

# Back to the Classroom

**Stumped for what to say to a classroom full of kids?**

**Here are some ideas –  
Pick one of these activities or get creative and make up your own!**



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## *Tips for speaking with young students*

- Keep in mind the age and experience of the students and try not to talk “above their heads.” It’s a good idea to ask the teacher what the students have already learned about the subject.
- Honor the time limit given by the teacher. He or she knows the length of the students’ attention span.
- Bring items the students can see and touch, especially when meeting with very young children. Good attention grabbers include buttons, bumper stickers, hats, gavels, city or county flags, library cards, street signs, traffic cones, and other objects that relate to city or county government.
- Take a memento to hand out to each of the students (at the **end** of your presentation) so they will remember your visit to school that day. The memento may remind them to talk to their parents about what they learned from you. Pencils, buttons, stickers, pamphlets, etc. are appropriate.
- Make your message personal for students, something they can relate to. Ask them questions about their parents or themselves that relate to your topic.
- When you ask questions, say “Raise your hand...” so the students will not all start talking at once. And it is okay to say, “I think I will wait until it is quiet before I go on (or before I call on someone).” Then be sure to wait for quiet, so the students will know you expect them to listen to you and to their classmates.
- Try not to let one or two students dominate the discussion. Say, “I think I will call on someone who hasn’t had a turn (or is sitting quietly, or is remembering to raise his or her hand).”
- Give the students your address so they can contact you if they have a concern or need. Write it on the board at the end of your presentation.
- Have fun! Enjoy yourself! Children will usually follow suit.

*Credits: Tips compiled by teachers Laura Mills Clougherty and Margaret C. Henderson at Hunter Elementary School, Wake County Public School System, North Carolina  
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## *Hands-on classroom activities: K-3*

### ▪ **Local government photo tour**

*Use large-sized photographs of each facility as props for a classroom tour of city or county operations:*

Take a photo of each major city or county facility: city hall or courthouse, library, health department, water and sewer treatment plants, jail, parks, etc.; these don't need to be professional, just recognizable.

Have each photo enlarged to 8 x 10 size.

Ask the students to describe what goes on at each site; elaborate on their answers and explain in basic terms the services provided.

### ▪ **Local government's "best-dressed list"**

*Allow student volunteers to dress up in uniforms, hats, or badges, or carry a tool from a number of city or county departments*

Collect a box of props representing as many departments as possible: police or sheriff's deputy and firefighter hats, health department lab coat, water and sewer department rainwear, recreation t-shirt, etc.

Ask student volunteers to help you with your presentation, and distribute the props to each volunteer.

Have each student model his or her prop for the class while you and the rest of the class talk about that employee's job.

### ▪ **A day on the job**

*Walk students through your day as an elected or appointed official:*

Draw a timeline or a calendar page for a typical workday on a flipchart or poster board

Write in at least a dozen tasks (ranging from a few minutes to several hours) from morning through evening. Be sure to include lots of interrupting phone calls and at least one meeting! Be creative – use an outline of a phone for calls, a cartoon firecracker for a sudden crisis, tall stacks of paper for handling the mail, etc.

Gather some props for acting out your day such as a telephone, documents, briefcase, pager, calculator, coffee cup, and gavel.

Talk with the students about your day, letting as many volunteers as possible help to act out your activities, using the props you've brought along.

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# Which services do you get from your CITY and COUNTY governments?



Garbage collection



Fire protection



Clean water from your faucet



Law enforcement



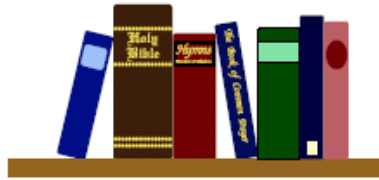
Elections



Streets and traffic control



Parks and open spaces



Library resources



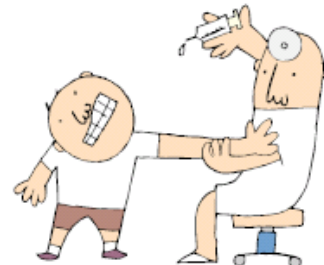
Emergency medical care



Jails



Places to play sports



Public health services



## *Hands-on classroom activities: 4-8*

### ▪ **Local government job interviews**

*Conduct brief interviews for the job of city or county manager or administrator*

Ask the teacher to prepare the students to talk about the job of city or county manager; provide the teacher with the budget description for the department or the actual job description.

Write up a set of questions to ask each student, such as:

*Why are you seeking the job of manager (or administrator)?*

*What do you see as your most important function?*

*How would you keep members of the governing board informed?*

*How would you stay in touch with activities and problems in each department?*

*What do you think would be your favorite part of the job?*

Ask for several volunteers to be interviewed in front of the class. Take notes of their responses and wait until after all the interviews are completed to comment on their answers and clear up any misconceptions about the job. Be sure to allow some time for students' questions afterward.

### ▪ **An introduction to making tough choices**

*Give the students the chance to allocate scarce resources.*

Prepare a straightforward budget problem, such as a list of capital projects with varying price tags. For younger students, simplify the problem by limiting the available funding to one project only. For older students, make the problem more complicated by providing funding for two or more – but not all – the projects. (You don't necessarily need to make a handout. Just write the figures on the board as you explain the budget dilemma.) Choose your examples to interest kids, such as ball field lighting, a system of bike trails, ping-pong tables, a concession stand, etc. If your community does not provide public parks and recreation facilities, consider examples of community agencies that are seeking funding, such as an arts council, a hometown museum, a meals-on-wheels program, a homeless shelter, etc.

Have the students break into small groups of five or seven (or the number on your governing board). Give the groups ten to twenty minutes to discuss the situation and arrive at a plan for spending the money.

Record each spending plan on the board while the students report their decisions. Use the results to discuss the difficulty of making budget decisions to benefit the whole community.



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## *Hands-on classroom activities: 4-8*

### ▪ **Local government quiz show**

*Share some general and obscure information about your local government in a quiz show format*

Prepare a list of questions about your local government. For source material use your budget document, departmental brochures, recent meeting minutes, etc. Add in a few unusual questions about personalities on the board and staff. For example:

*In what year was our city incorporated or county created?*

*How did our city or county get its name?*

*How many people serve on the governing board?*

*What department spends the most money?*

*What department spends the least money?*

*Which department head used to be a schoolteacher?*

*How many full-time police officers or sheriff's deputies do we have?*

*How long have we had a public library?*

*How many books and other items are available at the public library?*

*What department is in charge of inspecting restaurants for sanitary conditions?*

*Are all the streets in our city "city streets"? Why or why not?*

*What is our newest department?*

*Who was the youngest member of to serve on our governing board?*

*What is the purpose of the planning board?*

*How many public parks do we have?*

*Who takes care of the shrubs and flowers around our public buildings?*

*If there was an empty lot next to this school, could someone build a McDonald's or Burger King restaurant on it?*

*What does the city pay for a regular-sized stop sign?*

*Why do new landfills have linings?*

*What is the life expectancy of our community's landfill?*

Divide the class into two or more teams. To keep a few students from dominating the discussion, change the assigned contestant with each question so that every student gets a turn. (you and the teacher can decide if you want to use "buzzers" of some kind, if you want to allow coaching by the rest of the team, and if you want to keep score.)

Like host Alex Trebek on "Jeopardy," give each team a chance to answer the question. If a team answers correctly, you can provide a little more information to their answer. If no team knows the answer, you can provide the answer and some related information.



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# What do you know about your LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

*Watch out for trick questions with more than one answer!*

1. An ordinance is:
  - a. The shortest distance between two points
  - b. A law passed by a local government's governing board
  - c. A musical instrument similar to a xylophone
  
2. Local law enforcement in Kansas and Missouri are provided by:
  - a. The county sheriff's department
  - b. City, town, and village police departments
  - c. Your parents and older brother's and sisters
  
3. A public hearing is a chance to:
  - a. Listen to a new c.d. before it goes on sale
  - b. Have your hearing checked at a mall
  - c. State your opinion about an issue to the governing board
  
4. In Kansas and Missouri, a local government's budget must be:
  - a. The subject of a public hearing before it can be adopted by the governing board
  - b. Balanced (the government can't spend any more money than it expects to receive)
  - c. Printed and made available for reading by the public
  
5. County commissioners and city council members earn their seats by:
  - a. Winning an election
  - b. Winning the Publishers' Clearinghouse sweepstakes
  - c. Winning a competition at the state fair
  
6. A settlement becomes a city or town when the people living there ask the State for:
  - a. Evaporation (changing from a liquid into a gas)
  - b. Condensation (changing from a gas into a liquid)
  - c. Incorporation (establishing city boundaries and approving the city charter)



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## *Tips for speaking with older students*

- Assess the students' familiarity with your subject by checking with the teacher to find out what the students have already covered in class. Don't bore them by dwelling on basic information they already know, or talk over their heads with technical information they're not ready to absorb.
- Honor the time limit given by the teacher, even if you have to narrow the focus of your presentation.
- Bring displays and handouts that illustrate your comments.
- Make your message personal for students, something they can relate to. Ask them questions to help them put the information into perspective
- Use examples from the real world to make your point. List some *real* citizen complaints, explain how the alignment of a *real* road was selected, detail the *real* concerns of a business relocating to your community.
- Try not to let one or two students dominate the discussion. Ask "Does someone else have an answer (or question)?"
- Give the students your address so they can contact you if they have a concern or need. Bring business cards or write it on the board at the end of your presentation.
- Have fun! Enjoy yourself! Let the students see that local government officials are real people, and not just names in the newspaper.



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## *Hands-on classroom activities: 9-12*

### ▪ **Public hearings and public decisions**

*Introduce students to the public hearing process and board decision-making*

Distribute a brief summary (one page or less) of a real or imaginary ordinance being considered by your governing board, such as an amendment to a sign ordinance, which places new limits on the size of flags and banners flown outdoors.

Select students at random to represent your governing board. Divide the rest of the class in half; assign one group to speak in favor of the ordinance and the other group to oppose it. Give everyone the time frame for completing the exercise within the class period, and allow the two groups a short time to prepare their arguments.

While these groups are meeting, explain to the board the basic format of board deliberations, such as the need for a motion and a second before a vote. Assign one student in this group the role of mayor/board chairman and coach him or her on recognizing speakers, maintaining order, and moving the meeting forward.

During the public hearing, play the roles of the manager/administrator and the attorney to the board, and provide guidance as requested. Afterwards let the board deliberate and reach a decision.

Try to leave enough time to talk with the class about the time frame for drafting and considering an actual ordinance. Also ask the board members about the experience of making a difficult decision in a public meeting, and explain the restriction of Open Meetings Law concerning private discussions among board members.



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## *Hands-on classroom activities: 9-12*

- **Media Coverage of local government**

*Explore with students the different levels of detail in media coverage of local issues and the advantages and disadvantages of each type*

Search your meeting minutes for two good examples of governing board discussion and action on a controversial issue; make portions of just this portion of the minutes.

Divide the class in half and distribute a copy of example #1 to the first half and example #2 to the second half. Then divide each half into three teams.

Assign one team to prepare a 20-second TV news segment about the board's action, using an anchor, reporter, and video segments at their option. Assign the next group to prepare a 45-second radio news segment; with an anchor, reporter, and taped segments at their option. Assign the third group to draft a newspaper article using quotations and written documents as source materials. Give the groups at least 25 minutes to prepare. Provide explanations for any technical terms in the minutes and other assistance as needed.

Have the first half of the class put on their TV news segment, then their radio news segment, and have them read the newspaper article. After each presentation ask the other half of the class (which hasn't had the chance to read this example) a few questions about their understanding of the issue.

Then have the second half of the class put on their TV news segment, radio news segment, and newspaper article, while asking the students in the first half of the class questions about their understanding of the issue.

Afterwards, talk with the class about the advantages and disadvantages of each type of media coverage.



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## *Hands-on classroom activities: 9-12*

### ▪ **Property taxes in perspective**

*Help students explore relationships between the tax base, property taxes, and level of services provided.*

Collect the following materials from the county tax assessor and planning department:

- *Total taxable value for the county and the municipalities in the county with subtotals for residential and commercial properties;*
- *Property tax rates for the county and all municipalities in the county;*
- *A line drawing of the county with the municipal boundaries marked – a large version and smaller copies for each student in the class*

Set up a large map of the county with the municipal boundaries marked. Ask the students to identify the municipalities and label their own maps.

Explain that the tax base is the total assessed value of all the taxable property in a community, and that public facilities (federal, state, and local government facilities, including public schools and state colleges) and churches, are not taxable property.

Ask the students to guess the tax base for each community and play “higher, lower” until they have labeled the county and each municipality with the correct tax base figures. Discuss any surprises. Is there a major industry or commercial property driving up the figure for a relatively small town? A large public facility such as a state university or public airport, which is not reflected in the figure for another town?

Now explain that the tax rate is a certain value per \$100 of assessed valuation. Give the students one municipality’s tax rate and calculate for them the taxes due for a typical home in that community. Ask the students to guess and then record the tax rates for other municipalities. Give the students the county tax rate, but remind them that it cannot be compared with municipal tax rates, because county government provides a completely different set of services mandated by the state.

Finally, discuss the fact that each municipality chooses which services to provide, and at what level to provide them. For example, one municipality may believe in a highly visible police force, with more than the average number of officers for its population. Another municipality may emphasize recreation opportunities, and have a high number of neighborhood parks and recreation centers. Larger municipalities, in general, will need more officers and more parks, but will usually have a larger tax base to fund these expenses. However, a larger municipality may also choose to offer more “urban” amenities,” such as a civic center or a system of branch libraries which will expand their budget. Discuss the choices reflected by your own community’s budget.



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# REWARDS AND DRAWBACKS Of Being a Local Government Official

- ☺ Seeing projects accomplished after months or years of planning and monitoring
- ☺ Being recognized at the grocery store
- ☺ Knowing all the details behind the local headlines
- ☺ Having citizens come to you for assistance with a local concern
- ☺ Being invited to lots of functions
- ☹ Seeing projects accomplished only after months or years of interminable meetings
- ☹ Being recognized at the grocery store...especially when there's a hotly contested zoning issue coming before the governing board
- ☹ Knowing all the details behind the local headlines, when the details would have presented the other side of the story
- ☹ Having citizens come to you for assistance with a local concern, but finding there's no ideal solution.
- ☹ Eating too much!

