

# UNIT

# 6

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## *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.

# ***Becoming An Active Political Player***

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## ***Implementation Outline***

- 1. What does it mean to be a political player?**
- 2. Who is a political player?**
- 3. Are political players always successful in their efforts to make change?**
- 4. Learning to become a political player**

# ***TEACHER'S GUIDE to CLASS DISCUSSION***

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## ***UNIT 6: Becoming An Active Political Player***

### ***Teacher's Note!***

This unit can be used as a basis for a long-term discussion of issues that are important to youth. Beyond an academic exercise, the learning can be taken to the next step, i.e., purposeful action in the public arena by individual youth or the group as a whole. It is assumed that the instructor will provide a process to determine the issue(s) that might lead to an intentional action, such as meeting with a public official or a letter to the editor.

### **1. What does it mean to be a political player?**

- Everyone wants to do well in various pursuits that are important, whether it is playing ball, being an opera singer, or doing well in math. Even if we have basic skills in certain areas and are highly motivated to pursue a talent, individuals need discipline to perfect gifts or skills. Often that means practice, attention to detail, and cooperation with others. The same is true with developing skills to become a 'political player.'
- Everyone faces the 'politics' of everyday living and working with people in our family, at school or work, or during free time with friends. Being political is a natural way in which we negotiate being part of a group. We learn this from childhood as we are taught to share toys. As young adults, we learn that a larger community needs citizens to contribute to the common good. We take it for granted that everyone contributes to make a community safe in which there are opportunities for education, work, and play. So, who is a political player and how does one person become a citizen who makes changes that would improve the community?

### **2. Who is a political player?**

- A political player is someone who knows how to make things happen in his/her community. This person sees the connections between public policy and politics and gains an understanding of how power works to benefit and improve communities and individual lives.
- Where does a citizen get the 'power' to make changes? Understanding that information is powerful, where should one go for information and access to those who have political power? What public resources are available?
- Politically skillful citizens know how to participate in public life. They know whom to call and how to communicate. Knowing where to go for information and what to do with it are basic skills that can be learned by citizens motivated to be political players.

### 3. Are political players always successful in their efforts to make change?

- The short answer is ‘no.’ While our democratic government protects minority rights and viewpoints, laws and regulations are created by majority vote at all levels of legislative and judicial authority. Politics is the art of persuasion, i.e., a person or group must persuade a majority to agree with a position in order to make change. That means that political players must be knowledgeable, have an ability to communicate well, and understand that success is dependent upon convincing a person with proper authority or a majority of a governing body that a viewpoint is good or beneficial.
- A son or daughter in a family becomes a political player when negotiating with parents about such things as an extended curfew. It might not be possible to be allowed out of the house on school nights, but parents might reconsider for a special performance or school event. Or, a group of Latino teens who have experienced frequent stops by the police that they feel are unjustified might work through an organization to challenge the perceived profiling. Their efforts might lead to a coordinated letter writing campaign to the police commander, elected officials, and local newspapers.
- The ‘rightness’ of an issue might also depend upon the general atmosphere created by public opinion at a given time. Many American citizens in the 1950s, for example, took for granted that restaurants and movie theaters were segregated, i.e., African Americans were not allowed to sit with white Americans to eat or see a movie. As a result of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, public opinion changed. Individuals and group political players publicly and forcefully stated the case for equality and access to basic freedoms. Laws changed, resulting in attitude change by the majority of Americans. It was the ‘right’ thing to do.

### 4. Learning to become a political player

- The following exercises are designed to engage youth in learning how to be political players.



**Group Activity 1, STUDENT SURVEY: Whom Do You Know?** Hand out the survey included in this unit to your students. The goal of the survey is to find out students’ knowledge and interest in local, state, and national politics. The goal of this survey is not to *test* the students. In general, many people do not know the answers to these questions. What matters is their ability to track down this information and the contacts that follow. This lesson ties together the importance of information about and access to the political system (see Handout 1).



**Group Activity 2: What Do I Do? Where Do I Go?** This class exercise expands upon the previous activity to increase knowledge about basic services and information. Since many people do not know what resources are available to them as citizens and taxpayers, this activity is geared toward accessing information about basic public services. To answer the questions, students are encouraged to utilize the local telephone book (Blue Pages). More information can be obtained from a toll free number (1-877-237-3738) or from a Web site <http://www.USBluePages.gov> You may wish to add interest areas not listed in the exercise. This can be a step in exploring areas of interest for more research and action (see Handout 2).



**Group Activity 3: Moving From Information Gathering to Action.** Activity 3 is a step that will require a process for identifying an issue which the youth may want to pursue with the goal of some specific action, i.e., contacting a government official, preparing an educational campaign, or writing a letter to a newspaper editor (see Handout 3).

## ***WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?***

- ❑ **Citizenship is a skill that can be learned and practiced**
- ❑ **Public services exist to fulfill public needs**
- ❑ **Students enjoy access to public resources, but they need to learn how to access them**
- ❑ **Politics and public life is complicated and we do not always get what we want**
- ❑ **Government affects everyone, everyday**
- ❑ **One of the important functions of government is to provide basic services to the community**
- ❑ **Everyone has a right (and responsibility) to hold public agencies accountable to the community**
- ❑ **Access to the government is open to all, but it requires commitment and follow-up. Remember, if you ignore your politician, it makes it easier for him or her to ignore you**

## ***KEY TERMS or CONCEPTS\****

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\*Unless otherwise noted, all definitions are taken from Webster Dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com>

- ❑ **Political Player:** Someone who knows how to make things happen in his/her community. This person sees the connections between public policy and politics and gains an understanding of how power works to benefit and improve communities and individual lives.



## ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS INDEX

The Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science were developed using the 1985 Illinois State Goals for Social Science, the National Standards for World History, the National Standards for United States History, the National Geography Standards, and National Standards for Civics and Government, other various state and national work, and local standards contributed by team members.

### *Online Resource:*

Information regarding the Illinois State Board of Education Learning Standards can be found online at: <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/default0.html>

### Illinois Learning Standards Alignment

State Goal	14	Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.
Learning Standards	A, B, C, D, F	
Major Emphasis	14.C.3, 14.C.4, 14.C.5, 14.D.3, 14.D.4	
State Goal	16	Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations.



## NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

The Curriculum Standards for Social Studies were developed by a Task Force of the National Council for the Social Studies and approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in April 1994. Its *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* focuses on ten thematic strands in social studies considered essential for educators and students. More information can be found at their website: <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/>

This unit addresses the following thematic standards:

- ❑ Power, Authority, and Governance
- ❑ Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- ❑ Civic, Ideals, and Practices
- ❑ Individual Development and Identity

# ***DICTIONARY and INFORMATION LINKS***

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There are many helpful resources online for you and your students. Those below will just get you started.

## **LibrarySpot.com**

This is one of the best places to begin any kind of information search. It provides direct links to encyclopedias, dictionaries, curriculum ideas and library resources.

<http://www.libraryspot.com/>

## **Dictionary.com**

Free online English dictionary, thesaurus and reference guide, crossword puzzles and other word games, online translator and Word of the Day.

<http://www.Dictionary.com>

## **Webster Dictionary** at [www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)

Online version of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary. Simply enter keywords for a comprehensive definition, with thesaurus option.

<http://www.m-w.com>

## **AllWords.com** - Dictionary, Guide, Community and More

allwords.com provides English definitions plus a multi-lingual search. Search in German, Dutch, French, Italian, Spanish and English. It provides a helpful pronunciation guide and gives students a chance to see how words often share cultural roots with geographic, and cultural neighbors.

<http://www.allwords.com/>

## **AskJeeves.com**

One of the best search engines on the web. Web users simply put questions to AJeeves@the butler, who then searches the web for relevant information and web sites.

<http://www.askjeeves.com/>

# ***INTERNET RESOURCES on BECOMING AN ACTIVE POLITICAL PLAYER***

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Visit the following web sites for more information on how to connect your students to public life. Some of these sites provide information while others outline opportunities for getting students connected to their communities. Unless otherwise noticed, all quoted material is taken directly from the listed web sites.

## **⊕ *FirstGov.com***

A good first stop in your web search should be at FirstGov. This site provides direct links to elected officials and public agencies.

<http://www.firstgov.gov/>

## **⊕ *Direct Links to government officials (various websites)***

Homepage for Executive Office at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

Home page for both House and Senate at <http://www.congress.org>

Homepage of the President at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

Homepage of the Congress at <http://www.house.gov/>

Homepage of the Senate at <http://www.senate.gov/>

For a link to all state home pages see <http://www.governing.com/urlstate.htm>

## **⊕ *Direct Links to Illinois state homepage (various websites)***

State Legislators at <http://www.state.il.us/state/legis/>

City of Chicago homepage at <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/>

City of Chicago homepage for contacting city officials at <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/CityCouncil/>

## **⊕ *The Vanishing Voter***

This site aims to increase and improve citizen participation in the American electoral process.

At <http://www.vanishingvoter.org/>

## **⊕ *Project Vote Smart***

This site provides useful information on candidates and issues. They also provide direct links for voter registration by state.

<http://www.vote-smart.org/>

## **⊕ *U.S. Blue Pages***

This website is helpful to find out and connect to services sponsored by federal government. In addition, you can find information about most federal agencies.

<http://www.USBluePages.gov>

# ***CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT***

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This curriculum was developed with the support of a grant to the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), Loyola University Chicago, from the Technology Innovation Challenge Grant Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The project team consisted of:

- ✦ Brian C. Shea, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Philosophy, coordinator and principal author;
- ✦ Alan Gitelson, Ph.D., Department of Political Science, faculty consultant;
- ✦ Nelson Portillo, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Psychology, evaluation, editing, and web design;
- ✦ Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, evaluation supervision;
- ✦ Linda Von Dreele, Associate Director of CURL, oversight and editing.

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