

State Government and the Role of the Citizen

Lesson Video: Grades 3-5

Overview

Teacher: Diane Kerr
Grade: 4
School: Butcher Greene Elementary School
Location: Grandview, Missouri

NCSS Standards-Based Themes: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Civic Ideals and Practices

Content Standards: Civics

Video Summary

How does government function at the state level? How are state laws made? In this lesson, Diane Kerr’s students examine the branches of state government, the powers of each branch, and how a bill becomes a law.

Ms. Kerr begins by identifying the three branches of government and describing the role of each branch. Working in small groups, students use vocabulary cards and a picture of a tree to create posters that illustrate the relationship between the legislative, judicial, and executive “branches.” Then students examine the process by which a bill becomes a law and make flip books that illustrate each step. Next, Ms. Kerr identifies their state representative—the elected official who introduces bills on their behalf—then asks students to consider what legislation they would introduce if they were representatives. As the lesson concludes, students write letters to their state representative as concerned citizens, asking her to consider their proposals.

Standards

Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. This lesson correlates to the following standards for elementary school students:

V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Give examples of and explain group and institutional influences such as religious beliefs, laws, and peer pressure, on people, events, and elements of culture; identify examples of institutions and describe the interactions of people with institutions; identify and describe examples of tension between an individual’s beliefs and government policies and laws; show how groups and institutions work to meet individual needs and promote the common good, and identify examples of where they fail to do so.

Standards, cont'd.

VI. Power, Authority, and Governance

Explain the purpose of government; give examples of how government does or does not provide for needs and wants of people, establish order and security, and manage conflict; distinguish among local, state, and national government and identify representative leaders at these levels such as mayor, governor, and president.

X. Civic Ideals and Practices

Identify examples of rights and responsibilities of citizens; identify and practice selected forms of civic discussion and participation consistent with the ideals of citizens in a democratic republic; explain actions citizens can take to influence public policy decisions; recognize and interpret how the “common good” can be strengthened through various forms of citizen action.

Content Standards: Civics

About the Class

Classroom Profile

“I think it’s important for kids to see how their state government connects to their lives—that they don’t just see our capitol as a building with a dome, but that they see themselves as citizens and that what happens there affects them.” —Diane Kerr

Diane Kerr teaches fourth-grade social studies at Butcher Greene Elementary School in Grandview, Missouri. A suburb on the south side of Kansas City, Grandview is the former home of President Harry Truman. Grandview is still largely residential, providing much of the affordable housing for people transitioning out of the inner city. Its ethnically diverse population is roughly 65 percent African American, 25 percent Caucasian, and 10 percent Hispanic. Most residents work in local manufacturing, retail, or service industries. Many of the students at Butcher Greene Elementary live in nearby subsidized housing, moving and sometimes changing schools multiple times over the course of the school year.

Ms. Kerr began the year with a unit on world geography to help students understand where they lived in relation to other world regions and to develop their geography vocabulary and map skills. This unit also introduced students to the notion of themselves as global citizens. In the next unit, Ms. Kerr narrowed the focus to U.S. regions, ending with the Midwest and, finally, Missouri. The chronological study of Missouri history began with the region’s Native Americans and early explorers and progressed to the Missouri Compromise, the Civil War, and significant events in the state’s economic, political, and agricultural history throughout the twentieth century.

The lesson shown in “State Government and the Role of the Citizen” fell within the unit on Missouri state government. By the time the class began the lesson, Ms. Kerr wanted students to understand the geography of world and U.S. regions. She also wanted them to understand how Missouri became a state and the context in which its government was created. This rich history provided a foundation for understanding the historical and current role of the citizen.

Year at a Glance
World Geography
U.S. Regions
Missouri History
State Government
Famous Missourians
Missouri’s Future

About the Class, cont'd.

The lesson also covered how state laws are made. To illustrate how a bill becomes a law, students brainstormed a list of their own civic concerns, and identified the people and steps involved in the lawmaking process, from proposing a bill to ratifying legislation. They drew pictures and wrote out the steps in flip books they created. The lesson culminated in a letter to their state representative, Kathy Jolley, outlining their concerns: the legalization of fireworks, lockers for elementary students, and stronger drug laws, among others. After the lesson, Representative Jolley visited the class to discuss the students' concerns and talk about different legislative processes in Missouri's state government.

This lesson on the role of the citizen segued into a unit on famous Missourians and their civic contributions. The final unit of the year focused on Missouri's future and drew from what the class had already learned about Missouri's past and present.

Lesson Background

Read this information to better understand the lesson shown in the video.

Content: Establishment and Organization of State Government

The Articles of Confederation, a document consisting of a preamble and 13 articles, is considered our country's first national constitution. It spelled out how the 13 colonies were to become a confederation or league of independent states, each with sovereign power but working together to meet common goals. This confederacy was proposed by the Second Continental Congress in 1776, (while the Declaration of Independence was being drafted), revised in 1777, and finally ratified by all 13 states in 1781.

While the Articles of Confederation created a model for independent state government, they gave so little power to the federal government that it couldn't operate effectively. In 1789, the Articles of Confederation were superseded by the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution introduced a federalist system to unify states under a centralized national government. The federal government retained power over national affairs, while leaving states with the power to enforce laws and govern local affairs. Any powers not specifically assigned to the federal government were assigned to the states.

The Constitution divided national government into three branches with a system of checks and balances and a process for making and amending laws. The structure of state government mirrors that of federal government with legislative, executive, and judicial branches for establishing, amending, and interpreting laws that are enforced at the state (as opposed to the federal) level.

The **legislative branch** of government refers to the House of Representatives and Senate, where bills are introduced. The **executive branch** of government refers to the chief executive—the president at the federal level, the governor at the state level—who has the power to sign bills into law or veto them. Finally, the **judicial branch** refers to the role of federal and state courts in interpreting law and determining what is constitutional.

Teaching Strategy: SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review)

SQ3R is a teaching strategy Ms. Kerr uses to help her students comprehend text and build meaning. Before they read a section of text, students first **survey** the text; that is, they skim the headings in bold print, study pictures, maps, charts, and diagrams, and read captions. The purpose of surveying headings and visuals prior to reading is to gain an overview of the topic and understand how the information is organized. The survey process also activates students' background knowledge as they identify terms that are familiar and make a note of terms that are new. Students then move to the **question** phase of the strategy, in which they form questions based on the bold headings in the text. Developing these questions in advance helps students to focus on the most important information contained in the section. Students then **read** to find the answers to their questions, synthesize what they have read through **reciting** (sharing with a partner, general discussion), and summarize what is learned in the **review**. SQ3R encourages reader engagement and increases comprehension and retention.

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

Watching the Video

Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions:

- How do you make abstract political concepts and processes more concrete for students?
- How do visual representations help students learn and remember?
- How do you prepare students for extracting information from visual representations?
- What are some ways to break down concepts and processes to help students learn, retain, and apply them?
- How do you help students make connections between political processes and their own lives?

Watch the Video

As you watch “State Government and the Role of the Citizen,” take notes on Ms. Kerr’s instructional strategies, particularly how she uses a variety of strategies to teach students about their state government. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning in this lesson.

Reflecting on the Video

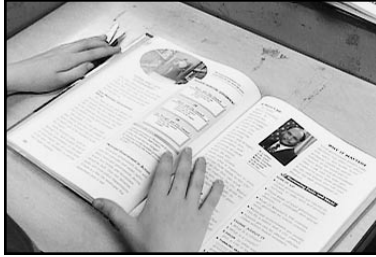
Review your notes, then respond to the following questions:

- What struck you about the classroom climate, background, preparation, strategies, and materials used in this lesson?
- How does this class differ from yours? How might you teach your students about the branches of state government?
- How did Ms. Kerr use the reading to gauge students’ background knowledge?
- How did Ms. Kerr help her students extend the meaning of concepts and processes? What made this learning accessible to a wide range of students? What made it meaningful and memorable?
- What evidence did you see that students were able to apply what they were learning?

Watching the Video, cont'd.

Looking Closer

Here's an opportunity to take a closer look at interesting aspects of Ms. Kerr's lesson.



Using Multiple Strategies: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately six minutes into the video. Watch for about four minutes.

Students have reviewed the structure and function of each branch of state government. They engage in several activities to extend background knowledge.

- How does Ms. Kerr use the text to engage students?
- Why does Ms. Kerr use the SQ3R strategy? What do you notice as students use parts of this strategy? How does the strategy help students build comprehension and retention skills?
- What are the benefits and challenges of creating and presenting visuals to illustrate and define the branches of government?



Examining a Complicated Process: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately 12 minutes into the video. Watch for about five minutes.

Ms. Kerr illustrates the path a bill follows to become a law. Students are then asked to describe and illustrate the same path by making a flip book. Later in the lesson, students will propose their own bills.

- What is the purpose of Ms. Kerr's illustration, and why does she have students make a flip book?
- How can these strategies be used with a wide range of learners?
- How do these experiences prepare students for taking civic action?

Connecting to Your Teaching

Reflecting on Your Practice

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

- What are some examples you teach of the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizens? How do you segue from concept to process to action?
- What hands-on experiences do you find most valuable in helping your students learn, remember, and apply abstract concepts in social studies like individual versus state rights?
- What are some other ways you would have students apply social studies concepts beyond the classroom?

Taking It Back to Your Classroom

- Create a visual that illustrates how a bill becomes a law. Ask pairs or groups of students to think of a metaphor and design their own visual to share with the class or to present to a younger group of students.
- Ask students to help develop the criteria for a persuasive letter. Then have students write a letter to their representative proposing an idea for a bill and stating the reasons why such a bill is important.
- Over a period of several weeks, collect print or online articles having to do with the branches of government. Divide students into groups and give each group several articles to categorize according to branch. Then have each group explain how they categorized the articles. From their explanations, students will learn how government works and also become informed about current issues.

Resources

Print Resources for Students

Giesecke, Ernestine. *State Government*. Kids Guide. Crystal Lake, Ill.: Heinemann Library, 2000.

Lefkowitz, William. *Government at Work From City Hall to State Capital*. Riverside, N.J.: Fearon/Janus/Quercus, 1999.

Wing, Ann and Nancy Van Wie. *Travels With MAX: How a Bill Becomes a Law*. Max's Publications, 1999.

Print Resources for Teachers

Hyerle, David. *Visual Tools for Constructing Knowledge*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996.

Irvin, Judith L., John P. Lunstrum, Carol Lynch-Brown, et al. *Enhancing Social Studies Through Literary Strategies*. National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin 91. Washington, D.C., 1995.

Ravitch, Diane, and Joseph Viteretti, eds. *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.

Resources, cont'd.

Web Resources for Students

Ben's Guide to the Government for Kids: <http://bensguide.gpo.gov/3-5/index.html>

Ben's Guide explores basic governmental principles and positions, including branches of government, the election process, and how laws are made.

Kids in the House: <http://clerkkids.house.gov>

On this site, the Office of the Clerk introduces the House of Representatives and other branches of the government.

White House Kids: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/kids>

This interactive site gives up-to-the-minute headlines on governmental news in a comprehensive, kid-friendly format.

Web Resources for Teachers

CongressLink: <http://www.congresslink.org/lessonplans/HCAccomplishments.htm>

CongressLink offers lesson plans about passing bills and making laws.

ERIC Digest: http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed450062.html

The ERIC Digest provides detailed background information for teaching about the U.S. Congress, as well as extensive references.

Kids in the House: Lesson Plans: http://clerkkids.house.gov/parent_teacher/lesson/lesson1.php3

The parent and teacher section of Kids in the House features complete lesson plans, including "How a Bill Becomes a Law."

Learning Booth: http://www.voteutah.org/learning/government/three_branches.html

This site gives clear definitions of each branch of government and explanations of their respective duties; appropriate for teachers and students.