

Educating Youth About Local Government

By Karen Hildebrant,
MTA Public Affairs Liaison



Open any high school government textbook, and you are not likely to find a chapter dealing with state or local government. This inattention to Michigan's various levels of government has cost us dearly. Our interest with national, and even international, government can make the entire concept of government seem detached from citizens and their everyday lives.

In the United States, as well as in other countries, traditional history, civics and government classes spend a disproportionate amount of time studying national government. Very little time is dedicated to state or regional governments, and even less to local government.

But the issues and concerns in our schools, neighborhoods, and our townships and cities, are very real and immediate. Citizens can bring about changes for the better in their own communities, if only they know how to go about it. The primary opportunity to learn about the government closest to the people—local government—is in our schools.

Becoming Civic-Minded

The idea that we should be educating our youth to be civic-minded is not a new one. Thomas Jefferson and other of our

nation's forefathers knew that in order to maintain constitutional democracy, our citizens must be knowledgeable and skilled in civic virtues.

To give an idea of how wide the reach of democratic local government can be, we don't need to look any further than our own country. In contrast to one national government and 50 state governments, the U.S. has more than 83,000 separate local governments, according to the 1990 census. Even more impressive, the United States has more elected positions at the local level than any other nation in the world. Conservative estimates put the number of local elected officials at more than a half-million, and these public servants are accessible to their residents by a simple local phone call or a personal visit.

Students' daily lives are affected by countless decisions made at the local level by Michigan's more than 1,850 local units of government, including townships, cities, villages and counties. With local government so accessible, students can observe first-hand those decision-making bodies at work, and, with appropriate instruction, they can learn how to monitor and influence them.

Local government also offers students and teachers a setting in which they can

develop and practice the participatory skills essential for informed, effective citizenship. Students learn about government by getting involved in those local government activities that can cast them in decision-making roles as they face the tough decisions that come with governing.

When students join with their peers, neighbors or an interest group to work for changes to improve the quality of life in their school or community, they learn essential elements of democratic civic action. When students "shadow" or accompany an elected or appointed township official in the conduct of their daily business, they learn about leadership in a democracy, and about the exercise of authority and the limitations on power that constitutional democracy imposes.

Unfortunately, the current lack of education about local government in schools can leave children unprepared to participate in their local government. Many studies conducted over the years recognize that our young people are uninformed about government, and many even fail to exercise their right to vote. However, when given the proper education and chance to participate, youth often will seize the opportunity to become involved in their community.

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Ways to Involve Youth in Local Government

Today's youth are the leaders of tomorrow, and it is vitally important to have them involved in local government. It not only provides townships with a more invested citizenry at a younger age, it saves time (and taxpayer money) in training these people as they move into leadership roles in the community. A variety of methods exist to promote youth involvement in local government.

1. Create a "shadow" opportunity where youth work with an individual township board member and do a job shadow for credit.
2. Start a youth advisory council.
3. Appoint young people to local boards and commissions.
4. Have an official youth seat on the township board.
5. Hold a youth summit, where issues affecting young people are highlighted in the media and presented to community service clubs. Each club then agrees to tackle an issue with a youth organization.

6. Hold a "mock" township election where only youth vote.
7. Have a "Township Day" where township leaders meet with young people in the community to learn what it is that officials do and discuss local issues. Or have a Youth Supervisor for a Day, etc.
8. Mentor youth election workers.
9. Sponsor an ordinance essay contest. Young people submit an essay on an ordinance they would like to enact, with the winning essay presented to the board for debate and reprinted in the local school, chamber and community newspapers.
10. Create a Youth Election Commission, which sends a youth questionnaire to local candidates with the results published in the newspapers. Or hold a public forum where youth can ask candidates questions on issues important to them.

*Adapted from "Tips for Involving Youth in Local Government," by Trista Ochoa, AmeriCorps Promise Fellow, League of Oregon Cities, and Kevin Kline, AmeriCorps*VISTA Leader, Moreno Valley School District*

This is something MTA First Vice President **Maxine McClelland** has witnessed firsthand.

McClelland has been visiting high school classrooms to discuss township government for more than 28 years. "I don't think young people understand the uniqueness that township government holds in that township leaders are the legislators as well as the administrators of their communities," said McClelland, **Big Rapids Township** (Mecosta County) supervisor. "Even though a lot of students live in a township, they are often not aware of what a township is and how it differs from a city or county."

"Many students in my area have gotten involved in our community after I visit their classroom," she continued. "Some have started volunteering at the fire department, washing fire trucks, and eventually become firefighters or paramedics. Students also work with political candidates or on election proposals, working in parades, at fair booths or on mailings."

Talking with students can be an educational experience for parents as well. MTA District 11 Director **Cindy Heinbeck** feels that her own citizens' lack of understanding about planning and zoning, elections, assessment and taxation, and nearly every other aspect of the daily work in townships can, to a large degree, be traced back directly to the small amount of education students receive about local government.

To help remedy this, Heinbeck takes time from her busy life as supervisor of **Alpine Township** (Kent County) to visit local elementary schools and educate students about township government.

"Getting students interested and even excited about how local government works will not only give us better citizens in the future, but also helps their parents become better informed," Heinbeck said.

"These kids go home and share some of that information with their parents. I've had parents visit me at the office because their third or fourth grader told them how much they learned and wanted them to see our township offices or historic hall. I've had parents tell me that their children really motivated them to get out and vote after the children had the experience of voting on our Optech equipment."

"The importance to me is educating kids about government to try to deter the level of apathy that exists in our society today. Any information that I can give that helps them understand the process or spark an interest is important. Our youth will be our leaders some day."

*-Randi DeVries, Clerk,
Spring Arbor Township
(Jackson Co.)*

Getting Involved in the Classroom

By visiting a classroom and discussing their role as an elected official and the role of townships in Michigan, township officials can make great strides in educating students about local government.

The importance of teaching students about local government cannot be stressed enough, according to MTA District 17 Director **Randi DeVries**.

"The importance to me is educating kids about government to try to deter the level of apathy that exists in our society today," said DeVries, **Spring Arbor Township**

(Jackson County) clerk. "Within a year or so after these kids graduate from high school, they will be voting on issues that may affect them for a very long time. Any information that I can give that helps them understand the process or spark an interest is important. Our youth will be our leaders some day."

Making direct classroom contact to educate local students about their own local township government will foster enthusiasm as well as future participation in government. The objective should be to provide a positive and practical educational experience to students.

According to MTA District 19 Director **Colleen Schwartz**, making contact is as easy as writing a letter or calling the superintendent of your local school district to let them know you are available to make a presentation about township government. Schwartz has been involved in her local school since 1977 when she was a deputy clerk.

"I initially got involved going to our local high school for a voter registration program for graduating seniors," said Schwartz, **Milford Charter Township** (Oakland County) clerk. "More than 20 years later, I am still going into the classroom to make them aware that someone local is out there and to share with them the roles and responsibilities of township officials. It is so important to put a positive spin on government."

Tips for Speaking with Students in the Classroom

- Assess the students' familiarity with local government by checking with the teacher to find out what the students have already covered in class.
- 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.
- Use examples from your township to make your point. List some real citizen complaints and explain how the township board handled those issues.
- Give the students your phone number or e-mail address so they can contact you if they have a concern or need in the future. Bring business cards or write the information on the board at the end of your presentation.
- Have fun! Let the students see that local government officials are real people, and not just names in the newspaper.

Adapted from "Back to the Classroom" by the North Carolina City and County Management Association.

Schwartz also uses the opportunity to recruit workers for elections. "Even at 16, students can participate in the voting process as election inspectors," she said. "At 18, students can become a precinct chairperson. The training involved with these positions exposes the students to the township facilities, equipment and, most importantly, the process of voting."

Officials should keep in mind that even if they are invited to make a presentation, it may take persistence to remind a teacher that they are available to visit the class year-after-year. Heinbeck urges officials to write to their schools every year in late August or early September to offer their services as a resource or speaker.

"I have come to realize that unless you continue to let the school know you are available to them EACH year, they won't remember until a presidential election year," she said. "It's a shame that we have a tendency to better educate only every fourth class on elections and voting. We should be making a strong effort to reach every class we can."

By initiating this contact, students will have an important opportunity to engage in dialogue with officials about their various roles and responsibilities as a township official and the day-to-day operations of a township.

DeVries also has advice to pass along to township officials who head into the classroom: "Be prepared for questions," she said. "I didn't think there would be a lot of interest on the subject, but I was overwhelmed with questions."

When visiting a classroom, try relating the topics to students' everyday lives such as where their mom and dad's tax money goes or fire department and library services. The primary objective should be to provide a positive, practical educational experience for students.

Officials should also try to provide students with an opportunity to exercise their rights as members of their community. They not only need to learn about township government, but they also need to acquire participatory skills. This participation can be fostered by holding a mock election at a school with the township's voting equipment, registering students to vote, inviting students to attend board meetings,

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*-Maxine McClelland, Supervisor
Big Rapids Township
(Mecosta Co.)*

offering tours of township facilities, or by hosting an annual poster or essay contest.

In Big Rapids Township, students can earn class credits by attending township meetings. "Our board offers meeting attendees an opportunity to speak on the issues that matter to them," McClelland said. "Many students ask questions and participate throughout the meeting."

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Although many local students may not choose to become township officials in the future, they will be involved with local government as adults. By becoming involved in their government education, a township official can ensure that the students are aware of the main responsibilities of township government, and know how to become involved if they choose.

New State Government Curriculum Now Available

What would happen if the traditional civics curriculum in Michigan schools was turned upside down?

Instead of teaching students about the federal government, teachers would instead teach about the level of government most accessible to students and the community—township, city, village and county government. Students would learn about the impact of government on their lives and how individuals' voices, votes and actions can truly make a difference.

In Michigan, the effort to correct this inattention to local government has long been underway, with the creation of a local government curriculum in the K-12 public school system. The effort started out as a project of the Michigan City Management Association (now the Michigan Local Government Management Association or MLGMA). In 1998, the MLGMA Community Education Committee was formed, with several goals and initiatives related to local government education.

The main goal became an effort to create a local government curriculum in the K-12 public school system to better prepare our youth to become more knowledgeable participants in local community affairs.

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In 1999, the Michigan Townships Association and representatives from other local government organizations were invited to serve on the Michigan Municipal League's (MML) Centennial Youth Committee. The committee, formed to work on a strategy to reconnect youth with local government, chose development of a K-12 curriculum as its top priority.

The task was not a simple one, however. The committee developed grant proposals that were submitted to foundations for funding. The first round of applications was not successful, but the door was left open for reapplication by some foundations.

In 2001, the committee refreshed its efforts and was surprised to learn of the existence of the Michigan Civics Institute (MCI), a Michigan government education initiative started by Rep. Doug Hart (R-Rockford). MCI's goals included integrating Michigan government education into high school government curriculum statewide, providing government teachers with "world class" educational tools and students with more meaningful educational opportunities relative to Michigan government.

In February 2001, the Centennial Youth Committee decided to merge its efforts with MCI, which had established relationships with all of the major agencies and players necessary to complete the state government curriculum. The Michigan unit curriculum plan appeared to be light on local government education, but the Michigan Civics Institute agreed to allow the committee to assist with curriculum development.

In August 2001, MCI invited a dozen writing specialists to Lansing for a week-long curriculum-writing project to create a series of units on state government in Michigan. The central purpose of each unit was to create a flexible, innovative curriculum that answered the fundamental question: "What do students need to be active members of a democratic society at the state level?" Each unit was designed around a topic of state government, and contained within it were several lesson plans along with assessment tasks, classroom simulations, accompanying procedures, resources and Web links needed to teach each unit.

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-Colleen Schwartz, Clerk
Milford Charter Township
(Oakland Co.)

After a week of preparation and meetings with municipal leaders, state legislators, judges, lobbyists and members of the executive branch, the authors published lesson plans on the following subjects:

Representative Democracy and the Michigan Constitution: Making Connections

- What Does a State Legislator Do?
- Who Cares About State Laws?
- Lobbying Power
- Bill, Take the Road Often Traveled
- Are the Core Democratic Values Alive and Kicking in Michigan Today?

The Michigan state government curriculum is now available and can be accessed by teachers on the Michigan Civics Institute Web site, www.michigancivics.org. Through the site, teachers have access to each unit, as well as opportunities for feedback on the implementation of each unit.

Local Government Curriculum in the Works

In order for the local government portion of the curriculum to be completed, it was necessary for the Centennial Youth Committee to raise funds to assemble another panel of writers to create, design and implement a comprehensive curriculum on Michigan local government.

During spring 2002, the committee embarked on a fundraising effort, with hopes of beginning the writing process by July 2002. Enough funds were gathered, with donations from the MTA, MML, MLGMA, Grand Valley Metro Council, Ford Foundation, Lathrup Village, Frey Foundation, DTE Energy, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, Michigan Association of Counties, Michigan Mayors Association and International City County Management Association.

MCI's Michigan local government curriculum is considered a continuation of, and will work in partnership with, the state government curriculum. Using a comprehensive outline of the various levels of local government and their functions as devel-

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*-Cindy Heinbeck, Supervisor
Alpine Township
(Kent Co.)*

oped by the Centennial Youth Committee, 15 new writers assembled in Lansing for a week in July.

Facilitated by the Michigan Department of Education, the writers began researching, planning and writing their own unit on Michigan local government. The research phase of the project included interviewing a panel of local government officials, as well as MTA Executive Director Larry Merrill and a representative of the MML. It is hoped the local government curriculum will be available later this year.

Of the new curriculum, Heinbeck said, "I think the local government curriculum is an excellent resource to make available to teachers. But I hope they will continue to utilize their local officials, too."

DeVries agreed. "It will promote awareness of local government—and that is what I am trying to achieve by talking to our youth."

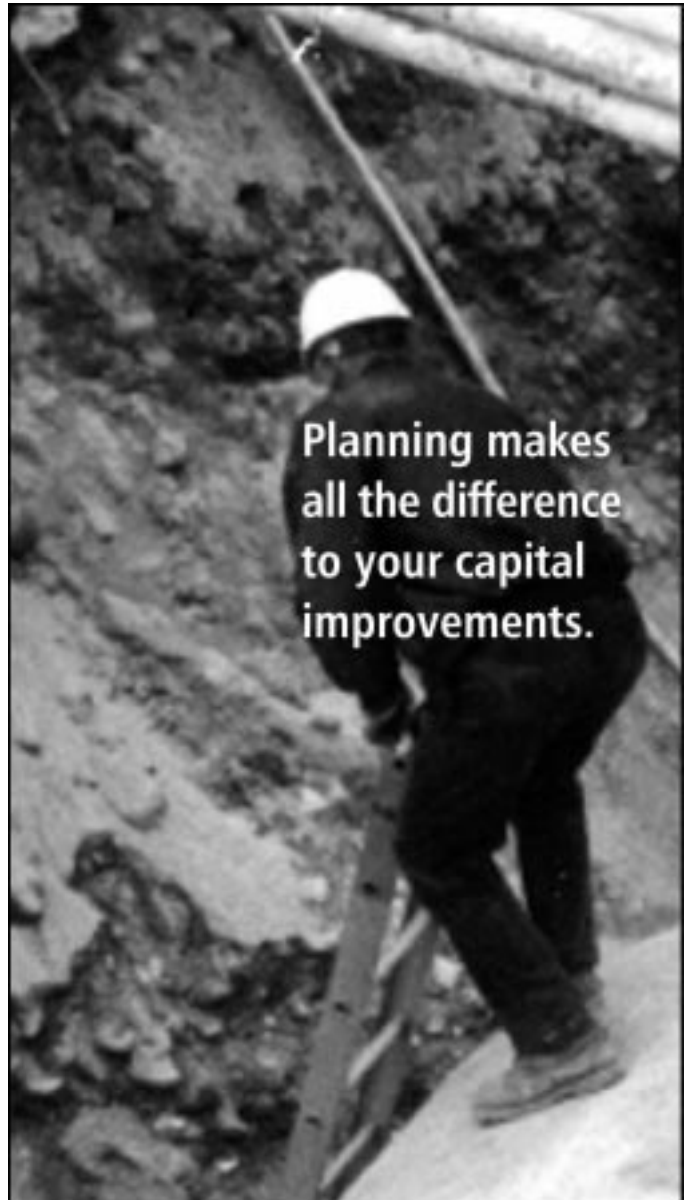
It is crucial that township officials inform their area teachers of the state government curriculum and where it can be accessed. Information about the curriculum will be disseminated through social studies coordinators and curriculum consultants at intermediate school districts and in local school districts. Presentations will also be made at statewide social studies conferences. The local government curriculum will be made available in the same manner.

Although the local government curriculum is not yet available, township officials can still do their share to educate students about their communities, and make contact with students and teachers this fall.

Shaping Future Leaders

As the level of government closest to the citizens, local government offers students the opportunity to influence the future of their communities. Accomplishing this goal depends upon citizen awareness and a commitment to become involved. By encouraging local students to serve your community now and in the future, you will be shaping Michigan's future leaders. ■

Want to know more about the local government curriculum? Contact MTA Public Affairs Liaison Karen Hildebrant at (517) 321-6467 or e-mail: karen@michigantownships.org. To view the state government curriculum, visit: www.michigancivics.org.



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