

Award for Local Government Education



ANTHONY H. GRIFFIN

ICMA's Award for Local Government Education recognizes a local government professional, or an individual whose current primary vocation is academic, who has enhanced the understanding of local government for primary and secondary school students. This year, ICMA presents the award to Anthony H. Griffin, county executive of Fairfax County, Virginia.

Local government receives meager, if any, attention in most public schools. Almost all of the discussion of government structure and processes focus on the federal government; in some states, there may also be some discussion of how the state government operates. But the level of government closest to the citizens—the local government—

is virtually ignored. The result is an often apathetic citizenry with little understanding of local government and even less appreciation for the services it provides. Fairfax County Executive Anthony Griffin sought to change this.

The county of Fairfax and Fairfax County Public Schools joined in a pioneering partnership to develop “Closest to the People,” a program designed to educate young people—the county’s next generation of citizens—about their local government. In its first year (1999–2000), the partnership focused on developing a new curriculum for high school seniors aimed at helping them understand the link between local government and their everyday lives. The next year, the curriculum was expanded and adapted for middle school students. In addition, a junior from each of the county’s high schools was selected to participate in the pilot year of the new Youth Leadership Program (YLP).

Expanding on the idea behind the Closest to the People classroom study, the YLP is designed to take students from the classroom into county workplaces and the community, providing a unique opportunity to meet the people who influence policy, as well as to learn about the wide range of services that the county provides. As part of the one-year program, the county sponsors monthly activities, including seminars, workshops, and presentations by county staff, interactive lessons and debates, simulations, and tours of county facilities. Students learn about all aspects of county government and

the issues facing their community, from homelessness and affordable housing, to local government budgeting, to the judicial system and public safety. In addition, student participants are placed in a three-week summer internship with a county department or agency. They receive an \$800 stipend for the internship.

From its inception, Anthony Griffin has been deeply committed to the Closest to the People and the Youth Leadership Programs. He provided direction and support during the planning process and his active leadership and liaison with the school superintendent ensured that there is ongoing communication and commitment at the top levels of the partnering organizations, as well as within the county government. Mr. Griffin has not only encouraged government agencies to sponsor an intern, he has set an example by sponsoring two interns himself. In addition, he participates in some of the student activities, stressing the importance of public service for both citizens and government personnel.

Student evaluations indicate that the program is making a difference. The first YLP graduates spoke in glowing terms about the experiences they had, the people they met, and the things they learned. But it is the future cities, counties, and communities that are the real beneficiaries of the program. In educating future citizens about how government works and the critical role played by citizens, the Closest to the People curriculum and the Youth Leadership Program are helping to forge a better future. ♣