STUDENT-LED CIVICS PROJECT: BEING A SENATOR SIM

INTRODUCTION

Student-led civics projects can be completed after the Post-Visit Lesson of the Being a Senator SIM, giving students the opportunity to apply the civic knowledge gained during the SIM to the process of taking action to affect social and political change in their community. The SIM may inspire civic action projects on a variety of issues that were brought up during the SIM, such as the role of the military in foreign conflicts, priorities for funding research on cancer and other diseases, access to health insurance, and the environmental impact of exploring and distributing oil and natural gas.

This project is designed to align to the Massachusetts 2018 History and Social Science Curriculum Framework for both Grade 8 and high school civics courses. It also supports the state civics legislation, S263, An Act to support and enhance civic engagement, by providing an outline for a student-led, non-partisan civics project for developing civics skills and dispositions in Grade 8 or high school civics courses.

PROJECT LENGTH

As outlined, this is a six-week civics project; it can be expanded in scope based on the complexity of the focus issue and the action plan. However, it is most important to complete all six stages of the project so that students have the opportunity to implement a thoughtful, well-researched, and action-oriented project grounded in their own civic identities.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GRADE 8 AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-LED CIVICS PROJECTS

This project is suitable for both Grade 8 and high school student-led civics projects. Grade 8 students will be developing civics skills in critical thinking and problem-solving, communicating persuasively, and working collaboratively. During the six stages of the civics project, students may need significant scaffolding and support in building background knowledge and understanding the focus issue in local, state, national or even global contexts.

High school students should be able to complete the student-led project with a greater degree of independence, evaluating and analyzing the focus issue more deeply. Their action plan should be knowledgeable and intentional in affecting long-term change.

PRIOR TO THE PROJECT

As an educator, if you are intending for this project to meet the specific requirements of S263, An Act to promote and enhance civic engagement, please refer to the following: the Civics Project Guidebook from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html, and the Ten Questions for Changemakers Framework, https://yppactionframe.fas.harvard.edu/, developed by the Democratic Knowledge Project at Harvard University.

According to the law, civics projects may be individual, small, group, or class wide. Students may opt to request approval from their principal to complete an individual project rather than participate in a group or class wide project. Educators should consider the benefits and challenges of the different groupings before determining project group configurations.
SIX STAGES OF THE BEING A SENATOR CIVICS PROJECT

Pacing for each student-led project may vary depending on the scope of the project and the schedules of community partners and events.

STAGE 1

EXAMINE SELF AND CIVIC IDENTITY

Students brainstorm the issues and topics that matter to them, their peers, families, and communities, focusing particularly on issues where they can see opportunity for change. After identifying issues that they may like to work to solve, students should examine the resources available within their own community and work already being done to solve problems.

LEARNING GOALS
• Define a student-led civics project with examples and an overview of the six-stage process.
• Define community and help students understand what it is like to be a community member with roles and responsibilities.
• Guide students in identifying community “assets” and needs.
• Examine community issues and needs.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
• What is a community?
• What communities am I a part of?
• What are the roles and responsibilities in my community?
• What are the assets that the community offers?
• What problems or challenges do people in my community routinely encounter?

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:
• Define what “community” means to them.
• Identify and describe their role in the community.
• Analyze data from other community members about their concerns and issues.
• Analyze data from media outlets regarding community issues.

BEING A SENATOR SIM CONNECTION

BRAINSTORM
Have students brainstorm issues and topics related to being a senator, the role of a senator, and issues that a senator can help with in the community.
STAGE 2
IDENTIFYING THE ISSUE

After students have spent time brainstorming and identifying the issues that matter to them and their community, the next step is for students to identify a focus issue.

LEARNING GOALS

• Build consensus on a single issue.
• Narrow a broad range of issues to a select number to investigate more deeply.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• How can we build community support and consensus for an issue?
• How do we learn more about community issues?
• How can we use facts, statistics, and stories to convey the depth and scope of a community issue?
• What are persuasive techniques and how do we use them to convince others of the importance of this issue?

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

• Use a reflective process to narrow a range of issues to a few issues.
• Use facts and statistics on a community issue to argue for the need to take a deeper look at the issue.
• Develop a working definition of consensus vs. majority rule.

BEING A SENATOR SIM CONNECTION

FOCUS ISSUE

The topics students debated in the SIM are too complex for students to choose as focus issues. However, the Being a Senator SIM offers many possible topics in relationship to the assets and needs students can focus on in their community. For example:

• the status of veterans in their community;
• the priorities for health-related research, based on community needs;
• the status of citizens without health insurance; and
• environmental impact of oil and gas exploration and/or distribution.
STAGE 3

RESEARCHING AND INVESTIGATING

During this stage, students engage in research and investigation of their chosen issue, using sources both inside and outside the classroom. The purpose of this research is (1) to examine context, language, and general background knowledge on the issue, and (2) to learn about the possible root causes of the issue.

LEARNING GOALS

• Understand and conduct quality research.
• Understand and identify systems-level root causes of an issue.
• Develop an action plan that addresses a root cause of the issue.
• Develop a persuasive argument by synthesizing research.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• What do I need to learn to better understand the focus issue?
• Where do I go to research the focus issue?
• What does action research look like?
• How do I research within my own community?
• What is the root cause of the focus issue?
• What are different goals that we might take action on?
• How can I use evidence and data to build support for taking action on this issue?

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

• Analyze how different forms of research serve different purposes.
• Define and identify root causes and how they impact the community.
• Gather appropriate and relevant evidence to support the overall argument.
• Synthesize research collected by peers.
• Craft a thesis that addresses both a root cause and a goal.

BEING A SENATOR SIM CONNECTION

RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION

For example, students might investigate a community health issue through the following methods:

• media research,
• interviewing people with perspective on the issue, including citizen groups, professionals, non-profit or government organizations, individual community members and others; and
• participating in a community meeting or legislative hearing related to the issue.

Students then determine an action plan based on an identification of the root cause of the issue, e.g., environmental, economic, cultural, societal, or political.
STAGE 4

DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN

Once students have determined the root causes that will be at the core of their project, it is time to build a theory of action and action plan aimed at influencing public opinion, achieving a policy goal, or both.

LEARNING GOALS

• Define who should help achieve the goal in terms of decisionmakers and influencers.
• Define what action steps and tactics can be used to achieve the goal.
• Form and structure action teams and construct an action plan.
• Formulate persuasive “asks” to make during action.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• Who is the target audience?
• Who are some possible decisionmakers and influencers in the community?
• What is a tactic?
• What kinds of skills and tactics can we use to make a change?
• How can each member of our team contribute to our common goals?
• How can we backwards map to achieve a long-term goal?
• How do we work effectively in a group to push forward for change?
• What makes a request persuasive?

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

• Identify the various decisionmakers and influencers in the community who hold power.
• Evaluate and select what civic action tactics they can use to try to create change.
STAGE 5
TAKING ACTION

Students begin acting on the tactics they planned. They move beyond the walls of the classroom and exercise their voice. This is the stage that will be the most unique to each project, depending on the choices students make along the way. Teachers should be prepared to support students as they interact with decisionmakers and influencers, supporting the process as students consider potential contacts, reach out, and engage.

ACTION GOALS
• Gain support from influencers.
• Share persuasive information with influencers to impact public policy or public opinion.
• Monitor and support effective group work.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
• How do we bring people and organizations in the community together to support the issue?
• How do we invite influencers and decisionmakers to have a conversation and take action on the issue?

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:
• Develop material to present persuasive arguments supporting the need for action for their goal.
• Contact and communicate with civic leaders who hold power in their community to influence or take action on the issue.
• Develop collaboration and teamwork skills to drive small group work forward.

BEING A SENATOR SIM CONNECTION

TAKing ACTION
If students have chosen to take action to affect public opinion on an environmental issue, for example, they could develop and distribute persuasive material, quote influencers about the issue, and follow-up by surveying their community about the issue.

If students have chosen to take action to affect public policy, they could advocate to their local or state lawmakers to pass legislation to remedy the environmental issue.
STAGE 6

REFLECTING AND SHOWCASING

Students end their project with a final, summative reflection and work showcase. Such a showcase is a best practice of project-based learning that supports student pride and ownership. Students should reflect on individual growth and project success throughout the six stages.

REFLECTION GOALS

• Reflect on individual growth.
• Analyze collective growth and understanding, and consider measurable outcomes of the project.
• Apply advocacy skills beyond the classroom.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• How did the six stages of an action civics project impact your participation and engagement?
• How do you think information influences a person’s understanding and perspectives?
• How did your group’s collaboration change throughout the action civics project?
• How can we measure the success of our civic action projects?
• How will you utilize your civic advocacy skills beyond the classroom?

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

• Reflect on individual growth in civic knowledge, skills, and values.
• Analyze collective growth and understanding of the topic.
• Communicate information orally in a clear and concise fashion.
• Represent information visually (through text, images, graphics) that communicate key learnings from the project.

BEING A SENATOR SIM CONNECTION

REFLECT AND SHOWCASE

No matter what topic students have chosen, it is often easier to measure success in changing public opinion than public policy. Changing a public policy can take time.

If students have been working to encourage lawmakers to pass a law banning fracking, for example, they can measure success by meeting with decisionmakers and rallying community support for their goal.