

Unit Description

Although the least-known form of local government, special purpose governments often provide the services that may be the most recognizable to students. Special districts are often the only way to provide necessary services such as schools, fire protection, and parks. As a matter of fact, Missouri has more than 500 school districts and nearly 1400 special districts. This unit will focus on school districts while also describing other special districts that may be present in the students' community.

Lesson Description

This lesson addresses school districts. Students will examine the importance of a well-educated society in advancing quality of life. They will look closely at the services offered in their own school district, survey other students, and interview school board members. They will prepare position papers for each school board member and hold a mock election.

Concepts

Civics – special purpose governments, school board, superintendent, platform, plank
Economics – scarcity

Related Subject Areas

Language Arts – interviewing

Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

contrast special purpose governments and general purpose governments.

Time Required

One week

Materials Required

Activity 1, *Board Member* _____: *An Investigative Report* (one per student)

Visual 1, *Education Extras*

one piece of newsprint or poster board

another class in the school as guests

index cards

Procedure

1. Explain that **special purpose governments** provide only one or two services as opposed to general purpose governments such as county and city governments which are responsible for many different types of activities that benefit their residents. There are two general categories of special purpose governments: **school districts** and special districts.
2. Explain that public education is often regarded as one of the most important functions of government because it benefits both individuals and the society as a whole. For the individual, a good education is the ticket to a well-paying job. The more well-educated individuals there are in the society, the more enterprising and productive is the whole economy. In other words, education contributes to a growing economy, which translates into better incomes and more goods and services for all of us to enjoy. At the same time, a productive economy makes it easier for governments to raise revenues (through taxes) to provide better governmental services, including education. Aside from the economic benefits of education, it is important to recognize that democracy depends on an educated electorate.
3. Ask students why education and democracy go together. (*A democracy is a form of government that allows people to govern themselves. A better educated electorate has the ability to be more knowledgeable about government procedures, issues, and policies and, therefore, can make better decisions.*)
4. Explain that state and federal governments establish guidelines under which public schools must operate. In Missouri, about six percent of school revenues come from the federal government. The remaining 94 percent is divided about evenly between the state and local school districts. The principal policy-making authority and funding responsibility rest with local school districts.
5. Explain that school districts have the power to carry out a variety of activities with the sole purpose of providing free public education for all persons living in the district. The primary functions of a school district include:
 - a. school education and services
 - b. school personnel administration
 - c. school financial administration
 - d. building maintenance
 - e. curriculum establishment

6. Place students in the same number of groups as you have grade levels in your school. Instruct students to think about the goods and services their school provides. Have them consider academic resources, extracurricular activities, and facilities. Get them started by displaying Visual 1, *Education Extras*. Explain how items can be categorized by providing some examples such as: academic resources — newer books and computers; extracurricular activities — yearbook staff and intramural sports; facilities — cafeteria and wide selection of food. Allow adequate time for each group to compile a list of at least 10 items.
7. Place a sheet of newsprint or poster board in the front of the class and label it “Our School Offers...”. At the bottom of the poster, write the words “Please Add Any Goods or Services We Have Missed.” Have one representative from each group take turns writing one of her group's list of items on the poster. Continue moving from group to group, but do not allow duplications. Meanwhile, instruct students to add items to their lists that they may have missed.
8. Display the poster in the classroom. Explain that these are educational goods and services provided for students by the local school district. In most cases, decisions as to whether to offer these goods and services are up to the school board.
9. Explain that school districts are administered by an elected body called a **school board**. In Missouri, most school boards have seven members and are elected for three-year terms. (St. Louis city is an exception, with a twelve-member board elected for six-year terms.) Although the general operation of the district is the responsibility of the school board, the school district's **superintendent** is responsible for carrying out the directives of the board and for handling the day-to-day business of the district.
10. Place students in seven groups. Assign each group a member of your local school board. Explain that students are to be reporters. This means they must seek information about the school board member. This information can be obtained by an interview with the school board member, newspaper articles, public forums, attendance at school board meetings, or your school district's web site.
11. Distribute a copy of Activity 1, *Board Member _____, A Report to the students*. Instruct them to use this as a guide in obtaining information about the school board member. Have each group choose an interviewer to collect the information.

12. Remind students that school districts are a form of special purpose government. Ask the following questions:
 - a. What is the difference between a special purpose government and a general purpose government? (*General purpose governments are responsible for many different types of activities that benefit their residents. Special purpose governments provide only one or two services.*)
 - b. What type of government governs cities and counties? (*general purpose governments*)
 - c. Can cities and counties provide an unlimited number of services for the citizens? Why not? (*Resources are limited.*)
 - d. Can school districts provide an unlimited amount of educational services for students? Why not? (*Resources are limited.*)
13. Explain that the situation of having limited resources and unlimited wants is referred to as **scarcity**. Because of scarcity, citizens and government leaders must choose which services to offer. For instance, if the school district buys new text books for each class, it may not be able to buy a computer for each classroom.
14. Place students in their groups. Have them choose a student to portray their group's candidate for school board. Instruct students to prepare a **platform**. Define platform as a list of issues on which the candidate has taken a particular position. Each position is a plank, and all of the planks form the platform on which the candidate stands.
15. Explain that in taking their positions for school district improvements, students must keep scarcity in mind. Tell them to assume the school district is offering a set of goods and services that consumes its entire budget. If they choose to improve some goods and services offered in the school, they will have to reduce or eliminate other goods or services. Give student groups adequate time to prepare a candidacy.
16. Invite another class to participate in the election. Explain that in this year's election, only three positions on the board are open for election, but there are seven candidates seeking their votes. Have the candidate from each group present his or her position to the class.
17. Give each student in the other class an index card on which to write his or her votes. Instruct students to vote for no more than three of the candidates.

Closure

Ask the following questions.

- a. How is a special purpose government different from a general purpose government? (*General purpose governments are responsible for many different types of activities that benefit their residents. Special purpose governments provide only one or two services.*)
- b. Which type of local government structure provides education services? (*a special purpose government*)
- c. Who administers the school district? (*the school board*)
- d. Who is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school district? (*the superintendent*)
- e. What are the names of your school district's board members? (*Answers will vary.*)

Assessment

Assign students an essay in which they declare their candidacy for school board member. They should include a discussion on the importance of offering public education, an important school district issue as defined by the students, and their suggestions for improvement.

Lesson Description

Who provides the fire protection, sewer service, and libraries enjoyed by citizens? Very often, a special district is formed to provide these and other specific services. Students have probably never thought about how these basic services were established in their neighborhoods. In this lesson, students study the services provided by special districts, how special districts originated, and how the services provided by special districts are funded.

Concepts

Civics – special district, special purpose government

Economics – revenue bond

Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

define special district.

give examples of services provided through special districts.

Time Required

2 class periods

Materials

Reading 1, *Special Districts* (one per student)

Speaker (Extension agent, a special district board member, fire chief)

Sample letter to speaker

Procedure

1. Assign Reading 1, Special Districts to each student. After the students have completed the reading, ask the following questions:
 - a. Why is the formation of a special district important to homeowners and business owners? (*Special districts, in some cases, are formed to provide fire protection, sewer service, and water to homeowners and businesses.*)
 - b. Why can't the county provide these services? (*The counties may offer only very specific services as granted by the state. It would be quite difficult for counties to offer some services, such as sewer service, to all parts of the county.*)

- c. Why does the state authorize the establishment of a special district? (*The residents want the service, and there is no other agency that can provide it efficiently.*)
2. Introduce your guest speaker and explain that he or she will present information on special districts in the students' community.
3. Before the speaker begins the presentation, write the following list on the board and explain that these are some of the types of special districts found throughout Missouri.

Examples of Special Districts		
Fire Protection	Park and Museum	Road
Libraries	Drainage	Soil/Water
Ambulance	Sewers	Health
Nursing Home	Transportation	Water
Johnsongrass (weeds)	Housing	Conservation

4. Ask students if any of these districts exist in their community. (Students will likely be unaware of the special districts in the community.) Ask the speaker to begin her talk by explaining which of the listed services are provided through special districts in the community. Ask the speaker to add any special districts not listed. Have the speaker specifically address one of the districts by explaining how it is funded and why it exists.
5. Debrief the presentation by asking the following questions:
 - a. What special district did the speaker discuss?
 - b. How is the special district funded?
 - c. Why does the special district exist?
6. Have students write thank-you notes to the speaker.

Closure

Ask the following questions.

- a. What is a special district? (*A special district is a state-authorized special purpose government established to provide a specific public good or service.*)
- b. What are examples of special districts in our community? (*Answers will vary.*)

Assessment

Using the list on page 55, have students make a list of those services not available in their area. Separate students into the same number of groups as services on their new list. Assign one of the services to each group. Have groups decide whether their area would benefit from having the service they are assigned. Give each group a transparency film and overhead marker. Direct them to list the reasons why the service is needed or not needed. Instruct each group to choose a spokesperson to present the group's list to the class.

READING 1
SPECIAL DISTRICTS

You've learned that the state has granted counties limited responsibilities. Voters may choose to form special district to provide services that are not being provided at all, or to a satisfactory degree by their county government. Sometimes, services desired are not services counties are authorized to provide. Other times, tax limitations prevent counties from providing the level of services some voters may desire. Still other times, voters in one part of the county form special districts to achieve some measure of autonomy from other parts of the county. Perhaps voters in one part of the county differ with others in the county on how much they are willing to spend for the service or perhaps they simply want more control of the program.

Counties are authorized to provide county finance and administration, road building and maintenance, and law enforcement. Additionally, some counties provide land use management and providing parks and recreation facilities. Counties have been granted taxing authority that covers these responsibilities. However, the list of county responsibilities doesn't begin to cover all of the services citizens may want, and counties are not authorized to increase taxes to cover all the extras. For this reason, residents may choose to form a special district to provide services that are not being provided at all, or to a satisfactory degree by their county government. Sometimes, desired services are not services counties are authorized to provide. Other times, tax limitations prevent counties from provided the level of services voters may desire. Still other times, voters in one part of the county may be willing to pay for a service that voters from another part of the county do not want. A **special district** is a state-authorized special purpose government established to provide a specific public good or service.

Special districts are created by state legislation to provide specific local services. For instance, if the community would like to build a biking trail, it could form a special district to build and maintain one. There are over fifty different types of special districts in Missouri. Some of the services offered through these districts include fire protection, ambulance services, libraries, sewers, roads, parks, and water.

Some special districts receive tax revenue. State legislation gives the special districts the authority to tax citizens for a specific good or service the citizens in the community want. The tax payment for the special district is included on the county property tax bill. The county forwards the special district tax to the special district.

Some special districts can issue revenue bonds. **Revenue bonds** are loans taken out by the special district. The bonds are purchased by individuals as a financial investment. This is a way for special districts, and other special purpose governments, to borrow money from individuals and then pay those individuals back with interest.

The special district then charges user fees and uses part of those fees to pay the bond holders back. Each special district has a **governing board** to make decisions regarding the operation of the district. Members of this board may be appointed or elected. The special districts in each community vary. They are established to provide specific services that the county is not authorized to provide. For instance, counties are not authorized by the state to provide fire protection, but people certainly want to have a fire truck show up when their house is burning. So, a fire protection district is established and paid for by people within the district. Special districts have been established to provide very specialized services. For instance, some areas in Missouri have established a special district for noxious weeds (johnsongrass). You won't find this type of district in the urban areas, but it is important in farming communities.

Source: Dohm, R. "Special Districts in Missouri and the Nation." *Missouri Government and Politics*. Hardy, R.J., R.D. Dohm, D.A. Leuthold, editors. University of Missouri Press. Columbia, MO. 1995. pp. 321-333.

ACTIVITY 1

BOARD MEMBER _____ : A REPORT

1. How long has this board member been a resident in this school district?
2. What is this board member's experience in the school district? Has she served as an employee, consultant, parent, or volunteer?
3. What is this board member's educational background (level of educational attainment, degree or area of interest, educational institutions)?
4. What is this board member's work experience?
5. What is this board member's philosophy of education?
6. Why does this board member wish to serve on the board?
7. What are the most notable achievements or characteristics of the school district?
8. In what respects does the school district have room for improvement?

SAMPLE LETTER

Dear _____:

My class is participating in the Local Government CECH-UP program. In this program, students study county government, city government, special districts, and government financing. Soon, we will be examining the special districts in our community. Would you visit our class and present a talk on this subject?

At the beginning of your talk, students will examine a list of special districts found in Missouri. The list is as follows:

fire protection	park and museum	road
libraries	drainage	soil/water
ambulance	sewers	health
nursing home	transportation	water
johnsongrass (weeds)	housing	conservation

Please include a brief talk on any of the above that pertain to our community. Feel free to add any special districts that are present in our community but are not shown on the list.

Our study of special districts will take place during the week of _____.
Our free periods are _____.
_____. Please call me at
_____ to let me know if
you will be available to speak with my class during any of these times.

Sincerely yours,

VISUAL 1

Education Extras	
cheerleading squad	new books
yearbook staff	counseling
language clubs	gifted programs
sports teams	chess club
foreign languages	math clubs
science equipment	wall maps
computers	globes
art program	photography club