

Preparing to Speak to Students in the Classroom

We asked the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, along with several middle school teachers who teach social studies or civics, "How can city officials prepare to speak to students in the classroom?"

Here is what they had to say...

Janine Brown, 7th grade civics teacher

22nd year teaching

It's been my experience that the most effective guest speakers are the ones who come prepared! Bring a pamphlet, handout, key chain, pencils/pens with logos, etc., but make sure you bring enough for everyone. Plan ahead! Divide your time with the class in half: first half is your presentation and the second half is reserved for Q and A. With regards to your presentation, a power point is fine, but just flashing each slide and reading it to the students is boring. Sharing anecdotes about your job is highly effective because it humanizes your position with a story. Your best anecdote will be one with some kind of drama, humor, or "disastrous" occurrence (like you had a press conference to attend, but you had just spilled coffee on your shirt). Human interest stories would be excellent. Describe a particular success story that changed someone's life. The students need to see you as a real person, one who wants to work for the common good and solve problems. Include something in your talk that mentions the students and what they can do as the next generation. Finally, when you look at the questions below, I think the guest speaker would be best prepared if he/she asked the teacher to generate a possible list beforehand. You'll see that these questions go well beyond the obvious "How old are you?", "How much money do you make?", "Do you like your job?", etc. Seventh graders are very sophisticated these days.

(I asked my seventh grade students to write questions they would like to have answered. There was a huge outpouring of questions! I simply couldn't narrow it down any more than this list. I've tried to categorize them. I've also listed their first name and last initial.)

Questions from my students:

Issues facing your town:

1. What is this area's most difficult issue right now? Sarah H.
2. Why do builders continue to tear down trees and clear land to build more shopping plazas and strip malls when there are many vacant ones that are unoccupied? For example, there are plenty of vacant places across from Waterford Town Center. Brooke C.
3. How do you prioritize services when there are budget cuts? Payton W.
4. Do you have a primary focus---that one goal you promised you would address? Explain your progress so far. Kaitlyn M.
5. How do you plan on making the city more energy independent and efficient? Maria V.
6. Why did you approve the new soccer stadium when they possibly could've used the Citrus Bowl? Devin M.
7. What can you do to increase citizen participation in voting? Chris T.

About your specific position:

1. Describe a typical day. Is it a 9-5 job or more of a 24/7 job? Hunter W.
2. What is the specific procedure/system for citizens to register their complaints? Kami C.
3. Did you campaign for your position? If yes, what campaign strategies did you find to be the most helpful? Did you pay for your campaign yourself? Did you get donations? Payton W.
4. How important is it that you follow your political party's ideals when making decisions? Brittany McC.

Your personal life:

1. Do you have future plans to move to higher levels of government work? Devin S.
2. What are your values and how do they influence your day-to-day job? Arabelle B.
3. What was your path that brought you to being a public servant (college, experience)? Quest B.

4. How do you balance your personal and family life with your busy job? Thomas McC.
5. How do you want to be remembered? Evan L.

About student's lives:

1. I'm interested in volunteer work. What is available for me? Who do I contact? Arabelle B.

About education:

1. What do you plan to do about schools that are not completely developed with technology? Raise taxes? This is very uneven in our area. Courtney L.
2. What are you doing about schools that fall below a "C" grade? Hunter W.

Also there were other questions of student interest ranging from school uniforms to gay marriage.

Tim Girard, 6th year teaching

- Make personal contact with the classroom teacher to focus the purpose of your visit.
- Plan an activity. A simulation always works, ie. a public commission meeting, or organize "public meeting" to propose solutions to a commonly recognized problem. Perhaps visit the school with the purpose of gathering opinions from students about a current city project.
- Prepare a short bio about yourself including how from whatever age group being addressed you got interested in public service.
- Make a list of government services that are most relevant to the audience and list examples of how your city directly addresses those services. Have students try to guess or create their own list...
- Come prepared to share real ways and exciting ways a student can be involved in their city. Share stories of students participating in government, even if it is not in your city.

Donna Davis & Katie Williams, 3 years of Civics Instruction

- To gain and keep the attention of middle school students, it is best to use visuals and current real-life stories/scenarios that the students can personally connect to.
- Middle school students love acting out government related business, such as a city council meeting or a board meeting. Any "mock" event that the official could portray or involve the students with will definitely "stick" with our students far longer than any Powerpoint presentation.
- Include a method for explaining how students can change the surroundings in their own city. For example, our students repeatedly ask, "Why don't we have a skating rink or bowling alley?" or "How would we go about getting a movie theater?"
- Always assume the students know nothing about their city or surroundings, please be prepared to provide a background informational segment explaining their own city, county, or state government you represent.
- Please include time for Q & A...they always have questions and this would be a great opportunity to connect with the class on what they consider to be important to them.

Manouchka Pierre, 5th year teaching

- Begin with the end in mind; be clear on the purpose of your presentation. What impact do you want to have on your audience? Providing the teacher with information to help prepare the class prior to your visit is a proactive method that allows you to not waste time. Our goal for ANY student activity is that they take the learning and "use or apply" it in some way. What type of pre-reading assignment could the students have to prepare them for the speaker? What type of post writing assignment could the students have that connects to the standards/benchmarks needing to be mastered?
- KISS – Keep it Simple Sam (Sally) Students have a short attention span (as do most of us) Tell students why you're an expert but don't try to impress with your intellect. Close the gap by being honest, funny, real, and approachable; possibly by telling a personal story. Storytelling puts an audience at ease, humanizes you as a speaker, and makes your messages more memorable.

Through your passion and personal connection students will find the means to “buy” into and believe your message. Real word connection brings the material to life and allows students to see why “they should care”.

- Be open to their questions, just don’t allow for questioning to lead you off on a tangent or to get TOO personal. They will ask as many “what-if”/scenario questions as possible, if allowed.
- PowerPoints are great if they are visually appealing and not word heavy. Slides should make an impression and be kept to a minimum; 10 is a magic number. They should be simple, compelling and graphically appealing. The best PowerPoint presentations are supported by the speaker and engage students in discussion not just rote viewing. You cannot hold students’ attention when you are reading from a slide or fumbling with technology.
- Students need to do much more than “listen” to someone speaking. How can the official bring their expertise and provide an opportunity for the students to get up and interact? I really feel badly for students when I see them in educational settings in which they are expected to sit and listen. They need to get up!

Cathy Schroepfer, 7th grade civics teacher

23rd year of teaching

1. Create and use a visual presentation with graphics
Use lots of pictures, not many words
Be sure the presentation is age appropriate (very different presentations for 4th graders and 9th graders)
2. Share anecdotal stories to engage the students
How you first got into leadership
How you became actively engaged as a young person
How you felt the “calling to lead”
Fun stories about real people they have encountered
3. Apply their position to real world situations
don’t be afraid to discuss real issues in their community (this makes things relevant to the students)
4. Utilize simulations if possible
This can be a group or individual activity that gets the students involved in what is being discussed. (Role play, discussion, skit, etc.)
5. Allow for questions and interaction with the audience
Students love to be able to connect with the public officials most of all
We encourage the teachers to have the students prepare questions ahead of time so that they are prepared and well thought out questions.

Florida Joint Center for Citizenship's advice:

1. Ask the teacher that invited you to speak to provide you with:
The reasons why they want you to come to their classes. Instructional time is extremely valuable and they have specific learning goals to achieve with students. Spend time discussing those learning goals and the instructional objectives related to hosting an elected official with the teacher. Use this time to convey any of your own needs and expectations as well.

The benchmarks related to the unit of study. The middle school civics course has clearly defined benchmarks that will provide you with insight into the depth and limitation of the topic.

Any questions the students have prepared in advance or research topics the class is working on. If the class is actively working on a topic or has prepared questions in advance for the visit, you can be better prepared by answering these thoroughly before your arrival.

2. Develop a presentation that is as interactive as possible:
 - role play
 - games
 - props
 - act-it-outs

- scenarios

3. Bring "gifts" of any kind to distribute to the students.

Students of all ages love getting an interesting freebie from a guest speaker. If it can be integrated into the presentation as a "prop" and used by the teacher later as an instructional tool later, even better.

4. Try to stay for the whole day.

Interacting with more students may assist in justify the time commitment involved in dedicating an entire day to a school. Ask the teacher if there are other classes that would like to join in on the experience.

Please understand that due to class schedules the students cannot all be at the same place at the same time and can only come during the scheduled civics class period. Students that do not have the opportunity to see or hear the guest speaker miss out on very valuable learning opportunities.

Teachers make lesson plans months in advance and arrangements are difficult to reschedule.

5. Share with students the opportunities and services that are available to them as residents of the community:

- Parks and recreation (seasonal, year-round, special functions, etc.)
- Other places in the community that are student friendly
- Feature services that might be of interest to students (graffiti hotline, park information, libraries, etc.)