

Community Decisions

Middle school students learn how to participate in community decision-making by conducting a needs assessment to collect data on possible ways to develop a vacant lot. They use the *Visual Ranking Tool* to prioritize the responses, and then present their conclusions to a Community Advisory Committee.

At a Glance

Grade Level: 6-8

Subject sort: Social Studies

Subject(s): Social Studies

Topics: Government, Urban Planning

Targeted Higher-Order Thinking Skills: Decision Making, Problem Solving, Data Analysis

Key Learnings: Community Needs Assessment, Local Government, Decision-Making Process, Social Responsibility

Time Needed: Six 45-minute periods

Unit Summary

Students get involved with community decision-making processes as they plan potential uses for a vacant building a few blocks from their school. The building lies within a community development area, and the city has asked a Community Advisory Committee to propose possible development ideas. Students offer to study the issues and contribute their analyses to the committee. They become social science researchers who conduct a community needs assessment and analyze the results. They then use the *Visual Ranking Tool* to represent the most popular development ideas, and rank these alongside representatives from different community groups. Teams develop oral presentations defending their choices. After discussing all the ideas, the class votes on the solutions and offers its recommendations to the Community Advisory Committee.

Although this is a specific example, these project procedures could be used anytime students have the opportunity to contribute to a community or school decision.

Curriculum-Framing Questions

Essential Question

How can we make a difference?

Unit Questions

How can we make our community a better place?

How can we make sure that community decisions reflect our different needs and perspectives?

Sample Content Questions

How are local planning decisions made?

How do you conduct a community needs assessment?

Assessment Processes

View how a variety of student-centered [assessments](#) are used in the Community Decisions Unit Plan. These assessments help students and teachers set goals; monitor student progress; provide feedback; assess thinking, processes, performances, products; and reflect on learning

throughout the learning cycle.

Instructional Procedures

Prior to Instruction

In this project, students use *Visual Ranking* to evaluate and compare ideas for how a vacant lot will be used. Examine [Visual Ranking](#) to learn about the tool and how to use it with your students.

Set the Stage

Ask students to respond to the Essential Question in their journals or learning logs:

How can we make a difference?

Instruct students to share their thoughts in cooperative learning groups. Read the picture book, *City Green* by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan, a story about one girl's motivation to make a change in her community. Ask students to reflect on the different points of view discussed in the book.

Present the Following Scenario

You have noticed a vacant building near the school. It has deteriorated and is an unsafe eyesore. The city has asked community members like you to contribute to a plan for improving the vacant building situation. In small groups, you will research and then represent a particular constituent group's interest and ideas for the vacant lot. You will present your ideas to a Community Advisory Committee.

Ask students to respond again in their journals to the Essential Question, *How can we make a difference?* in relation to this specific situation. Conduct a whole-class discussion about their ideas for what could be done with the vacant building and brainstorm a list of possible uses. Tabulate a list of development ideas with the class and discuss criteria for deciding which items to keep on the list. Some ideas may receive so few votes that they do not merit further consideration. Others may be essentially the same (such as playground and park), and can be collapsed into one item (park). Narrow the list to eight to ten distinct solutions.

Possible development ideas might include:

- Community garden
- Teen center
- Skateboard park
- Affordable housing
- Public park
- Food bank
- Community center
- Homeless shelter
- Health center

Student Perspectives

1. Set up a project in the *Visual Ranking* workspace called Community Decisions.
 - Create the prompt: *How can we make our community a better place? What uses of the vacant lot would be most beneficial?*
 - Populate the workspace with development ideas from the earlier discussion.
 - Create and assign teams.
2. Conduct a lesson on evaluating ideas according to established criteria.
3. Introduce the *Visual Ranking Tool* using the demonstration space at [Try the Tool](#).
4. Have students log in to their *Visual Ranking* team space. Point out the prompt that guides their ranking and remind each team to rank the items with this in mind.
5. Show students how to rank and compare lists, and how to describe items and explain their relative merit using the comments feature. Point out the meaning of the correlation coefficient

(the degree to which rankings agree or disagree). A coefficient of 1.0 is perfect agreement, and a coefficient of -1.0 is perfect disagreement.

As students are ranking their choices and filling in the comment boxes, push them to really think through their decisions. Probe them about their decision-making process by asking them to justify their choices. Questions such as the following can prompt students to elaborate on their thinking:

- *Why have you ranked the bottom three and the top three the way you have?*
- *Where do the reasons for your rankings come from?*

Consider: What is a Community?

Discuss the concept of community, and ask students to use their classification and comparison skills to individually build a web diagram (graphic organizer) to describe what makes a community. Have them write “community” in the middle of the web and post the following questions to guide their thinking:

- *What are the key elements of a community?*
- *What different kinds of communities do we belong to?*
- *What is the role or impact of the buildings and physical surroundings on people in a community?*
- *How are decisions made about what happens in a community?*

Form cooperative learning groups and ask students to combine their individual webs into a group diagram on chart paper that reflects the best of all their ideas. Post webs around the room and ask students to compare and contrast the different webs. Conduct a discussion on what the students noticed about the different webs.

To answer the Unit Question, *How can we make sure that community decisions reflect our different needs and perspectives?* explain constituency, the mix of distinct interest groups in a community. Discuss the challenges of making choices for a community while keeping in mind the diverse interests and needs of its constituent groups. If available, provide students with newspaper editorials and letters to the editor reflecting different points of view on current community issues.

Review, if necessary, the concept of point of view. In small groups, have students discuss what the different constituencies are in their community and how their different points of view present challenges for making decisions. Take anecdotal notes to check students’ understanding of the various constituencies in the community.

Invite a Guest Speaker

Make sure that students understand the structure of their local government and how decisions are made. Invite a member from the advisory committee or a local government official to discuss their work and decision-making processes. Ask the official to describe how community members have contributed to making a difference in the community and how the government works with citizens and various community partners to help communities improve and redevelop areas. Ask the official to talk about a recent improvement project in your community to give students an idea of what the city has already accomplished. Focus on these discussion questions during the visit:

- *How can citizens have an impact on their community?*
- *What does community development mean?*
- *What is community planning?*
- *How are the needs of a variety of people or groups (such as businesses, service industries, government, and residents) met?*
- *What is our local government structure?*
- *Can government agencies tell people and businesses what to build?*

- *What responsibilities do different levels of government (federal, state, and local) have when it comes to deciding where development occurs?*
- *How do governments use economic incentives to encourage people or businesses to build in certain areas?*
- *Where does the money come from to fund development projects?*

Ask students to write down five interesting pieces of information from the presentation and use that information to write in their journals about two or three ideas on how their point of view could contribute to making the community better for everyone.

Conducting a Community Needs Assessment

After discussing the idea of community and urban development, divide students into small teams to explore the Unit Questions, *How can we make our community a better place?* and *How can we make sure that community decisions reflect our different needs and perspectives?* Have groups identify the different constituent or interest groups in the community (for example, senior citizens, people with business interests, students, and community groups).

Assign each group a different constituent group. If there are too many student groups, more than one group may represent a constituency. Explain that they will conduct a community needs assessment to determine the priorities of the constituent groups they represent. The needs assessment includes mapping, interviewing, polling, and data analysis. A checklist for each component of the needs assessment helps students stay on track and monitor their own progress.

Community Mapping

Community mapping can be done on graph paper. Establish geographic boundaries for the students depending on the size of the community. Then, ask each group to determine the facilities relevant to their constituent group, where those facilities are located, and create a map using symbols and a key to show where they are. They may need phone books and the Internet to help identify the facilities in their communities. For example, a group representing senior citizens, might identify the following facilities used by seniors: community center with classes for seniors, park with benches and paths, assisted living communities, health centers, and so forth. Once the maps are completed, students will be better able to visualize the resources that are lacking or that are geographically spread out for their constituent group.

Interviewing Constituent Group Members

In order to truly represent the wishes of their constituent groups, students should talk to as many members as possible. This may mean visiting senior centers, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, childcare facilities, and so forth, depending on who their constituent group is. As students interview people, they should be gathering data on the current services available for that group and the needs that are not met or are met inadequately for that group.

Polling Constituent Members

To get a broader sample of constituent voices, have students conduct polls. The polls should be developed based on the data collected from the community mapping and interviewing. Have each team develop a draft of a needs assessment survey to poll community members about issues in the neighborhood, with a focus on ideas for replacing the vacant building in the neighborhood. In a class discussion, have teams share their drafts, and then synthesize team drafts into a final [community needs assessment survey](#) that each group distributes to members of their constituent group.

Data Analysis

After each group collects and records data from members of the group they are representing, they analyze it by categorizing, looking for trends, identifying common themes and differing points

of view. Then students sort the data, create visual representations and draw conclusions about appropriate uses of the vacant lot based on their findings.

Prepare to Prioritize

Before proceeding with the next activity, return to the [Visual Ranking teacher workspace](#).

Add new student groups based on constituent groups. Give each student team representing a constituency group a name. If you want to make the teams smaller, assign more than one team to represent the same constituency groups (i.e., teams named Retired1 and Retired2 would both represent the interests of retirees). When students compare their rankings with other teams representing their same constituency, great discussion will result. You may even ask "twin" teams to negotiate and come to a consensus for their constituency group. .

Identify a leader within the community to represent each of the constituency groups and add them to the project. Invite the community leaders to participate, giving them information on how to sign in and rank items using the *Visual Ranking Tool*. Tell them to use the comments feature to justify their choices and explain their decision-making process. Read comments to assess student thinking and understanding, and use the comment feature within the tool to provide feedback.

Describe the next phase of instruction to the class: Each Community Development Advisory Team will now act on behalf of one constituency group and rank the list of development options from the point of view of that group, based on their research. Prior to ranking, have each group summarize the perspective its members will bring to the ranking task, and decide which criteria are important when making decisions for that group. This [community decision handout](#) expands on these questions and guides work:

- *What values does your constituency group hold?*
- *How will your group's values affect how you will sort the solutions?*
- *What is your constituency group concerned with in the community?*

Rank Priorities Using Visual Ranking

Have students log in to their *Visual Ranking* team space as members of their constituent group teams. Remind them to use the prompt while they are ranking the development options: *How can we make our community a better place? What uses of the vacant lot would be most beneficial?* Have each team rank the items with this in mind, and explain the relative merit of each item, based on their constituent group's needs, using the comments feature of the tool. Ask students to explain in the comments which ideas from the original list did not appear in the community needs assessment and which new ideas they would now replace them. Have teams refer to their completed handout as they rank and defend their choices. As students sort their lists, listen to their discussions and ask questions to help teams negotiate, make choices, and express their thinking, take anecdotal notes on decision-making processes and group skills.

Compare Thinking about Design Options

Once teams have finished ranking and commenting, have them compare their lists with the lists from the previous *Visual Ranking* activity and the lists that were ranked by the community leaders. Be sure to have the community members complete the comment boxes, explaining how they made their decisions. Students should read each other's comments about the relative merit of each development option. Have students discuss why their lists are alike and different. Suggest that they identify the teams that ranked items most and least like they did. Have similar and dissimilar teams meet to discuss their rankings and rationale behind the order. Some teams may want to revise their ranking based on things they learn from other teams.

Examine the Visual Ranking Activity

The *Visual Ranking Tool* workspace below represents one team's ranking on this project. The view you see is functional. Click the compare button to see how different teams ranked the items. You can roll over the red triangles to see the teams' comments.

Project Name: Community Decisions

Question: How can we make our community a better place? What uses of the vacant lot would be most beneficial?

Once teams are finished ranking and discussing, have teams reflect on the process by answering some of the following questions:

1. *What was it like defending your group's point of view? Was it difficult? Why?*
2. *What was the biggest obstacle to settling on a compromise within your team? What obstacles do communities in general face when they are trying to get things done?*
3. *What are other similar situations where there are different groups with competing interests?*

Meet again as a large group and discuss these same questions. Using a projector system and networked computer, display the lists and discuss general themes that appear. Ask students to consider: *Is any development idea consistently in the top of the ranking? The bottom of the ranking? Is universal agreement necessary, or even desirable? How does the process of ranking the items compare and contrast with the process for making decisions in your local community government?*

Ask students to respond to the following questions in their journals:

- *What differences did you see between the rankings in the first Visual Ranking activity and this one? What ideas were eliminated and what ideas were added. What do you think is the meaning of the differences?*
- *What differences did you see among the various constituent groups? What do you think are the reasons for these differences?*

Inform and Persuade Others

Have teams develop a multimedia presentation that they will present to their constituency leader describing their recommendations for the vacant lot. Supply the [presentation rubric](#) to guide their work, using this sample [student multimedia presentation](#). To prepare students for this activity, introduce relevant problem-solving skills and strategies. Discuss how they decide what to include in their presentation in order to make it persuasive.

The presentation should include the following components

- Explanation of community issue
- Community needs results
- Synthesis of needs assessment results to determine top three choices for that constituency group
- Ranking of choices from the point of view of that constituency
- Description of benefits of top three choices
- Comparisons with other groups' rankings
- Recommendations for top choice

Have constituent teams present, and have the constituent leaders discuss merits and weaknesses of each argument. Vote on a final set of development ideas to recommend to the advisory committee at their next meeting. Make a final class presentation for the community advisory board meeting, using informative and persuasive elements from the individual presentations. If computers are available at the meeting, you can show the board the processes the class used to develop their recommendations, show the tool, and even set up a team for the

board so it can use *Visual Ranking* as it continues its deliberations. Have the Community Advisory Board share their decision-making process with the class. Discuss, *How will they make the final decision about how the vacant lot will be used?*

Once teams have completed this project, have students reflect on the process by answering some of the following questions in their journals:

1. *What thinking skills and strategies did you use to complete this project? How effective were they?*
2. *What did you learn about your thinking that you can use in future projects?*
3. *What did you learn about working with others that you can use in future projects?*

Conduct a closing discussion and have students write an essay responding to the Essential and Unit Questions:

- *How can we make a difference?*
- *How can we make our community a better place?*
- *How can we make sure that community decisions reflect our different needs and perspectives?*

Extensions

- Study these three voting methods: approval, borda count, and plurality, and then vote one time using each method. Discuss how different outcomes result, depending on the voting method used. Have students select the voting method they think is most fair in this instance.
- Dig deeper into the requirements for the top design solutions. For example, if students think a park is the best choice, have them identify and rank the most important features of a park using the *Visual Ranking* tool. Have students create an advertisement or poster for their development choice.
- Have students conduct an economic analysis of their top three choices.

Prerequisite Skills

None needed

Differentiated Instruction

Resource Student

- Provide small-group explicit instruction and scaffolding on specific skills.
- Assign students to heterogeneous groups to encourage interaction.

Gifted Student

- Have students draw up design plans in the form of a large-scale blueprint.
- They can present their blueprint with their team's media presentation.

English Language Learner

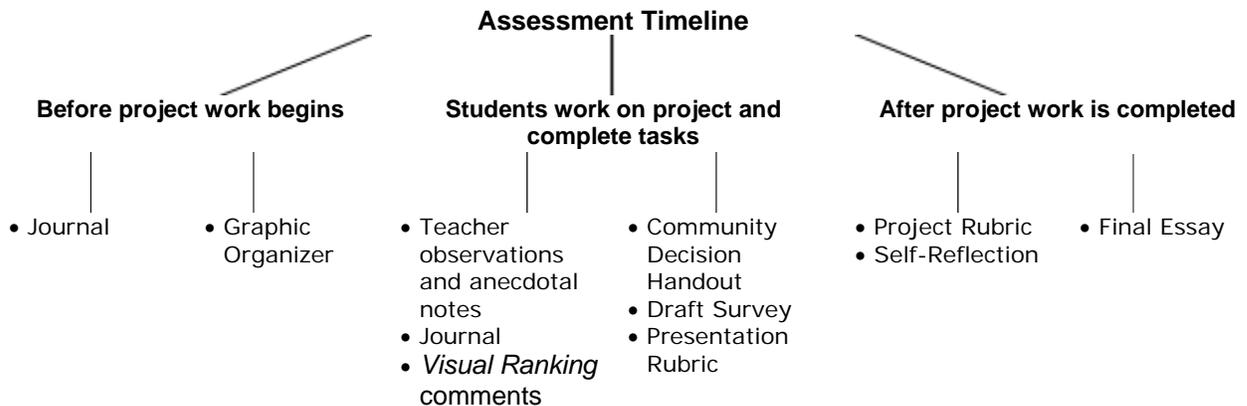
- Place English Language Learners in groups with native speakers to develop English language and content skills.
- Use visual aids to communicate concepts.

Credits

A teacher contributed this idea for a classroom project. A team of educators expanded the plan into the example you see here.

THINGS YOU NEED

Assessment Plan



Assess prior knowledge of community and citizen action through journal writings and a graphic organizer. During group activities, take anecdotal notes about students' understanding of different community constituent groups. Review the *Visual Ranking* comments, journal entries, draft survey, and Community Decision Handout to monitor understanding and provide additional instruction if necessary. Guide students' work on their presentations with the [presentation rubric](#), and encourage metacognition by asking students to reflect on their thinking and learning processes after they make their presentations. Students' synthesis of their knowledge about the topics addressed in the unit is assessed through the final essay.

Targeted Content Standards and Benchmarks

Social Sciences (Oregon Benchmark 3, Grades 6-8: Civics and Government)

Students will:

- Understand how citizens can learn about public issues
- Identify and give examples of how individuals can influence the actions of government

Social Sciences (Oregon Benchmark 3, Grades 6-8: Analysis)

Students will:

- Examine an event, issue, or problem through inquiry and research
- Design and implement strategies to analyze issues, explain perspectives, and resolve issues using the social sciences
- Gather, interpret, use, and document information from multiple sources, distinguishing facts from opinions and recognizing points of view

- Consider two or more outcomes, responses, or solutions; identify their strengths and weaknesses; then conclude and justify which is the best

Student Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Conduct a community needs assessment
- Analyze the results of a community needs assessment
- Assume the perspective of a constituent group
- Apply problem-solving skills to propose suggestions for a vacant building
- Draw comparisons between different constituent groups using the *Visual Ranking Tool*
- Propose and defend a solution for the vacant building

Materials and Resources

Internet Resources

- Citizenship and the Constitution
www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Social_Studies/US_Government/GOV0002.html*
Students can identify government officials and resources on a local, state, and national level
- Know your Local Government
www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Social_Studies/US_Government/GOV0024.html*
This activity introduces students to the local government structure and the people in the various community positions
- PBS TeacherSource – Approval Voting
www.pbs.org/teachersource/mathline/concepts/voting/activity4.shtm*
Students can examine a voting method in which voters can vote for as many candidates as they wish. Each approved candidate receives one vote, and the candidate with the most votes wins.
- PBS TeacherSource - Borda Count Voting
www.pbs.org/teachersource/mathline/concepts/voting/activity1.shtm*
In this voting method each candidate gets 1 point for each last-place vote received, 2 points for every next-to-last-place vote, etc., all the way up to N points for each first-place vote (where N is the number of candidates). The candidate with the largest point total wins the election.
- PBS TeacherSource – Plurality Voting
www.pbs.org/teachersource/mathline/concepts/voting/activity2.shtm*
Students can explore the voting method they are most used to-one in which voters choose one candidate and the candidate with the most first place votes wins.

Technology—Hardware

- Internet connection to enable use of *Visual Ranking Tool*
- LCD Projector to share multimedia presentations

Technology—Software

- Database/spreadsheet software for graphing activity
- Multimedia software for creating presentations