

# Express Yourself:

## How Can Citizens Participate?



Grades 3–5

Using AIT Products

- *Solve It*, program # 6, “Statistics—Understanding Mean, Median, and Mode”
- *democracy it is!*, program 4, “Choices and Changes”
- *Club Write Kids*, program # 4, “Writing to Persuade”

### Overview

Few tasks are more important for educators than arousing young people’s interest in government and helping them obtain the knowledge necessary for effective self-government. As President Reagan once remarked, “Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction.” This lesson is designed to help educators in this effort.

In this lesson, students will discover why civic participation is crucial to the maintenance of a representative democracy and explore various ways they can become involved in government. Students will also practice civic skills and dispositions while identifying a problem in their local community and developing a plan of action to rectify the problem.

### Objectives

- Explain the importance of citizen participation.
- Describe the various ways citizens can participate in government.

- Identify which levels of government and which governmental agencies are responsible for changing, enforcing, or developing a specific public policy.
- Practice responsible citizenship by identifying a significant issue in the community, gathering information about the issue, and making a justifiable decision to resolve the issue.



“The life of a republic lies certainly in the energy, virtue, and intelligence of its citizens.”

—Andrew Johnson

## Vocabulary

citizens	participate
federal government	persuade
federal system	petition
local government	volunteer

## Preparation

### Materials needed

- Access to a computer with Internet access
- Projection device
- Center on Congress at Indiana University Facts of Congress Video—“Citizen Participation”
- AIT video—*Solve It*, program #6, “Statistics—Understanding Mean, Median, and Mode”
- AIT video—*democracy it is!*, program #4, “Choices and Changes ”
- AIT video—*Club Write Kids*, program #4, “Writing to Persuade ”

### Time

This project will take at least five class periods, in addition to homework and extension activity time.

## Procedure—Day 1

### Introduce Topic

Introduce students to the concept of citizen participation. Tell them to imagine that their parents have asked them what they want for dinner. Then ask students what would happen if they didn't tell their parents what they wanted. Explain to students that if they don't tell their parents what they want, their parents would have a hard time figuring out what they want. The same is true of our government. If we citi-

zens don't speak up and let our opinions and ideas be heard, then our elected leaders won't know what we want.

### Video

Show students the Center on Congress at Indiana University Facts of Congress video—“Citizen Participation.” Then facilitate a discussion around the following questions:

- How can citizens participate in the political process at local, state, and national levels?
- Why is it important to communicate your ideas to your representatives?

### Whole-Class Activity

Explain to students that one way to participate in our government is to tell elected officials what you think about problems in the local community, state, or nation. As a class, brainstorm a list of problems that the students are interested in. Write this list on the board. For homework, have students interview two people, read the newspaper, or watch the news and identify two other problems in the community that they think are important.

## Procedure—Day 2

### Review

Have students share the problems they identified with the class, and add them to the list you previously wrote on the board. Invite students to share what they already know about the problems written on the board. Then tell students that, as a class, they will select one of these problems and try to influence the decisions people in the government make about this problem. Conduct a class vote and select one problem.

### Video

Explain to students that now that they have selected a problem, they need to gather more information about it. Cue program 6 from the

series *Solve It!* to approximate time code 00:00:43.

Tell students that they will watch a video about some kids who have identified a problem that they want their local government to solve. Then play the video until approximate time code 00:01:57.

After the video, have students summarize the problem. Discuss how the kids in the video will gather more information about who uses the park. Then have students watch how the kids gathered information. Cue program 6 from the series *Solve It!* to approximate time code 00:09:43 and play the video until approximate time code 00:13:24.

### Whole-Class Activity

Tell students that there are many ways to gather information about a community problem. In the video, the kids conducted a survey. As a class, develop a list of ways you can learn more about your selected problem.

For homework, have students gather information about the class's chosen problem. Tell them that they should also learn how the government is currently handling the problem and find out about alternative solutions to the problem.

## Procedure—Day 3

### Review

Invite students to share what they learned about the problem.

### Video

Tell students that now that you know more about the problem, you need to come up with your own solution to the problem and develop a plan of action. Cue program 4 from the series *democracy it is!* to approximate time code 00:01:52. Explain to students that they will watch a video about a kid who influenced the govern-

ment to build a guide dog school for kids in the United States who are visually impaired. Play the video until approximate time code 00:04:54.

After the video, discuss the following questions with students.

- Why did the boy from the video want to open a school for people who are visually impaired?
- What did he do to persuade the local government to open a school?
- What else could he have done?

### Whole-Class Activity

Explain to students that we have a federal system of government. This means that the power is divided between national, state, and local governments. To be able to participate effectively, citizens need to know which levels of government and which governmental agencies are responsible for different issues or problems. Point out that in the video, the boy spoke to his local government.

Discuss the responsibilities of local, state, and national governments. Use a projection device to show students the Democracy Kids Web site. Complete the Making a Difference activity, and read about kids who made a difference.

After completing the activity, review the class's selected problem. Then determine which levels of government or governmental agencies can help your students resolve the problem.

## Procedure—Day 4

### Introduce New Topic

Explain to students that citizens can impact government by writing a letter to elected officials that explains how issues affect them and their families.

## Video

Tell students that they will watch a video in which students write letters to persuade people to save a local park. Show students program 4 from the series *Club Write Kids*.

After the video, discuss what the students in the video were trying to accomplish. Have students summarize the different ways the kids in the video used writing to persuade others. Discuss why these methods were effective.

## Whole-Class Activity

Help students come up with one sentence that states their opinion about the class's chosen problem. Then write another sentence that explains what the students think the government should do about the problem. Examine these sentences, and ask students to think about to whom they could write a persuasive letter about their topic.

## Procedure—Day 5

### Culminating Activity— Develop a Plan of Action

Explain to students that they are now ready to develop a plan of action to show how they might influence the appropriate government or governmental agency to address the class's chosen problem. As a class, brainstorm ways to persuade the government to resolve the issue. Have students think about what they have seen in the videos and what they read during the interactive exercise.

As a class, select one plan of action to implement. Or divide the class into groups and have each group implement a different plan of action.

## Reflection

An important part of any civic participation project is to give students the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned from the experience.

The following questions can be delivered in a handout for written short-answer or essay responses, or used as springboards for class or small-group discussions.

1. How did our project demonstrate citizenship?
2. What community problem were we addressing in our project?
3. Did we solve the problem, or is this something that needs constant, ongoing citizen participation?
4. Talk about your personal impressions during the experience:
  - Was it a happy experience or sad?
  - Did you get angry or feel troubled during the project?
  - Did you feel satisfied with your efforts or that you weren't doing enough?
5. What did you learn about public policy from working on this project?
6. Did you see other areas where citizens should participate, different from the project you worked on?
7. How do you feel about yourself after participating? Has your self-image changed because of it? In what way?
8. If you were going to repeat this participation project, would you do anything differently? What changes would you make?
9. Is there another project that you would rather do the next time? Why?

## Assessment

Use any or all of the following writing prompts to assess student learning:

1. Why is citizen participation important to our democracy?
2. How can citizens stay informed about what's going on in government?
3. How can citizens participate in our government?
4. What do you consider the most important avenue of citizen participation? Why?
5. How are you most likely to participate?
6. Why do you think some people don't participate in our government? What can you do to encourage others to participate?

## Extension Activity

Have the class create a monthly “Active Citizens” newsletter. In the first newsletter, students should explain why it is important to be an active citizen and describe some ways to participate in government. In the subsequent newsletters, students should interview one student at the school and write a feature article about how that person got involved with government. Students writing the newsletter should try to include examples of many different ways students have participated in government. For example, the newsletter may include articles about students who send letters to their legislators, help with campaigns, sign a petition, or identify a problem in the local community and work with others to find a solution. Students may also want to include suggestions for becoming active citizens in each newsletter.

## Resources

### Ben’s Guide to U.S. Government for Kids

<http://bensguide.gpo.gov>

This site was created by the U.S. Government and Printing Office (GPO). It contains resources for K–12 students, parents, and teachers about how our government works, the use of the primary source materials of *GPO Access*, and how people can use *GPO Access* to carry out their civic responsibilities.

### Kids In the House

<http://clerkkids.house.gov>

This site was created by the Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives for K–12 students, parents, and teachers. It includes online and print resources about the legislative branch and offers ways that citizens can participate in government.

### PBS Kids Go!: The Democracy Project

<http://pbskids.org/democracy/educators/index.html>

Visit this Web site to find online activities and lesson plans about the structure and duties of local, state, and federal government; the effects of government on our everyday lives; and the history of voting rights in America.

### The Center on Congress at Indiana University: Democracy Kids

[www.democracykids.org](http://www.democracykids.org)

The site presents information on Congress and civics through a variety of interactive games and other activities that entertain students as they learn. Features include crossword puzzles highlighting key concepts of democracy and government, a “Tour of the Town” that shows how government affects our lives, and a “Being Involved” survey that encourages students and parents to talk about civic engagement.