

If You Invite the Candidates, They Will Come: Special Guests Visit the Classroom

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As a new elementary teacher, I wanted my sixth grade students to understand the importance of voting and the election process. A student, intrigued by the classroom discussion, mentioned that he had an adult relative on the ballot for the upcoming election and thought that this candidate would be willing to visit our class. I encouraged the invitation, and thus began an election project, which I have molded, shaped, and refined over my 36-year elementary teaching career. Although the details have changed over the years, the basic component remains the same: invite the candidates, and they will come.

The idea is quite simple; yet, it has been my experience that this project has had a profound effect on students' understanding of the election process and on their awareness of the right and responsibility of citizens to vote.

During many election cycles since 1976, I have worked with my grade level colleagues, first at the sixth grade level and later at the fifth grade level, to invite candidates to come to our school, meet our students, and engage them in discussions about the upcoming election with the end result of students making informed decisions while participating in a mock election on Election Day.

For the past 12 years, this project took place within a K-5 elementary school of approximately 500 students. It is a Title I school located within a large urban district. There are a high number of students who receive special education services, along with a growing ELL (English Language Learner) population.

To facilitate candidate visits, I have found that it works best to set aside a few days or a week in late October and invite candidates to drop in for a brief 15-minute visit in each participating classroom—no appointment necessary. Some candidates will call and schedule a time, but many will just stop by during the assigned times.

When a candidate arrives at the door, students set aside whatever they're working on and listen as the candidates introduce themselves and answer students' questions. The visit typically ends with the distribution of the candidates' campaign literature. Although everyone on the ballot receives an invitation, local and area candidates are most likely to attend. Often overlooked in the election process, these candidates welcome the opportunity to talk to students.

Here is a timeline for implementing this project in the classroom:

Late September - Building Background Knowledge

Prepare and present a series of lessons to review or introduce students to the election process, voting rights, and the organization of local, state and national government, including an understanding of the three branches of government. These lessons, of course, should focus on standards appropriate for your grade level as outlined by your state or district.

At the fifth grade level, I engaged my students in a brief look at the Constitution; we diagrammed the functions of the three branches of government and discussed the importance of voting rights outlined in the 15th, 19th and 26th amendments. We also charted the difference between county, state and national government, giving an overview of how each is organized and where offices are located.

We also explored the basic duties and responsibilities of some of the offices that students would see on the ballot, including secretary of state, attorney general, state auditor, state treasurer, commissioner of school and public lands, public utilities commissioner and county commissioner. We reviewed who currently holds these elected positions.

Students also need to understand election terminology such as incumbent, political parties (Republicans, Democrats, Independent, Constitution Party and others), mock election, absentee voting, secret ballot, voter registration and polling place.

Early October - Introducing the Election Project

Obtain sample ballots, which should be available online from a local or state government website, the local board of elections, or your area's League of Women Voters. Have a copy for every student for reference throughout the project. Spend time reviewing the ballot with your students, drawing attention to how the ballot is organized, the various offices on the ballot, and who is running for each office. Terms like party affiliation, incumbent, and challenger will need to be explained. If the ballot contains initiated measures, constitutional amendments, or referenda, review and explain those items as appropriate for your students.

After your review of the ballot, assign to each student a candidate to invite. It is very important that every candidate on the ballot receives an invitation. If your ballot contains elections for multiple districts in your area, you may want to limit invitations to those candidates who represent districts

where your students reside. If needed, review the parts of an invitation and ask students to write an invitation to their candidate. You might have students write their final invitations on special “election stationery.” Candidate addresses may be obtained from your state election website.

To each invitation, attach a letter from you and your colleagues, explaining the details of the project along with contact information for you and your school (e-mail, phone, and address). See the sample letter on the next page, P3.

Mid October—Preparing for the Candidate Visits

Review your expectations of student behavior during the visits and brainstorm a list of appropriate questions that students may want to ask the candidates. (See the sample questions on the handout, Pullout page P4.) In addition to the more generic ones on the handout, my students’ questions reflected their interest in certain issues: Do you think we should reduce government spending? How do you feel about legalizing marijuana? (a state ballot issue) How should we develop renewable energy in our state? What can we do to reduce the price of food and gas? How do you feel about year-round school?

Late October—Listening to the Candidates

Alert the office staff that candidates will be arriving. It works well to have the office staff contact your room and then send a student down to meet the candidates and bring them to your room. Be flexible and enjoy meeting the candidates as they arrive. In the past, we would often have 20-30 candidates visit in a week’s time. That meant many interruptions to our schedule and, at times, several candidates lined up at the door!

Allow the candidates a few minutes to introduce themselves and then open up the discussion to student questions. Distribute any campaign literature brought by the candidates as you end the session. It’s also nice to take a photo of each candidate with the student who invited him/her.

Early November—Analyzing the Election

Prior to Election Day, students can be involved in preparing and presenting campaign speeches or commercials for a favorite candidate. You may want students to help prepare ballots, a ballot box and a voting booth for the mock election. Conduct the mock election on Election Day. Make every effort to tabulate student votes before students go home so that students can compare their class votes to the real election results. If your school serves as a polling place, be sure to take students on a tour of the space; perhaps an election official would be willing to speak to your students.

Conclusion

At times, it’s difficult to discern who gains the most from this project: our students or the candidates. Often candidates have written and thanked us for the opportunity to visit our school. They’re impressed by the great questions that students ask, and by the depth of their background knowledge. They also firmly believe that a mock election is an excellent way to engage students in the voting process.


For students, this election project offers a personal connection to the election. When they read the newspaper, watch the news or view television commercials, they activate a direct association to the issues and the candidates; they actually know several of these candidates and have questioned them on the issues of the day. Students have also been exposed to a variety of viewpoints. The same question asked many times during the visits always yields a diversity of opinions and ideas and fosters deeper thinking as students shape their own thoughts and opinions.¹

Parents, too, see the value of this project. Our fall conferences would often fall on or near Election Day. In past years, I’ve heard that the election was discussed around the kitchen table, and parents would admit to learning a great deal about the candidates from their children. Students reminded their parents to get out and vote and were known to give specific recommendations, based on their face-to-face meetings with the candidates.

Having candidates from all political parties, along with candidates registered as Independent, widens students’ perspective of the election process. I have always been impressed with presentations by candidates from lesser-known parties such as the Libertarian Party and the Constitution Party. These representatives have explained the basic beliefs of their respective parties and described why they have chosen to support them.

Finally, students enter the “voting booth” on Election Day excited to cast their ballot. They are well informed; their voting decisions are based on first-hand knowledge and hands-on experience. The abstract becomes real—and students are motivated and engaged. 🗳️

Notes

1. See  **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**, “Learning Expectations for the Early Grades,” in National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010): 90.

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A Sample Letter of Invitation

*Washington Elementary School Letterhead
address, and main office phone*

Ms. Sally Smith
Candidate for County Legislator, District 3
Campaign Headquarters Address

Dear Ms. Smith,

The fourth graders at Washington Elementary School would like to invite you visit our three classrooms to discuss the upcoming elections and your role in it. We have been studying the election process and also the three branches of government. We would like to hear about the work that you would do as a public official if you win this election, and why you believe that you are the best qualified person for this office.

We are inviting all of the candidates who are running for county legislator in our district to individually visit our classrooms. Feel free to bring a campaign brochure for each child if you wish. There are about 22 students in each classroom. They've been preparing for these visits and are ready to launch right into Q&A on your arrival. If you spend 20 minutes in each of our three fourth-grade classrooms, that would make for a one-hour visit to our school.

Feel free to drop by between 8:00AM and 2:00PM any day during the last two weeks of October, no appointment necessary. Or, if you would prefer, call the school office to schedule your visit. Please park in any of the spaces on the west side of the school marked "Visitor," and check in at the main office upon your arrival.

Please let us know whether you plan to visit. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me. My students and I appreciate your willingness to serve the public, and thank you for your time and commitment.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Johnson
Fourth Grade Teacher
e-mail; daytime phone

Handout

Questions for the Candidate

BEFORE THE CANDIDATE ARRIVES

Name of the Candidate _____

Public office for which s/he is running _____ Incumbent? ☐ Yes ☐ No

ASK THE CANDIDATE

To what party do you belong? _____

Have you ever run for public office before? _____

How is your campaign going (positives and negatives)?

If you win the election, what would be the most important part of your new job?

What are some of the important problems in our community that you could help solve?

Why are you the best-qualified person for this public office?

How will voters know, over the years, whether you are doing your job well?

On reverse: Discuss something the candidate said that you found important and why; your overall impression of the candidate and office; similarities/differences with any other candidates.