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“City Government: Omaha,
Nebraska”

Language Arts Lesson Plan

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is a feature of

the News

**A daily news broadcast for High School and Middle School students
now under development by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions**



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Winter, 2009

Dear Educator,

the.News online video reports for *the.Gov* provide middle and high school students with a valuable exercise in social studies and language arts with this 7:13 video report on the “City Government: Omaha, Nebraska” at www.pbs.org/newshour/thenews/thegov. Special correspondent, Robyn Wisch, reports on how a community responds to budget cuts in Omaha Nebraska. Lesson plans for social studies and language arts are available to support this video in the “For Educators” section of the website. All videos and curricula have been informed by *the.News* instructional design that can be found on the website www.pbs.org/newshour/thenews. *the.Gov* is open-captioned. The curriculum includes content-based standards, discussion questions, student activities, vocabulary and primary reference sources. A complete transcript of each video report includes time codes to assist in isolating specific segments of the video and to augment the instruction of media literacy and multimedia production. All of this material is presented as options to fit teachers’ instructional needs.

References to Larry Bell’s “The 12 Powerful Words” are highlighted in **bold** in the lesson plans, in the “thought starter” questions on the home page and educator’s page, and in the transcript (to denote where they are used in the video segment).

We welcome our partners at the Omaha Public Schools who have joined *the.News* in a special pilot project during the 09-10 school year. We are also developing a new authoring tool for students called *YOU.edit*, to launch in early 2010. It will give students an online tool to remix the content of *the.News reports*, so they can create their own multimedia presentations. This editing tool will reside on our website so that it will be available to all students with an internet connection. It will be password protected so that it can serve as a viable educational asset that allows classroom teachers to assign multimedia projects within the security and content safety of *the.News* website.

We are now providing answers to our **student “thought starter”** questions listed below the video.

#1. At the Mayor’s request the Library Board proposed raising the sales tax, and to cut some services like libraries, including closing the branch in the Florence Neighborhood for several months.

#2. The main source of revenue for the city of Omaha is the sales tax.

#3. Nebraska Law requires all cities to balance their budgets each year.

For more information and questions about this material contact me at kjaffe@newshour.org

Sincerely,

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City Government: Omaha, Nebraska

This lesson was designed to support *the.News* video “City Government: Omaha Nebraska” The video can be found online at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/thenews/thegov>

Grade Level: Grades 7-12

Content Areas: Language Arts, Economics, Civics, and Government

Key Concepts:

In this lesson, students will **evaluate** and **analyze** their own spending and then work in groups to prioritize city services. After **formulating** lists of services their own city supplies they will then create questionnaires for accessing information and opinion from the general public, **summarize** their findings and then write presentations as city planners that **explain** and **support** their recommendation in a mock budget cut. In a mock city council meeting, they will also act as government officials and **analyze** the presentations **comparing** pros and cons of recommendations.



Omaha Public Schools Language Arts Standards

<http://www.ops.org/district/CENTRALOFFICE/S/CurriculumandLearning/ContentStandardsfor20072008/tabid/912/Default.aspx>

Grade 7

- Students will build literary, general, academic and content specific grade-level vocabulary.
- Students will write for a variety of purposes and audiences in a variety of genres.
- Students will research, summarize and communicate information in a variety of media and formats (textual, visual, and digital).

Grade 9-12

- Students will build literary, general, academic and content specific grade-level vocabulary.
- Students will write for a variety of purposes and audiences in a variety of genres.
- Students will research, synthesize, and communicate information in a variety of media and formats (textual, visual, and digital)

Key Objectives:

Students will:

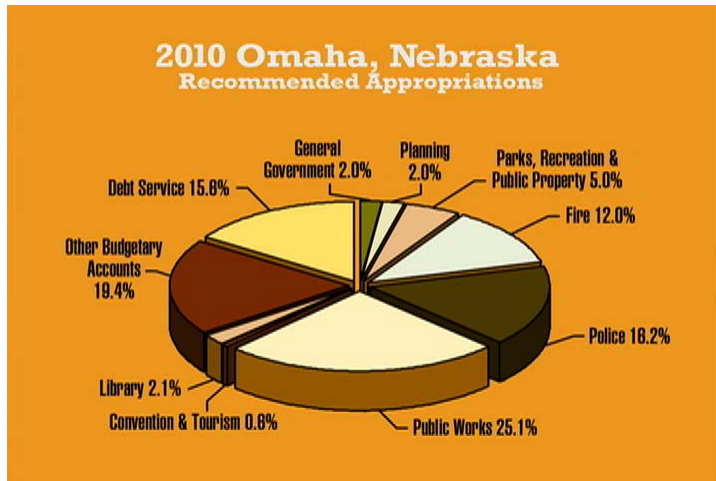
- Understand how the local government and its responsibilities for a balanced budget can directly affect their quality of life.
- **Evaluate** and prioritize municipal services and **describe** where budget cuts might be made.
- **Formulate** questionnaires for gathering information from the public.
- **Summarize** information.
- Map locations of interest in their community.
- Create proposals listing recommendations for city leaders on how to protect and improve locations based on budgetary constrictions.
- Brainstorm ways to raise the funds to keep programs and services.
- Conduct a mock city council meeting
- Prepare presentations as city planners, arguing to keep service.
- Act as government officials, **comparing** pros and cons of decisions.



Key Vocabulary:

Agenda: a list or outline of things to be considered or done.

Appoint: to name officially.



Budget: the amount of money that is available for, required for, or assigned to a particular purpose or set of programs.

Constituents: Persons represented by elected public officials.

Democracy: a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation, usually involving periodically held free elections or

referendums.

Preside: the act of serving as chairman or moderator of public assemblies or meetings of government bodies.

(Principal definition sources include the Merriam Webster Dictionary and Congress for Kids <http://www.congressforkids.net/index.htm>)



Materials:

- *the.News* segment “City Government: Omaha, Nebraska”
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/thenews/thegov>
- Access to the Internet and library sources
- Worksheet #1--Managing a Budget: A Look at Your Spending
- Worksheet #2 -- Managing a Group Budget
- City Budget Worksheet #1
- City Budget Worksheet #2
- City Budget Worksheet #3
- Materials for conducting questionnaire
 - Clipboards
 - Pens
 - paper



McRel Standards (www.mcrel.org)

Civics

Standard 17. Understands issues concerning the relationship between state and local governments and the national government and issues pertaining to representation at all three levels of government

Level III [Grade 6-8]

Benchmark 5

Knows the major responsibilities of his/her state and local governments (e.g., education, welfare, streets and roads, parks, recreation, law enforcement), and understands the organization of his/her state and local governments (e.g., legislative, executive, and judicial functions at state and local levels)

Level III (Grades 6-8)

Uses content, style, and structure (e.g., formal or informal language, genre, organization) appropriate for specific audiences (e.g., public, private) and purposes (e.g., to entertain, to influence, to inform)

Time Frame: 3-5 class periods

- **Part 1—Warm-up**
 - **Managing a budget--**hands-on activities exploring budgets and group decision making. (1 class period)
- **Part 2—Mapping and prioritizing city services.**—brainstorming, writing and conducting questionnaire and summarizing results (1-2 class periods plus time for research and conducting questionnaire)
- **Part 3—City Council Meeting--**writing, presenting, and evaluating ideas in a mock city council meeting (1-2 class periods)



McRel Standards (www.mcrel.org)

Language Arts

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Level III [Grade 6-8]

Benchmark 6.

Writes expository compositions (e.g., states a thesis or purpose; presents information that reflects knowledge about the topic of the report; organizes and presents information in a logical manner, including an introduction and conclusion; uses own words to develop ideas; uses common expository structures and features, such as compare-contrast or problem-solution)

Benchmark 11

Writes compositions that address problems/solutions (e.g., identifies and defines a problem in a way appropriate to the intended audience, describes at least one solution, presents logical and well-supported reasons)

Knowledge/skill statements

1. Presents well-supported reasons Identifies a problem in a way appropriate to the intended audience
2. Defines a problem in a way appropriate to the intended audience
3. Describes solutions to the problem
4. Presents logical reasons



Background:



In its simplest definition, a government makes laws that citizens must obey determining the way in which a country, state, county, township, city, or village is run. At every level, a government creates policies about everything connected with the daily life of a given community.

At the local level the legislative or lawmaking arm of government consists of a council or board—a group of citizens either elected or appointed to run the government.

People in the community may attend public meetings of such groups and are encouraged to voice their opinions about local issues. The council then votes on each issue under discussion and the majority rules. In certain specific cases, their decisions are by law submitted to the voters in general for ratification.

Government is a part of our daily lives. Public parks, libraries, schools, fire and rescue operations and even roads and sidewalks are all connected to local government.

These are services and resources that we may take for granted but when city, state and federal budgets are being whittled down, the services we consider vital to our personal well-being may dwindle and even disappear.



Partnership for 21st Century Skills (<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/>)

http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/p21_framework_definitions_052909.pdf

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

- Framing, analyzing and synthesizing information in order to solve problems and answer questions.

Communication and Collaboration

- Articulating thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively through speaking and writing

Information Literacy

- Accessing information efficiently and effectively, evaluating information critically and competently and using information accurately and creatively for the problem at hand.

Civic Literacy

- Participating effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes.
- Exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national and global levels
- Understanding the local and global implications of civic decisions

Make Judgments and Decisions

- Effectively analyze and evaluate evidence, arguments, claims and beliefs.
- Analyze and evaluate major alternative points of view.
- Interpret information and draw conclusions based on the best analysis.



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Services like public health care, education and highway construction cost money. Government officials are responsible for paying people to provide these services and paying for materials that keep them functioning effectively. Citizens pay taxes so the government can afford to provide these services. Assembling budgets – that is, deciding which public programs to fund through available revenues -- are the great balancing acts.



Lesson Plan:

Lesson #1 Warm-up--Managing a budget

Getting a handle on spending is something we hear every day on a federal level. But it is something we can do on an individual level as well. Individuals have clear ideas about priorities but groups can have a very different dynamic.

What you need

Worksheet #1--Managing a Budget: A Look at Your Spending

Worksheet #2 -- Managing a Group Budget

What you do

1. Discuss what a budget is.
 - a. What do you spend money on?
 - b. What does your family spend money on?
 - i. Food
 - ii. Shelter
 - iii. Clothing
 - iv. Transportation
 - v. Entertainment
2. Make enough copies of worksheet #1 and distribute to each student.
3. Ask students to make a list of the kinds of things they spend money on.
4. Ask them to organize them into categories and estimate how much they spend in each category.
5. Have them create pie charts to illustrate their spending in different categories as a percentage of an overall budget, by using a theoretical revenue total of just \$100. (This makes it easier to apply percentage and create pie charts)
6. Divide students into groups and tell them they are now in charge of their own cities. .
7. Have students create a name for the city they run.
8. Make enough copies of Managing a Group Budget worksheet for each student.
9. Students work together to rank services in order of importance and then assign a portion of the budget to each service.
10. Students should come to a consensus, draft a presentation and present their budgets.
11. As a group, discuss the following questions:
 - a. Was there negotiation?
 - b. Did some students get more of what they wanted than others?
 - c. Is anyone totally satisfied or not at all?
 - d. How is this applicable in terms of running a municipal government?



Lesson #2: Mapping and Prioritizing City Services-- brainstorming, writing and conducting questionnaire, summarizing results, and comparing group results to public response.

What you need

- Maps of town—enough copies for each team to have one. Go to Google Maps online <http://maps.google.com/>.
- Post-it stickies
- Paper, pens and clipboards for questionnaires

What you do

1. Have students brainstorm and list meaningful services and resources in their town—police dept, fire department, schools, library, pool, parks etc
 - a. Make sure they include important municipal services such as the following:
 - i. Police
 - ii. Fire and Rescue
 - iii. Streets and Sidewalks
 - iv. Trash and Recycling
 - v. Schools
 - vi. Libraries
 - vii. Parks and Recreation
2. Have students create and conduct questionnaires for gathering information about priorities from the public
 - a. Gather, **analyze** and **summarize** information
3. Have them rank each service in terms of importance to the community in general.
4. For each service, they should write a sentence about why it is important or not in running the community.
5. Print out a copy of your town and make copies for students
6. Divide students into teams of 3-4
7. Give teams a map and a pile of post-it stickies and have them map the services in order or public priority.
8. Have students discuss their own rankings and the public rankings and ask them to come to a consensus about the following:
 - a. Were they able to come to an easy agreement?
 - b. Do the favorite services or resources have anything in common?
 - c. How do they make the community unique?
 - d. What community problems do they help solve?



Lesson #3 City Council Meeting --writing, presenting, and evaluating ideas in a mock city council meeting

What you need

- *the.News* segment “City Government: Omaha, Nebraska”
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/thenews/thegov>
- City Budget Worksheet #1
- City Budget Worksheet #2
- City Budget Worksheet #3

What You Do

1. Have students watch *the.News* segment “City Government: Omaha, Nebraska”
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/thenews/thegov>
2. Discuss how this same thing could happen in your own community.
3. Have students fill out the **City Budget Cuts worksheet #1**
4. Explore the responses
 - a. If the budget commanded that some services and resources be cut which ones should go? Why?
5. Review the most and least popular community services or resources from lesson #1 and assign each one to a group of students.
6. Ask students to Fill out **City Budget Cuts Worksheet #2**
 - a. Discuss their assigned program.
 - b. **Evaluate** the potential impact on the community
Formulate ideas to improve, protect, or enhance the program and write paragraphs **supporting** their point of view...
7. Next, inform groups that they are going to take turns being city planners and presenting information to the rest of the class who will act as city government officials in a mock city council meeting.
 - a. Based on the information they gathered, have city planner groups present their recommendations to the class.
 - b. Instruct the class to ask questions of the presenting group about budget proposals:
 - i. Where the funding for the projects might come from.
 - ii. Possible consequences of each recommendation.
8. Students who are playing the roles of city government officials should fill out **City Budget Worksheet #3** during this part of the activity. There is space for questions (as well as sample questions) and room for notes for each presentation.

Teacher’s Notes for City Budget Worksheets

For this activity, make copies of these pages for every group of students in your class. Groups work together first as city planners presenting their case for services or resources being cut or not by budgetary constraints and then as Government officials who ask questions and critique presentations. .



Extension Assignments:

Have students work together to create a list of community members involved with the services or resources they identified as important in their community. Then ask students to schedule interviews and prepare relevant questions. Suggest questions that address the following:

- Interviewee's opinions about the service or resource.
- Their opinion about the impact it has on the community.
- Ideas about how to improve, protect, or enhance this location.
- What they think might happen if budgetary cuts are deemed necessary.
- What ideas might they have for raising funds to keep the resource?



Assessment: Students will be assessed on

- participation
- creativity.
- completion of handouts and level of research
- questionnaire
- summary of questionnaires
- written presentation
- verbal presentation

Resources:

- *City of Omaha Nebraska*, <http://www.cityofomaha.org/citycouncil/>
- *Google Maps online* <http://maps.google.com/>.
- *Great Government for Kids* <http://www.cccoe.net/govern/>

Activity Designer: A former English, science and art teacher, Lynn Brunelle is a writer and author of over 30 books for kids and adults.



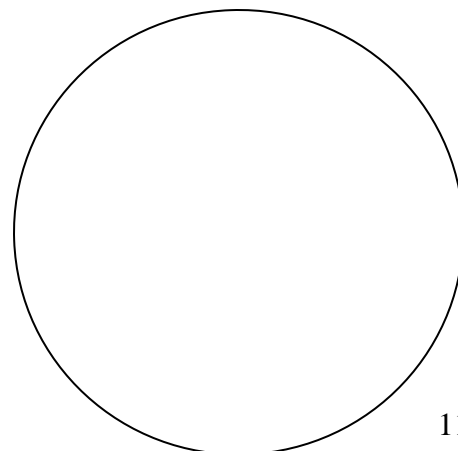
Worksheet #1
Managing a Budget: A Look at Your Spending

1. What did you spend money on last month? Brainstorm a list of things.

2. Arrange the items into categories (e.g., video games, school supplies, clothes, entertainment, food, etc.)

category	item	cost

3. Illustrate your budget by drawing a pie chart that shows the amount you will spend on each category.





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City Budget Cuts worksheet #1

Name _____ Date _____

Name some of the most important services and resources that your community offers.

Why are they important to your community?

How do they affect your everyday life?

If the budget commanded that some services and resources be cut which ones should go?

Why?



City Budget Cuts worksheet #2

Name _____ Date _____

Assigned service/resource:

1. **Describe** your assigned service/resource objectively (What is its purpose? How is it used by community members? What types of people use it?):

2. **Analyze** what kind of impact this service have on your community?

3. **Formulate** a list of recommendations for how to protect, improve, or enhance this service so that it can better serve or continue to serve this community in the future.

4.. Rate the ideas in terms of importance.

5. Write a persuasive argument that **supports** your assigned service and present your case to the council asking that it not be cut under the budget.



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City Budget Cuts worksheet #3

Name _____ Date _____

You are members of the city council. Your job is to listen to the presentations delivered by each group of city planners. Take notes on each presentation and ask each group questions about how their recommendations can be implemented.

Notes:

Presentations #1

Service _____

Presentations #2

Service _____

Presentations #3

Service _____



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Sample questions

1. Do you think the benefits to the city of implementing this plan would be equal to the cost of its implementation? Why?
2. Who will fund this project? The city? Private developers? Foundations? Volunteer fund-raisers? A combination?
3. Once this plan has been implemented, what lasting benefits (economic, educational, environmental, judicial, etc.) will the city enjoy?
4. Are there any people or organizations that may fight this plan? If so, how do you suggest the city appeal to these people?