

Unit 4

Political Communication

LESSON 1

Class Letter to Your State's U.S. Senators and/or Your Congressman/woman

Objective: To communicate by e-mail or mail to our U.S. senator(s) and congressman/woman about how the class is learning to choose, and to invite our U.S. senator(s) and congressman/woman and/or members of their staff to visit the school.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, computers, access to the internet, several copies of the Constitution.

Procedure:

- Invite upper grade students to join the younger students on a "Constitution Treasure Hunt."

Discuss with both groups:

- How does the Constitution organize the nation's legislature? Why do you think the writers of the Constitution chose to have two "houses" in Congress, the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of representatives?
- Team older and younger students for the "Constitution Treasure Hunt." The team that finds the most answers first wins.
 - How many senators are there?
 - How many representatives are there?
 - Why are there so many more representatives than senators?
 - How many senators can there be from each state?
 - Why do bigger states have more representatives than smaller states?
 - How old do you have to be to be a senator?
 - How old do you have to be to be a representative or congressman/woman? (Explain the interchangeable terms.)
 - Which bills must begin in the House of Representatives?
 - What is the difference between a "bill" and a law?
 - What can the Senate do that the House of Representatives cannot?
 - Can a bill ever become a law if both "houses" do not vote on it?
 - Which branch of government can veto a bill that the House and Senate have passed?
 - How many votes does it take to overcome a veto?
 - Which branch of government can decide that a law that has been passed by both the Senate and the House is unconstitutional?

- The following news story appeared in newspapers across the country in March 1999.

Clinton asks for vote on class sizes

WASHINGTON (AP) – President Clinton yesterday pressed for a vote on teacher hiring subsidies, the centerpiece of his education agenda, attached to a popular Republican school bill moving through Congress.

“The choice is simple: Are we going to give Americans smaller classes or more partisanship?” Clinton said in his weekly radio address. “Are we going to put politics ahead of progress or put 100,000 teachers in our nation’s classrooms?”

Clinton accused GOP congressional leaders of “trying to shut down debate” and thwart his proposal for another round of grants to help schools reach the goal Clinton and Congress set in 1998 of hiring 100,000 new teachers over the next six years.

In budget negotiations leading up to last November’s election, Republicans agreed to the first round of grants, more than \$1 billion, to be released in July.

The goal is to cut pupil-teacher ratios in the first through third grades. The national average now is 22 pupils per teacher, and Clinton wants that reduced to 18 or fewer.

- Write a class letter inviting your senator(s) (and/or congressman/woman) to visit your class and participate in a Mock Press Conference about reducing class size for grades 1-3. Tell them you will be inviting parents to join you. Ask that a member of their staff come if the legislator cannot, or, if neither can come, that they write a letter to the class telling you whether or not they believe the President’s position is correct, and why.
- Invite candidates for the Senate and the House from all parties to come and speak with your class (whether or not they can participate in the Mock Press Conference).
- Consider inviting members of your state legislature or their staff to come and participate in a Mock Press Conference about increasing state funding for schools. If they are too busy, perhaps they can write a letter as well.
- Ask the legislators to tell you how much of the money for education comes from the federal budget and how much from the state budget.

Discuss:

- What kind of legislative body will govern your [make believe] town? Will the town be able to decide how many students there should be in a class? Why? Why not? Where will the town get the money for its schools?

LESSON 2
"A Mock Press Conference"

Objective: To watch "Meet the Press" with members of the family in preparation for a Mock Press Conference.

Materials: Homework activity sheet.

Procedure:

- Assign the students, with the help of family members, to watch the TV program: "Meet the Press."
- Send home the homework activity sheet. (Examples of questions on activity sheet: Who were the guests on the program? What was the topic to be discussed?) What were some of the questions? Were the questions fair? What role did the moderator play? How did the reporters treat the guest?
- Ask students to fill out the activity sheet with family members and bring it back to school.
- Alternate option: watch the prerecorded video and fill in the activity sheet as a class.
- Discuss the student's observations.

LESSON 3

Preparing to Interview Candidates (or Mock Candidates)

Objective: To gather information about current problems affecting our schools and communities.

Materials: Newspapers, photographs, magazines, survey sheets, televisions, computers, access to the internet, *Scholastic and Weekly Reader*, chart paper, markers.

Procedure:

- Have students look through local newspapers, magazines and search the internet with the help of parents to find articles relating to current problems affecting your school or community. Bring the information to school.
- Have *Scholastic and Weekly Readers* available for the students to read and share with other classmates and older students.
- Create a bulletin board to display clipped articles, photographs, etc.
- Use the preliminary information to create a survey of problems and a class questionnaire with the students, e.g. Would a change in class size help solve the problem? If so, how? If not, what would?
- Ask families to help fill out the survey and questionnaire and talk about the problems with students as they fill them out.
- Gather all the information from the surveys and questionnaires and record the ideas on chart paper.
- Brainstorm ideas that would be good questions to ask the candidates.
- Discuss the role of the free press in a democracy. Are there any questions that cannot be asked?

LESSON 4

Wording Our Questions

Objective: To give students the opportunity to frame well thought out questions for their senator and/or congressman/woman (or a staff member) when they arrive at the school.

Materials: Chart paper, markers.

Procedure:

- Break the class up into groups. In each group students will select a moderator, reporters, and guests. All participants role play the press conference.
- Urge students to not only ask and answer questions that were already developed, but to follow-up on the answers with additional questions as necessary.
- Invite parents to come to the practice Press Conferences and make suggestions.
- Select the students who will be the moderator and the reporters in the Mock Press Conference.
- Decide who will run the video camera, the tape recorder, and take photographs.

LESSON 5
A Mock Press Conference

Objective: To actively engage students in an actual visit from their senator(s) and/or congressman/woman or members of their staff* to the school.

Materials: Chairs, refreshments, video camera, still cameras and tape recorder.

Procedure:

- Invite parents, grandparents, administrators, reporters and other classes.
- This is an excellent opportunity for the teacher to stress with the students the necessity of cooperation. Discuss why citizens in a democracy have to work together for the common good if they want to accomplish their goals. How can a visit with our congressman/woman and/or senator(s) achieve that?
- Ask the congressman/woman or senator to talk about their duties and how the duties of senators and congressmen/woman are alike or different; how alike or different from those of a state legislature? If time permits before the Mock Press Conference, ask visitors to also share with students something about where they went to school and how many children they have.
- Conduct the Mock Conference. Follow the "Meet the Press" model as closely as possible.
- If time permits, walk the visitors through your building to let them see your needs, your neighborhood needs, etc. (Let them see where the money you are requesting will be spent! Encourage the students to actively participate in the dialogue.)
- Videotape the whole program from beginning to end.

* If neither public officials or staff members can be secured, ask a family member or faculty member to step in and role play.

LESSON 6
Evaluating Our Press Conference and Visit

Objective: To evaluate the visit of a public official and our Mock Press Conference.

Materials: Evaluation forms, pencils, daily journals.

Procedure:

- Ask students to write/draw a composition about the special visitors and what it meant to them to share with the visitors.
- Compose a class thank you letter to the visitors and enclose the student's compositions and drawings.
- Ask students to fill out evaluation forms with the help of an older grade student if necessary.
- Possible questions:
 - Did the public official answer questions directly or change the subject?
 - Were the answers informative? (Did they give us information we did not know?)
 - What did we learn from the experience?
- Have students write or draw in their journals about the special visitors and what they learned about the democratic process.
- Gather the students together and watch the video.

LESSON 7
Watching or Listening to a Call-In Program

Objective: To watch a "Call-In" TV program or listen to a radio program in which the listeners call in their questions with the families.

Materials: Notes to go home.

Procedure:

- Send a note home with the students to ask parents to watch or listen to a Call-In TV program or radio program with their students.
- Discuss the programs the students watched. Were the questions asked good questions? Why? Why not?
- Was the host courteous?
- Did the program provide useful information?
- Did the family enjoy listening? Why? Why not?

LESSON 8
Visiting a Local Cable TV Company

Objective: To visit the local studio of a cable TV company.

Materials: Field trip permission slips, buses, chaperones, video camera, journals, chart paper, markers.

Procedure:

- Prior to this activity you may want to visit your local studio without the students to make arrangements for the class trip.
- Visit your local studio with the students. Invite parents; this will be an excellent learning experience for everyone. (Suggested alternatives for schools too far from a cable TV studio would be a mock cable TV program, or one that older grade classmates televise to be shown on the school's own system if possible.)

Discuss:

- What do the people working at the local cable TV company do? What are the responsibilities of the producers? directors? camera persons? What would their responsibilities be in a public emergency? How do they choose to whom to give air time? How do they assure that the diversity of the community is represented? How do they try to promote the values and principles of American democracy? Are all the citizens allowed to speak freely if they appear on the air? Are they permitted to criticize the government? If there are limits put on free speech, what are they? How do the students feel about these limits? Are they fair? Are they consistent with democratic values and principles?
- Do the cable company employees enjoy their jobs? What kinds of problems do they have on the job? What type of schooling is required for each job?
- If the cable TV company does not mind, videotape your field trip experience.
- Have the students write or draw in their journals what they enjoyed the most on their field trip.
- Send a thank you note to the cable TV studio.

LESSON 9
Preparing for a Mock Cable TV Call-In Program

Objective: To organize a mock cable TV call-in program.

Materials: Scrapbooks, newspaper and magazine clippings.

Procedure:

- Students will choose a "moderator," parent stand-ins as candidates for governor, and student "campaign staffs" to help the candidates prepare for their mock cable TV program.
- Have students consider choosing an older grade student to be their "moderator."

Discuss:

- The role of governor as Chief Executive of the state. How does the job of a "Chief Executive" differ from that of a legislator? How does the governor's job compare with the President's? What is similar? What is different?
- Ask for parent volunteers to act as stand-in candidates for governor from each party.
- Create a scrapbook from the previous lessons of newspaper clippings, magazines and photographs to "brief" the candidates for governor from each party.
- All students who are not on the campaign staff will be responsible for "calling in" a question. Ask students to prepare their "call in" question as a homework assignment. (Do this the day before if possible.)
- Ask for volunteers with video cameras who will come and videotape your call-in program.
- Rehearse with the staff, stand-ins and moderator.
- Consider whether or not to invite the press to your "program."
- Consider whether or not to invite another class.

LESSON 10
The Mock Cable TV Call-In Program

Objective: To actively engage students in a mock cable TV call-in program.

Materials: Video cameras, classroom decorations and furniture to resemble a TV set.

Procedure:

- Put the student's cable call-in program "on the air."
- Have students evaluate the program afterwards by writing or drawing one thing they liked about the program and one thing that they would like to change. What did they learn about the responsibilities of a governor? What did they learn about the positions of each party's candidates?
- Share the videos with a local cable company and ask them to evaluate it and let you know how well you did.
- Write a class thank you letter to the parents who volunteered.