

XVII. Getting Involved in Our Town: A Research Project

17 Activity

WHAT?

Students will analyze their town using current research and data to predict future trends for their town.

WHY?

- To explain the changes in the types of jobs and occupations that have resulted from the urbanization of Texas
- To describe the structure and functions of government at municipal, county, and state levels.
- To describe how people from selected racial, ethnic, and religious groups attempt to maintain their cultural heritage while adapting to the larger Texas culture
- To analyze the economic impact of the free enterprise system in local, national, and international markets
- To analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions
- To use a problem-solving process to identify a problem, gather information, list and consider options, consider advantages/disadvantages, choose and implement a solution, and evaluate the effectiveness of the solution
- To use a decision-making process to identify a situation that requires a decision, gather information, identify options, predict consequences, and take action to implement a decision

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills addressed in this lesson:

Geography:

- Understand the location and characteristics of places and regions of Texas
- Understand the effects of the interaction between humans and the environment in Texas

Economic:

- Understand the factors that caused Texas to change from an agrarian to an urban society
- Understand the interdependence of the Texas economy with the United States and the world

Government:

- Understand the basic principles reflected in the Texas Constitution
- Understand the structure and functions of government created by the Texas Constitution

Citizenship:

- Understand the rights and responsibilities of Texas citizens
- Understand the importance of the expression of different points of view in a democratic society

Culture:

- Understand the concept of diversity within unity in Texas

Social Studies Skills:

- Apply critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of sources including electronic technology

Communicate in written, oral, and visual form

- Uses problem-solving and decision-making skills, working independently and with others, in a variety of settings

TAAS:

- Objective 1: Civic Values and Responsibilities
- Objective 2: Economic Influences on U. S. History
- Objective 3: Political Influences on U. S. History
- Objective 4: Geographic Influences on U. S. History
- Objective 6: Sociological and Cultural Influence on U. S. History
- Objective 8: Critical-Thinking Skills



HOW?

Materials Needed:

- Copies of the questions for consideration for each of the areas of study

Suggested Teaching Time: possibly a semester project, but at least two weeks to study, of which 3 to 5 class periods for research and writing would be needed

Suggested Procedures:

1. **Divide the class into town “task forces”** to study issues of importance to the town. Five such areas with suggested questions for consideration are presented in the sheet that follows, but feel free to select other areas of specific local concern (energy needs and supplies, transportation planning, ethics in local government, funding needed programs, interracial relations, etc.).
2. **First impressions:** Ask each member of the task force to write answers for the questions presented. Each question should be addressed from the three points of view of reality, predictions, and dreams for the future. Students are not expected to know factual answers; rather, this is a time to record student impressions about the subject and to measure how much they may already know. Have each task force meet to share these initial impressions and to identify students who may already know facts or have strong feelings about the issues.
3. **Research:** Have students research their topics to become “experts” in the issues. They may consult newspapers, town reports, councilmembers, town employees, special interest groups, and so forth. Depending on the questions and the availability of sources of information, this stage of the process may take a week or two. Alternatively, this may be a semester-long project in which students meet in their task forces for a short time each week to update other members of their findings.
4. **Fact or Opinion?** Have students write down on index cards two statements they collected in the course of answering their questions- one fact and one opinion.
 - Briefly discuss the meanings of “fact” and “opinion.” One way to think about these concepts is that smart, well-informed people often disagree about opinions, and opinions have not yet been proven or would be very difficult to prove. Smart people are likely to hold different opinions about the same set of facts. Facts are usually agreed on by well-informed people and can be proven by observation, experiment, counting, sorting, or some other systematic or objective means.
 - Choose from these cards examples to read aloud to the class and have each student decide if a given statement is a fact or an opinion. Students could indicate with their fingers in the shape of an “O” if the statement is an opinion and show two fingers sideways (like an “F”) if it is a fact. If you prefer, students could write down answers to the statement.
 - To reinforce the difference between fact and opinion, ask students if the statement could be proven objectively, and if so, how.
5. **Have each task force member write a “position paper”** about an area they have researched. In this paper they should:
 - Ask a probing, thoughtful question about their task force’s topic. (Would it be good for our town if..., Should our town..., What would be the best time to ..., Can we afford ..., What will happen if..., Where is the best place to... Who should be the one to... What would be the best way for us to...).
 - Give key facts that address the question.
 - State their opinion about the subject and explain their position.
 - Present a plan of action: who should do what, when should it happen, where should it happen, how it could be paid for.
6. **Have students solicit feedback on their positions,** from other students, from councilmembers or other government personnel, from citizen groups, etc.

7. **Have students revise their original position:** Have students look back over the original chart they filled out about problems in their town. Ask them to evaluate the strength of their original position and whether they have changed their minds at all after research, input from their task force and the writing of the position paper.
 - If their opinion is still the same on the issue, have them write down the one fact that they believe is most important to supporting their opinion. Have the student name the person or source of information that he or she found to be most affirming of their position.
 - If their position has changed, have them explain what fact or point of view was most important in swaying them to shift their position.
8. **Debrief:** Ask students to consider
 - how many of them learned a new or surprising fact in the project.
 - how many of them changed their minds about the subject at least a little bit.
 - if they did change their minds, what convinced them to do so: more thorough information, seeing things from another person's perspective, peer pressure, a dramatic event that occurred while they were studying, etc.
 - whether it is reasonable to expect elected officials to continue to hold an opinion over the course of a number of years.