

Civic Engagement: Passport to Your Future

Curriculum Outline

⊕ **The Concept**

Civic Engagement: Passport to Your Future (Passport) is a 10-unit civic engagement curriculum for high school-age youth. It is designed as a teacher's guide with Web-based downloadable activity components and link resources that can be used in traditional or non-traditional educational learning environments, such as community-based afterschool programs.

The impetus behind the development of *Passport* was to fill a void in the availability of a hands-on, Web-based introduction to youth civic participation and action. The curriculum is not intended as a comprehensive academic civics curriculum. Rather, it is designed to be a practical source for moving youth toward an understanding of how they may become political players. Although it can be used in any setting, the approach is locally-based and urban since the model was designed within the context of a large metropolitan environment.

⊕ **The Structure**

Passport can be used wholly or in part, depending upon the instructional setting and experience of the students or youth involved. While there is a logic to the structure of the ten units, it is assumed that the teacher or educator may pick and choose the sequence of what is most useful. Very likely, one of the most useful components of each unit will be the excellent references to Web resources, which will open up numerous opportunities for expanding any component.

The following is a brief summary outlining the intent of the structure of the ten units and how they might be used:

Units 1- 4 These units serve as an introduction to the general issues related to political participation. Political engagement is defined and examples are given. An important discussion centers on differences between healthy cynicism and skepticism. The nature of citizenship, its privileges and responsibilities, and an understanding of public policy are discussed. Included in each unit are a number of activities that help reinforce the learning.

Units 5 - 8 The focus of these units is activism. Once basic concepts are understood, students are ready to begin to see themselves as political players. Historic barriers to full participation in American democracy are described, and Unit 6 devotes attention to practical ways in which students become political players. Finally, two important institutions, political parties and the media, are introduced. A number of activities help reinforce the learning.

Units 9 - 10 The final units bring youth back to very local urban issues in their neighborhoods. Unit 9 on gentrification introduces a complex public policy concern that most likely affects the students in one way or another. This is just one example of many complex public policy issues facing city neighborhoods. Finally, Asset-Based Community Building is explained in Unit 10. The purpose of this unit is to demonstrate how gifts of an individual citizen contribute to the common good. Unit 10 is a complement to service learning initiatives and would be used quite successfully in conjunction with Unit 6.

UNIT 1

Political Engagement: Getting Informed and Involved

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Define and discuss nature of political engagement
- 2) Survey the student interest in local matters
- 3) Outline five steps of community engagement

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group activity 1: “Knowing Where We Belong”
- 2) Group activity 2: “The Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.”
- 3) Group activity 3: “Our Political Participation”
- 4) Group activity 4: “Top Three Problems and Solutions”

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson surveys the students' interest in local community issues and provides a framework for engaging them in civic life. Democracy thrives when individuals are engaged in local matters and participate in public life. Students need to understand the dynamics of policies, politics, and individual interests in shaping the world around us. The building blocks of daily life—schools, workplaces, houses of worship, businesses, roads, places of entertainment and relaxation—result from and are maintained by fellow citizens. It is important to appreciate where these resources come from and how they are sustained. Students will learn to appreciate how individuals can relate to the complexities of public life and begin to see their role in it.

This unit outlines the necessary steps for participation in public life and encourages students to see themselves as responsible for the public good. This unit may be used by the instructor to lead youth through a process of local action. Becoming a citizen does not just happen but results from the actions, habits, and beliefs of individuals committed to public life. It means more than voting. It means being the kind of person who finds out about public issues, makes his or her opinion heard, and listens to others respectfully. It means getting involved.

UNIT 2

Political Cynicism and Citizenship

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Address contemporary cynicism about public life
- 2) Understand the importance of role models in shaping public life
- 3) Encourage a healthy skepticism about politics but challenge cynicism
- 4) Develop an appreciation for the complexity of public life

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: Student Survey: “Politics and My Future”
- 2) Group Activity 2: Politicians and Public Officers in Disgrace

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson begins with a class conversation about student impressions of politics and politicians. Many question the relevance of politics to their lives and hold negative attitudes about politicians. Where does all this cynicism come from and is it healthy? What do we expect of politics and our leaders? What expectations do we have of different kinds of people, parents, teachers, public officials? All of these topics raise questions about role models and where students see themselves in public life. The goal of this discussion is to challenge student cynicism and encourage students to see the relevance of politics in their daily life.

UNIT 3

Citizenship: Political Recognition & Personal Responsibility

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Understand the nature of citizenship
- 2) Understand the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship
- 3) Understand one's role in the civic life of the nation
- 4) Participate in class discussion and problem-solving
- 5) Pursue Internet research of basic terms and concepts

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: Learning the History of the Word "Citizenship"
- 2) Group Activity 2: "The Oath of Citizenship"
- 3) Group Activity 3: Sample Civics Test from the Immigration and Naturalization Service

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson will explore the character and nature of citizenship in American democracy. It explores how individuals become American citizens, including concepts of immigration and naturalization. Citizenship reveals the kind of relationship that exists between the individual and his or her political community. At its most basic level, citizenship is a matter of political recognition and responsibility. *Recognition* includes all the different rights and freedoms a community extends to its members. *Responsibility* includes the role the individual plays in preserving those rights and freedoms.

UNIT 4

What is Public Policy? Or Getting from A to B

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Understand the concept of public policy
- 2) Understand how policy decisions impact everyday life
- 3) Understand the importance of compromise in formulating public policy
- 4) Understand the difference between public and private domains

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: “How Do We Get from A to B?”
- 2) Group Activity 2: “Somebody Else’s Shoes”

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson introduces the concept of public policy. It covers the complexities of policy making, as well as its multiple components. This unit includes a thought experiment that relates directly to the students: transportation. Every kind of transportation option involves public choices and decisions. How students get from one place to another—physically or politically—represents the process of *Getting from A to B*. Transportation policy provides a good example of the compromises involved in public life. It shows them that policy questions affect them and invite them to get involved in the discussion of public matters.

UNIT 5

Active Citizens: Democracy in Action

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Understand the characteristics of democracy
- 2) Understand the historic barriers to full participation in American democracy
- 3) Understand the importance of the suffragette civil rights movements in expanding voting participation
- 4) Explore the reasons for low voter turnout and importance of voter registration

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: Online voter registration at **BeAVoter.org**

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson introduces the characteristics of democracy and distinguishes the difference between direct and representative democracy. It provides a brief discussion of historic barriers to full participation, citing restrictions against Japanese-Americans during World War II. It notes the successful efforts to overcome barriers to voting for women and African-Americans. Finally, voter participation is discussed, concluding with an exercise that accesses online voter registration.

UNIT 6

Becoming an Active Political Player: The Power of Connections

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Define who is a political player
- 2) Understand the importance of political access
- 3) Prepare students to become political players
- 4) Provide process for youth to contact public officials and other political brokers

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: Survey “Whom Do You Know?”
- 2) Group Activity 2: What Do I Do? Where Do I Go?
- 3) Group Activity 3: Moving From Information Gathering to Action

SUMMARY of the LESSON

Building upon the previous discussions, this unit is designed to give youth a framework for political action. The unit may be used to prompt a long-term discussion of important issues to youth that will lead to a specific public policy action. Through an exercise, it gauges youth awareness of local political figures and introduces realistic, practical guidelines for accessing and contacting public officials. The unit teaches youth to be political players, thus developing skills that build future leaders in a democracy.

UNIT 7

Political Parties and Democracy

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Understand the concept of political parties
- 2) Understand the connection between political parties and public policy
- 3) Pursue web-based research of basic terms and concepts

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: “Who Supports What?”

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson will introduce the importance of political parties. It reviews what a political party is and what it means to identify with a political party. This unit explains the role of political parties in our system of government and what they do. Finally, this unit introduces an exercise to help students identify the ideological positions of the major political parties.

UNIT 8

The Media and Your Right to Know: How Information Shapes Public Policy

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Understand the importance of the media in shaping public debate in a democracy
- 2) Understand the form and content of different kinds of media
- 3) Explore the question of media bias in its coverage of events
- 4) Understand how public policy is influenced by information and access

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Examples of local newspapers (online links will be provided)

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: “The Media and Your Right to Know. How Does the Media Function in a Democracy?”
- 2) Group Activity 2: “Tracking a News Story”
- 3) Group Activity 3: “Watching the News”

SUMMARY of the LESSON

The goal of this lesson is to explain the role of the media in distributing information and shaping public policy. Politics is often a battlefield of ideas that shape the character of local, state and federal laws and regulations. Various agendas and ideas compete for regulatory and financial support from politicians and their constituents. The participation of all citizens in the democratic process is based upon the assumption that everyone has access to relevant information and can make intelligent choices about candidates and policies. Citizens expect public officials to respect their concerns and further their interests. Access to this information is a central concern in a democracy.

The Internet has changed the landscape of information and access and opens up many opportunities for research and activism. This lesson provides a guide to the media as a shaper of public opinion. The students will review the format and content of newspapers and television news to evaluate their handling of public issues.

UNIT 9

Neighborhood Change: Gentrification

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Understand the concept of gentrification
- 2) Understand how policy decisions impact everyday life
- 3) Understand the importance of compromise in formulating public policy

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: “Where Do I Stand on Gentrification?”

SUMMARY of the LESSON

Many local changes can have a great impact on our community and our daily lives. A democratic nation seeks to serve the majority of its citizens, but in many cases the economic interests of few people can hurt those with less economic and political power. One of those complex and controversial changes is that of neighborhood change known as gentrification. Many urban neighborhoods that once suffered from a lack of investment are now places where new homeowners and businesses are moving in. Yet the renewal of the urban landscape is not without cost. Many of the older, long-term residents and low or middle-income renters find themselves squeezed out of their homes because of higher property taxes and rents. What does gentrification mean and how does it affect community life? What role should the government play in encouraging reinvestment without displacement of one group for another? This lesson will explore various issues raised by this often difficult issue.

UNIT 10

Asset-Based Community Building: Creating Social Capital to Build Neighborhood as Better Places to Live

◆ OBJECTIVES

- 1) Understand Asset-Based Community Building
- 2) Understand how students can become members of their community
- 3) Understand the importance of social and human capital

◆ TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1) Web access for online projects and research

◆ ACTIVITIES

- 1) Group Activity 1: “What Are Your Gifts?”
- 2) Group Activity 2: “The Community Tree: Where do I Belong?”
- 3) Group Activity 3: “Individual Gifts and Social Capital”

SUMMARY of the LESSON

When communities face difficult issues such as poverty and crime, it is easy to talk about them based on their problems and what they lack. However, we can look at communities like a half empty or a half full glass, depending which perspective we decide to take. The goal of asset-based community building is to reverse the perspective of most community development that looks for problems and needs before seeing the advantages and solutions already in place. Before we point out the problems in our communities, we need to look for the resources that already exist there. Many of the resources we need to improve our community life are available in our own backyard. The most important resource in the world is human and social capital: individual skills, experience, and collective energy to make the world a better place. We need to search out our neighbors’ assets and find out what each person brings to the community. Every member of our community has a place at the table and each of us brings different gifts to the feast.