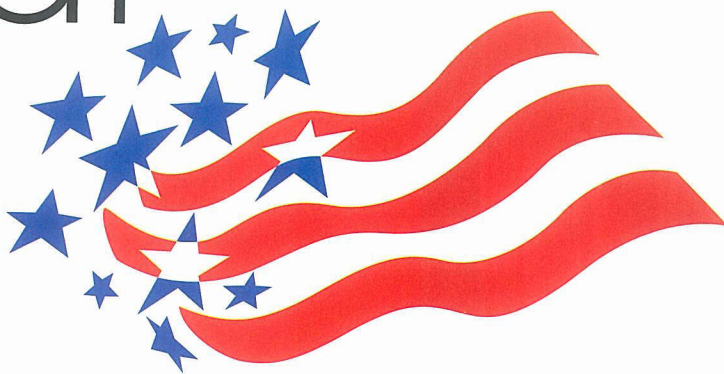


Political Gains



Give your student leaders a chance to
interact directly with politicians.

Alan E. Nelson

Next year, as the political arena heats up and candidates are out pressing the flesh and hungry for public appearances, it's a great opportunity for you to take advantage of introducing public policy, community leaders, and even the democratic system to your student leaders. Over the years, I've found that it's much easier to get a mayor, members of congress, or up-and-coming candidates to make a visit when it's election time.

Find out who is up for election in your area, at various levels, and who has filed to run for elected offices. Most candidates have to file to run for an office long before you ever see their posters and billboards. Even those not apt to win are good to network with because they are often leaders in realms other than politics. One office may yield half a dozen community leaders willing to interact with students, especially those who've been identified as young leaders. These mentoring interactions stick with young leaders, who are themselves exploring their influence potential. Plus, savvy candidates will strive to relate to their audience by sharing stories of when they were teens.

Even though most of your students aren't yet voting age, the opportunity for potential publicity and being seen interacting with young leaders and the education system are pluses for potential campaign winners. Therefore, if you plan ahead, you can take advantage of an election year as a part of your young leader development. Because of students' prowess for social networking,

savvy politicians understand the importance of both the young vote as well as image in the youth culture.

Not only will you be lighting the fires under potential future public leaders, you'll also be modeling interaction with policy influencers. Some of your students may end up working in an election headquarters, calling, canvassing, and even motivating peers to register to vote. Leaders interact with other influencers in general. This is a great opportunity for student leaders to have firsthand experience networking and interacting with community shapers, who they may or may not agree with on various topics.

Here are some ideas for taking advantage of this window of opportunity.

Don't worry about affiliation. Regardless of your political ideologies, your goal is to introduce young leaders to community influencers as well as the democratic process. Provide invitations to various parties and see who takes the bait. No doubt you'll have various political views represented among your students. Understanding different points of view and seeing these opportunities to share your differing views are all a part of the leadership process. If only one party shows and you get criticized for promoting a certain view, you can always say, "But we invited everyone." This becomes more of an embarrassment for those who aren't willing to meet with a group of young leaders than for you.

Consider the venue. Offering a suggested meeting situation is usually better than a generic request to meet. Depending on

the level of influence, a candidate or scheduling staffer may want to know how many people, length of time, and other candidates attending. Inviting the press is usually a plus for getting the candidate's attention. If that doesn't work out, then offer to fit the candidate's schedule. The venue could be a classroom visit or after school student leader gathering. Perhaps you can take a field trip to the candidate's office and if they are an incumbent, may observe them in a policy setting meeting. Your group may even host a schoolwide "meet the candidates" assembly, where many students experience the democratic process.

Do your homework. You don't want to embarrass yourself or your guest politician. That means you'll want to do a little research in terms of the person's bio, what office he or she is running for and how the political process works at that level. You probably don't need to invest much time until after the person accepts your invitation, but as soon as it happens, you'll be responsible for knowing a bit about the person, their position, and the pertinent issues.

Prep your students. Be sure to plan your meeting, whether it is a class time chat, evening round table, or more formal school

assembly. Do some training on self-introductions, good question development, and basic protocol and manners when interacting with a public official. That may include things such as what to wear, what to call the politician, and how to introduce the guest. You don't want to represent your school poorly, especially because there could be press there, either invited by you or the candidate.

Another great thing about networking with political candidates is that if the person gets elected, other opportunities could come in terms of visiting policy-making strategy sessions; having a student on an ad hoc committee, and if the candidate works up the ladder of influence, even greater opportunities down the road.

Use these ideas to seize tomorrow, because after elections take place, it will be more difficult to gain the attention of these community influencers. ■

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<LEADERSHIP LESSON —T-shirts and self-esteem>

Procedure

- Introduce the activity by saying: "We see T-shirts with all kinds of messages on them. Some have names of groups or organizations, some advertise products, others promote a certain viewpoint, some have purely artistic designs. Today we are going to make a new kind of T-shirt. Its purpose is to convey our thoughts or feelings about the wearer of the shirt."
- Pass out a T-shirt handout and a marker to each person. Ask participants to print their name on their T-shirt and tape it to their back (they can assist each other).

Objectives

- To build self-esteem of group members.
- To give participants the opportunity to compliment others, which is an important skill in teamwork and evaluation.
- To provide a positive way to celebrate the completion of a project or the end of the school year.

Materials

- Copies of the T-shirt drawing on 8½" x 11" paper.
- Thin line, nonpermanent markers in assorted colors.
- Masking tape.

Time Required

- Approximately 20–30 minutes, depending on the size of the group.
- Instruct the students that they will have the next 10–20 minutes to walk around the room and write comments on one another's shirts. The comments must be positive—qualities you see in that person, skills you see or appreciate in that person, or why that person is a good leader. Let the writing continue for as long as needed for your group. After this, give members a few minutes to read their T-shirts.

Processing

If desired, lead a discussion about the experience. Possible questions include:

- How do you feel about the comments written on your shirt?
- Were you surprised by any of the comments?
- Why is it important to compliment others?
- What are some other ways you can build someone's self-esteem in your family, your group, or your school?

This lesson was developed by Anne Stevenson and appeared in the book *More Leadership Lessons* published by NASSP.