have provided an agenda to follow and a generic topic for discussion with students. The purpose of the lesson is to highlight how multiple viewpoints make government decision making more difficult than it seems. We have chosen what to equipment to put into a park on a limited budget. Obviously, you can pick another more relevant issue if you choose. (Parks, Traffic, Shopping, Police Relations, School, all can be of interest to students). Hopefully you and the teacher will have had some conversations about topics for your visit.

Agenda:

Introduce yourself to the students.

*Be sure to give them some background on your life, where you went to school, favorite teachers and subjects, your family, your “real” job and what inspired you to be a public servant.

* Many students are surprised to learn of the amount of time you put into your job and the low (or nonexistent) pay. A brief “day in the life of a leader” can make this real.

*Quickly inform them about the scope of your position. What are your responsibilities? What issues are outside of your control? You are familiar with these, but student are just learning. Have a list of the top 5 duties and responsibilities of your office. A list of services provided by your level of government can be a real eye opener.

*A map showing your jurisdiction would also be useful. Ask the host teachers to make an overhead of this or project an online version if their classroom is so equipped.

Ask students what issues interest them. If they offer things like “World Peace” express your interest in the issue too, but explain how that is usually not what you deal with in your job. Making a list of 5 or more issues on the board or overhead gets them involved. Ask students for their position on these issues and ask them to identify others in the community who may disagree. Ask students if they know of reasons why the issue has not been solved. Use your expertise to highlight the variety of positions on issues. You might talk about various opinions from phone calls, emails and coffee shop conversations you have. Be sure to quickly explain how the issues can be complex and how resources are limited. Ask students if they would vote in favor of tax increases for certain services.

Issue Simulation: Students as Leaders and Community Members

What equipment is right for the playground or park?

Ask students to assume the role of leader and concerned community members for this issue. You add the real world answers as students try to make a decision.

Scenario: A park is being updated on a limited budget. Funds are available for only one of these updates. Which should the government pick? Who would support each idea? Who would be opposed? How should it be decided?

1. A jungle gym for kids aged 2-6
2. A skate park for middle school and high school aged kids
3. Soccer and baseball fields for grades k-6
4. Safety features like lights and fences, so all people can use the park after dark
5. A new family picnic shelter with grills and bathrooms

Some “groups” that students can role play in addition to leader: Homeowners Near the Park, Nearby Elementary School Students, Senior Citizens, Local Youth Sports Association, Middle and High School Student Council Members

Ask students to identify which groups would support which choice. Ask them to role play the group and prepare a 1-2 minute speech to you about why that choice is best. After listening to all groups’ speeches, have the class vote. Ask the class if they are happy with the result. Then discuss how you would have made the choice and how you would explain it to the public.

Variations:

1. **Candidate Debates:** During election season you can invite two or more candidates for the same office to come into class to address students. Be sure both candidates know this is your plan and have your students well prepared with knowledge of the candidates and questions about local issues.
2. **Issue Forum:** Invite multiple leaders in to address multiple classes in a panel format. Use your auditorium or other larger space to accommodate several classrooms. Before the forum conduct a question contest among classes and students. The best question gets to address the leaders.
3. **In School Field Trip:** If you have multiple classes create an in school field trip where students are excused from another class to attend the leader presentation.

Follow-up Activities and Assessment Options:

Write thank you notes. Use a piece of construction paper and have all the students sign it with a comment about what they learned from the leader.

1. Create a campaign ad for the leader or for someone running against the leader.
2. Write a newspaper account of the visit for your school newspaper or a special letter to the editor for your local newspaper.
3. Ask students to comment on the leader's blog, Facebook page or web site, or they could make a fake Facebook page for the leader.
4. Ask student to write other local leaders expressing their concerns about an issue they learned about during the visit.
5. Retake the pre-test and compare answers.

Local Leader Pre-Post Test

Name _____

Class _____

1. Name several types of local government in your area:

2. Name several local leaders:

3. Locate on a map the geographic areas of the various governments:

4. What are the duties and/or responsibilities of the local leaders?

5. What are three issues facing this government and leader?

6. How can you contact a local leader?