



Engaging youth in local government

Ask any high school student what they know about their local government, and odds are, you'll get a blank stare in return. That's not just teenage moodiness in the works. Most students likely know very little about the community they call home—how it functions, the services it provides, and its impacts on their everyday lives. This lack of knowledge about local issues is prevalent among many citizens, but can be especially apparent among youth.

You can help to change that.

The more citizens know about their local government, the greater the connection they will feel, and the more likely they may be to get involved in improving and championing their hometown. That connection is more important than ever before. With the 2010 U.S. Census showing that Michigan was the only state in the nation to lose population, township officials must ensure that youth understand and are involved in their community—that they feel a link to and a sense of pride in their hometown.

This connection can help to inspire today's youth to become tomorrow's local civic leaders. Township officials can play an integral role in this by undertaking efforts to engage with youth, and educate them on the value of local government.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Perhaps the most obvious—and important—way to improve youth awareness about the importance of local government is to head back to school. There are no shortages of ways to engage with students through your local school district. From elementary school through high school, students at every level can benefit from an introduction to the government closest to the people—township government.

Roscommon Township Clerk **Barb Stevenson** is hoping to have the opportunity to teach a unit on local government at nearby

Harrison High School—a topic she knows is lacking in the school's teachings. "I have a friend who teaches government at that school," she noted. "The curriculum is so heavy with state and federal modules, there is no time to teach local issues."

Township officials can help fill that gap by volunteering to visit the classroom and discuss their role as an elected officials and the role of townships in Michigan. Reach out to the area school district, principal or government teacher and offer to serve as a guest speaker. Even if you've spoken in the schools before, it may take persistence to remind a teacher that you are available year after year.

When visiting a classroom, try to relate the topics to students' everyday lives—such as the township library they visit after school, the township park where the area soccer league plays, or the fire or police department they see helping people in the community. Students could even participate in a mock election to learn about the election process, or take part in a model board meeting, deliberating on an important local issue. The key is to provide a positive, practical educational experience for students.

Students in **Northville Charter Township** (Wayne Co.) recently got a lesson in township planning, after officials from the township visited an area middle school and worked with four sixth grade social studies classes on a creative exercise to design their dream community park. The exercise was part of the township's public engagement program for a new master plan for a 350-acre parcel of property in the township.

"The students were tasked with arranging park features on a portion of a large map of the actual 350-acre site," explained **Jennifer Frey**, township director of community development. "Drawing on their first-hand experience with parks and recreation, students were encouraged to collaborate, negotiate and build consensus on their preferred plan."

The 120 students named their new parks, and each team picked a representative to present their ideas to the larger group. In addition to the design contribution from the four social studies classes, all 340 6th grade students at the school completed a township questionnaire and visual preference surveys for the new master plan.

“The result: students had a real work experience in public participation, consensus building, and the planning and design process,” said Frey. “As importantly, they can take pride in having an active role in developing a vision for development of this key community natural resource.”

A northern Michigan township has also benefitted from increased involvement by area students. Hide-a-way Park in **Tuscarora Township** (Cheboygan Co.), which borders the Indian River, has received a brand-new, 100-foot boardwalk and some 20-plus park benches have been repaired and painted, thanks to local industrial arts students.

The effort was spearheaded by **Brandon Beltz**, a member of the township beautification committee, who is also an industrial arts teacher at Inland Lakes Schools. “These projects are a great way for students to get a sense of pride in their work and take ownership for it,” Beltz noted.

SCOUTS HONOR

Branching out beyond the school walls can reveal further opportunities to involve area youth in the township. Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, as well as 4-H groups and other community organizations, are frequently on the lookout for volunteer opportunities or have requirements for civic education. In fact, the Girl Scouts have citizenry badges ranging for girls in the youngest, Brownie, level, all the way up through the Ambassador level, requiring scouts to learn more about and become involved in their local government. The Boy Scouts of America have similar requirements, and many townships have a history of working with these groups.

“Our township has been involved with the local scout groups for quite awhile,” said **Janet Clark**, **Green Charter Township** (Mecosta Co.) clerk.

“A lot of times, the scout troops approach us for opportunities,” she added, noting that a local Cub Scout troop recently assisted the township by placing flags on veterans’ graves in the township’s four cemeteries for Memorial Day.

Clark says that boys working on their Eagle Scout ranking have also completed projects in the township’s cemetery and parks, including restoration projects and improving the local ball fields. 4-H groups have also volunteered to help in the township’s cemeteries. “It’s a learning experience for the students,” she said. “Our township has always had good experiences working with youth from the community. They take a lot of pride in their efforts.”

In Roscommon Township, a Girl Scout troop helped with spring clean-up in the township cemetery, polishing markers on the veterans’ memorial, picking up leaves and placing flowers on

Ways to involve youth in local government

- Create a “shadow” opportunity where youth work with an individual township board member and do a job shadow for school credit.
- Designate a “Township Government Day.” Each year, a particular grade could tour the township hall and various departments. Students can speak with the members of the township board and other officials to gain an understanding of how their township functions. Each student could prepare a report on what he/she learned that day.
- Encourage teachers to take a field trip to a township board meeting to allow students to see how decisions are made and how citizens can participate in township meetings.
- Start a youth advisory council.
- Appoint young people to local boards and commissions.
- Have an official youth seat on the township board.
- Consider creating an Explorer program for youth to become involved in the township fire department.
- Hold a “mock” township election where only youth vote.
- Mentor youth election workers.
- Sponsor a poster contest. Each student could create a poster representing how township government affects his/her life. Posters could be displayed at the township hall.

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sites visible in the potter's field—a plot kept for indigent burials. "They were fascinated with the history behind the concept of a potter's field," Stevenson said. "There are a lot of things that [scouts] would like to be involved in at the government level, but it takes communications with the [scout] leaders to discover those."

AT WORK IN THE TOWNSHIP

There's no shortage of opportunities for local youth to help out in and around the township as well—either on a volunteer basis or as a township employee. For example, state statute (MCL 168.677) allows students who are at least 16 years old to serve as local election inspectors. (Before a minor can be appointed, three election inspectors meeting the requirements of MCL 168.677(1)-168.677(3) must be appointed.)

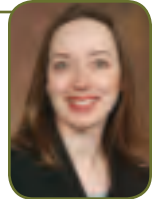
Stevenson says that since 2000, she has trained and utilized a dozen students to work as inspectors during township elections—two of whom continue in that capacity to this day. "They have a front-row seat to grassroots government," said Stevenson, noting that youth are technologically savvy and she expects that will be a benefit as the use of technology in administering elections increases.

Green Charter Township has also used area students to serve as election inspectors, to great success, according to Clark. "They catch on quickly," she said. "For the students, it's invaluable for them to learn the election process. Then, they're more apt to continue to work elections, and to vote."

Beyond elections, Clark says that area youth can even play a role in expanding services to the greater community. In Green Charter Township, the township is undertaking efforts to offer high-speed Internet to area residents. The township hired local students "to do the 'grunt' work, like digging," during tower construction, Clark said.

Stevenson has also made use of student volunteers helping in the township hall, assisting with office work such as filing, typing and stuffing envelopes. "All the while, they were experiencing the vast and varied duties of local government," she said. ■

Jenn Fiedler,
MTA Communications Specialist



Local government curricula available

If you are heading to the classroom this fall to teach students about the structure, role and value of local government, sample curricula is available to assist in this task. Compiled by the Michigan Civics Institute in cooperation with MTA and other organizations, these materials can be customized for high school, middle school and elementary students. There is no cost to use the items, which are available for download in individual file formats. Visit www.michigantownships.org/curricula.asp to see what's offered.



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