

Waking Up to Local Government: An Educational Objective

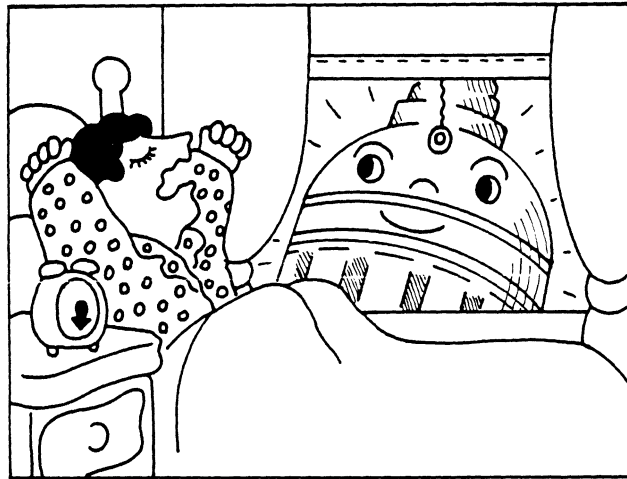
Mary Hepburn

Recently I was talking to a teacher, a city resident, about a land use issue being argued by the commission of the county in which that city is located. The teacher expressed dismay over having no voice in county politics: "Doggone it, since I live in the city, I can't vote in the county elections." The teacher was unaware that she was a citizen of both units of local government and could vote for elected officials in both.

When I ask middle school students if they have seen local government at work, or if they have been in a local government building, often the first response is "Yes, the post office."

A city councilmember campaigning for reelection told me that while knocking on doors in a relatively affluent neighborhood, she was greeted by a resident who was outspoken about his disinterest. He explained that he was diligent about voting in state and national elections, but did not vote in local elections because "the city doesn't really affect me or my business much, and it doesn't interest me much." She noted that, like so many other people in her district, it had not dawned on this citizen that local politics is linked to police and fire protection, street lights, and all other ordinary city services.

Local government is close to the people, so close that they often do not pay attention to how local officials' decisions affect the quality of life in urban and rural communities. Street maintenance, recording of property deeds, rabies prevention, mosquito control, law enforcement, sewage disposal and clean water are such a necessary part of everyday safety and comfort that people take them for granted and do not link the services to elections, government, and public offices. Clearly the lack of connection and lack of interest extends beyond the schools to the general population.



Cartoon by Mary Porter from *Local Government in Georgia*

Contributing to the Problem

Why do so many people of all ages and interests know so little about local government and place it so low on their list of civic priorities? Existing education patterns, textbooks, and mass media all seem to deemphasize the local level of government. Perhaps the major barrier to learning is that local government receives a bare minimum of attention at all levels of education—elementary, secondary, and college. And, when it is taught, presentation is often shallow and impersonal. The topic is given a dry, organization-chart treatment. Few textbooks and few teachers link local government to the quality of life in American communities. Sometimes services are mentioned or listed, but the treatment is usually devoid of issues and of explanations about the planning, processes, and costs involved in serving the public. Seldom is the human aspect of local decision making discussed. It is an unusual teacher, professor, or textbook that explains how local taxes, user fees, and other revenues pay for garbage collection, the water system, the court system, streets and roads, and other necessities in our lives.

In many states, the study of state history and the study of state and local government are designated in state guidelines for the mid-

Mary Hepburn is head of the Governmental Education Division, Vinson Institute of Government, The University of Georgia, Athens.

dle grades—usually the seventh or eighth grades. Curriculum content and learning objectives generally stress state history, including key people, events, and places in the state's development. Textbooks combine state history with state and local government. With most chapters dedicated to history, modern local civics is nearly ignored. This is the case with two combination textbooks recently adopted for teaching state history, geography, and government in the state of Georgia. One 291-page book contains three paragraphs of text on local government. The second contains seven and a half pages on local government, including photos and visuals, in a 302-page book. Such combination textbooks tend to set priorities for instruction by focusing heavily on events of the past and giving little attention to daily concerns in local and state governments of the present. In this way instructional priorities are shaped for teachers because so many rely on textbooks to organize the curriculum. Consequently, students gain no understanding of the importance of what happens on land-use planning commissions, on recreation boards, in the manager's office, or in the councils and commissions where local policy is decided.

“It is evident that special teaching materials are needed if we are to develop some depth of understanding by both teachers and students.”

High school American government textbooks, usually geared to eleventh and twelfth grade curricula, likewise present relatively little discussion of political processes in local communities. Consequently, many fail to convey the significance of decisions made in city halls and courthouses. Publishers have greater economic incentives to develop more and better instructional material on national government since such materials will sell in all 50 states. Discussions of state and local government tend to be brief, simplistic, and lifeless. Part of the problem here is that American government courses traditionally have focused on structure and functions rather than on processes, people, decisions, and key issues.

The net result is that teachers, students, and the general public continue to be unaware and uninformed about the way their communities are governed and how their most essential local services are paid for and provided. The recreation department and the

offices of the mayor or public works director are near and accessible when compared to national or state offices, but few individuals are conscious of that accessibility.

What Can We Do About It?

Elected and appointed officials, aware of the increasing demands and responsibilities of local government, are frustrated by the dearth of public knowledge and interest in local affairs. They hear from constituents when they have a complaint, and often, because of their lack of knowledge, the complaint is communicated to the wrong level of government or the wrong agency. Professionals in public administration, political science, and social studies education also have expressed their concern.

I can offer some examples of what can be done at the state level based on projects conducted in the Governmental Education Division (GED) of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Of course, GED does not have quick solutions. It is a continuing struggle to attempt to melt the cold shoulder given local government in the areas of curriculum and instruction, but GED is making some progress. It is doing the following:

- **Textbook.** It is evident that special teaching materials are needed if we are to develop some depth of understanding by both teachers and students. To provide a stronger substantive base, a textbook entitled *Local Government in Georgia* was developed and published in 1986. Geared to the eighth grade, the textbook's narrative, case studies, graphs, charts, and interviews examine counties, cities, and special districts in some depth (200 pages). Students can read about people who work in elective and in appointive offices and about how they work across and within governments to provide for the needs of the community. Short episodes are used to open some chapters to help young readers get involved in the subject matter (see box).
- **Lessons for elementary students.** Students can begin to understand local government in the early grades, and the concept of community is commonly taught in primary grades. Activities that deal with local communities, what their governments do, and the responsibilities of local citizenship have been developed for students in elementary grades.
- **Multi-media materials.** Maps, videotapes, and slide sets have been developed to supplement textbooks used in the schools. These materials have been prepared to enrich the imagery around which students

can build their knowledge of the boundaries and purposes of local governments and how local citizens take part. Review of state requirements. In the recent process of state educational reform, the trend has been toward standardizing curriculum across school districts. Members of the Governmental Education Division have reviewed new curriculum objectives published by the Georgia State Department of Education to determine which knowledge objectives and which thinking skills can be related to improved instruction about local governance. Results of the review assist teachers in including local studies, without having to add new courses and more objectives to the curriculum. Teacher education. Very few social studies teachers study local government in their college social science coursework, so teacher education is an important facet of improvement. In addition to basic knowledge, they need encouragement and assistance in planning instruction that brings local government to life. Discussions of local needs with panels of appointed and elected officials have been part of GED's broader teacher education programs for many years. However, GED has found that half-day or one-day programs are not enough. Teachers need more extensive background knowledge. And that knowledge must be enhanced with some understanding of how to utilize local resources in their instruction. These resources might include public facilities such as the courtroom, water plant, fire station, and the central office of the transit authority. Equally important are such human resources as elected commissioners and councilmembers and such appointed officials as managers, clerks, and board members. Currently, GED is working with city and county officials to plan and co-sponsor an annual three-day teacher education seminar on local government. Leaders of the Georgia City and County Managers Association, the Georgia Municipal Association, the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia, and the Vinson Institute are meeting to launch a statewide program to build cooperation between local officials and teachers to improve education about local communities and governance. This type of alliance could be helpful in improving education in other states.

Tell the Story

We must find ways to open the eyes of teachers and students to the significant influence that local governments have on the lives of

The Officials Who Deliver County Services

Covering the Bases

Todd was in his seat early. He stretched out his legs and yawned.

Tanya tapped him on the shoulder. "Better wake up. We're going to hear from a government guy this morning. Mr. Walker is coming to talk to the class."

Todd turned around. "Aw, the only Walker I know is the umpire for our softball games. But he's no government guy."

Mrs. Jeter arrived just as the bell rang. She laid her books on the desk, stepped in front of it, and said, "You remember that yesterday we were talking about how government is **people**, and that it takes good leadership to make it work. She turned toward the door and gave a friendly, welcoming wave. "Well, I'd like you to meet the chairman of the county commission. He is going to talk to you about leadership."

Todd looked surprised as he saw the man coming through the doorway. It *was* Harry Walker, the umpire!

Walker talked about his responsibility as an elected commissioner. "We have to try to lead folks to make things better in this county. You **know**, sometimes we have to stick our necks out. And, if it turns out for the best, we get cheers. But if we are proved wrong, we get some booing. And we might even lose the next election!" The class laughed.

"The point is that a local government official has to be a leader, push for action. '**Swing hard**' you might say. But sometimes you do strike out."

Before he left, Harry Walker looked around the room and nodded to several students. "I see at least one fielder and a first **baseman** from the boys' teams. And two pitchers from the girls' teams. You know, that softball program is part of the county recreation program."

Todd smiled. He thought to himself, "I'm the first baseman. A good one, too. A first baseman who knows the chairman of the county government!"

From the textbook *Local Government in Georgia*.

Americans. The quality of parks and recreation facilities, drinking water, street lighting and traffic signals, waste collection and sewage treatment, and many other features of our surroundings tell the story of the tremendous responsibility shouldered by local governments. The study of public services provides concrete examples, close to school and student, for reflecting on democratic principles, ethics in government, and political participation. If management professionals, elected and appointed officials, and educators work together within the states as well as nationally, we can strengthen the opportunities for students and the general public to wake up to local government. PM