

# Teaching Kids About Planning

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Steve Gurley

Every planner has probably given some thought to teaching kids about planning, and some have had the opportunity to do this from time to time during their professional careers. Many of us have been asked by a classroom teacher in our community to tell students about what we do on the job. Some of us may have been given opportunities to go further and teach about specific elements of our profession. Hopefully, this report will instill an added desire to get into the classroom and teach the future generation about planning. In this article, I hope to:

1. Encourage planners to teach kids about our profession and how it impacts society,
2. Provide a brief overview of the American Planning Association's efforts to teach kids about planning,
3. Explain recent and past efforts by the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association (NCAPA) to teach kids about planning, including efforts of NCAPA to establish a planning exhibit at Discovery Place in Charlotte,
4. Provide a partial listing of resources available for teaching kids about planning, and

5. Suggest ideas on how to get the most out of a classroom visit, for you the planner as well as the students.

## APA and NCAPA Efforts to Teach Kids about Planning

The American Planning Association (APA) is putting a great deal of effort into teaching kids about planning. APA resources for teaching kids, described later in this report, are more numerous than they were just a few years ago. Planners Day in School, a successful effort to put planners into high school classes in the city hosting the American Planning Association national conference, has been a mainstay of the past several conferences. APA has also made numerous publications and sources of information available to assist in teaching kids about planning. These efforts have given us many tools and ideas to help in formulating plans for teaching kids at the local level.

Teaching kids about planning has been a sporadic activity for NCAPA. In the early 1970s, Jim Hinkley, then president of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Planners, together with several other planners, created a Planning Information Kit including a film bibliography, lists of simulation games and filmstrip programs, a list of colleges and universities in North Carolina offering bachelor's degrees in urban planning, a lecture presentation outline, and pamphlets on planning. This kit was used throughout the state, particularly in the Raleigh, Gastonia, Salisbury, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro areas for two to three years. The kit was last updated in 1994, and it includes materials such as the "APA Public Information Guide IX: Teaching Kids About Planning," "Ideas for the Classroom," and other re-

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sources that will give you ideas about telling students about planning.

The current effort to teach kids about planning began in the early 1990s. The impetus for the latest thrust came from several planners across the state. Sue Schwartz, Judy Hunt, and I made a presentation on teaching kids about planning at the 1993 NCAPA annual spring conference. The following year, Planners Day in School (PDIS) was instituted as part of the NCAPA annual conference. Planners visited Jordan High School in Durham, where they spoke with government classes about planning. The Social Studies faculty at Jordan High welcomed us with open arms, and the only drawback was that there were not enough planners to cover all government classes. Unfortunately, we faced the same situation at the 1995 conference.

Another project that NCAPA has been working on is the creation of a planning display at Discovery Place, a hands-on museum in Charlotte, North Carolina. During late 1994 and into the summer of 1995, a study group made up largely of NCAPA members and representatives from Discovery Place met to establish plans for an exhibit. Discovery Place has accepted our proposal for an exhibit, and we are now waiting for a signal to start the project.

So far, several planners across the state have agreed to work on the project. In addition, Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc. (ESRI) will provide one complimentary copy of ESRI's ArcView geographic information system (GIS) software and one day of staff programming and technical preparation of the GIS portion of the exhibit. ESRI will also assist with coordinating GIS users and/or students who will further develop this portion of the exhibit.

Many ideas are being considered for the Discovery Place exhibit. In addition to the GIS exhibit, we hope to put together a watershed model to help viewers better understand the intricacies of watershed planning. Other possible features include neighborhood models and hands-on exhibits intended to give the observer a better understanding of planning. Once in place, we feel that the exhibit will be a great tool for teaching kids about planning.

The NCAPA Executive Committee passed a resolution in January 1995 endorsing the Discovery Place Exhibit. Both the Virginia and Georgia Chapters of APA have submitted similar resolutions in support of the exhibit.

## Getting into the Classroom

If you want to visit students in your community, you first need to arrange a visit. While I am generally contacted by teachers to speak to their classes, we must often make teachers aware of the materials we have to offer before we can get an invitation into the classroom. For example, I am preparing to meet with the principal and the third grade teachers of a local elementary school where I will be sharing the "Planning Education, Kids Style" program package (described later in this article) with them in anticipation of being invited to do the program in three third grade classes there. I initiated this effort on my own. Although I do not know if school personnel will be willing to follow through with the program, I will give

them a thorough overview and make myself available to carry out the program with their assistance. I have also been invited to speak to high school home economics classes about planning. At first, I thought a home economics classroom might be an awkward environment for

teaching planning. However, I found that their study of community fits well with many of the basics of planning.

In my experience, the key is making yourself available. Sometimes you will be invited to teach and teach again, but frequently you need to stay in contact with school teachers and administrators if you want to come back in the future.

## Resources Available to Teach Kids About Planning

The 1995 *Planners Bookstore Catalogue* lists no fewer than 16 individual resources for teaching kids about planning. Prices range from about five dollars for short books to \$75 for detailed guidebooks, lesson plans, and other tools for teaching.

"My Planning Activity Book" is an excellent coloring book that gives a young child an opportunity to learn about planning. For older children, there are two good publications by the Urban Land Institute that have been available since the early nineties: "Dilemmas of Development" and "UrbanPlan." These are geared for high school students and contain planning curricula that can fill several class periods. "Dilemmas in Development" focuses on a planned use development in northern Virginia and

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the various compromises that came about in its establishment. It presents some excellent examples of how local government can work with the development community to protect the public interest. "UrbanPlan" focuses on an urban redevelopment project (Quality Hill) in Kansas City, Missouri. It examines the intricacies of revitalizing an urban neighborhood in great detail.

"Planning Education, Kid Style" is an excellent tool that was developed by the Tennessee Chapter of APA for grades 3-6. It includes a manual and video, and uses the "box city" concept—putting together a small "city" using boxes as buildings—as a teaching tool. This activity allows the kids to put ideas into practice in a hands-on way by designing buildings and building cities. It is an excellent tool for teaching the concepts of space and community to students, especially since it helps show the interrelatedness of land uses. Additionally, local boards or elected officials can get involved since the box cities created by the students can be reviewed much as a planning board and city council or board of county commissioners would review a zoning matter. Not included in the resource packet are the boxes and street grid layout needed to put the box city together. You are left to create them yourself or order them separately.

Other promising materials listed in the latest APA Planner's Bookstore Catalogue include:

1. *How Things Were Built*, a children's book that shows how many of the world's greatest structures were built and explains technology that allowed for their construction;
2. *Little Planner*, a board game that teaches the most basic planning concepts by having players build projects using scaled-down plans;
3. *Underground*, a book for older children that exposes the root system of a typical city intersection;
4. *The Challenge of Change*, a 15-minute video focusing on how planning works and why it is rewarding and challenging by explaining how planners help preserve natural resources, enhance community character, do transit planning and help provide attractive and affordable housing;
5. *The Changing American Cityscape*, a series of seven posters with accompanying text showing

how the built environment of an imaginary city evolves over 115 years;

6. *Investing in Our Future: A Handbook for Teaching Local Government*, which presents guidelines for setting up programs designed to teach elementary and secondary school students about local government;
7. *Community as a Learning Resource*, a guidebook and video with hands-on exercises to help educators teach about the built environment and planning; and
8. *Walk Around the Block*, a book with a ready-to-use curriculum to teach children about architectural design and city planning by showing kids how to evaluate buildings, neighborhoods, and cities.

### Some Tips for the Classroom

Here are a few tips for working with students in the classroom. Some of these are based on the excellent publication, "APA Public Information Guide IX: Teaching Kids About Planning," while others are techniques that have been helpful to me.

First of all, do not talk too much. Children have limited attention spans, and ten minutes of introductory remarks is plenty for elementary students. Middle school students can handle up to half an hour, and high school students can generally last a full class period. In my experience, however, activities should take up most of the classroom time regardless of the age of the group. Use hands-on activities to allow students to participate.

Use simple explanations. Refrain from using planning jargon more than necessary. If you must introduce a planning term, do not use another planning term to define it. One of the best ways to introduce a concept to kids is to provide real life examples of how a familiar planning activity affects them in a personal way.

Maintain order in the classroom. Expect some unruliness, but do not let it get out of hand. Certain rules, such as requiring that students raise their hands for permission to speak, must be kept to ensure the best results from your visit. This does not mean that you should follow a rigid schedule at all costs. Instead, be flexible, maintain a sense of humor, and expect the unexpected, especially with younger students. If things do not go as planned, improvise as

you go. Some of the best learning experiences can evolve from such situations.

Here are three ways to stimulate discussion among students and get them to think about planning:

1. Ask students to compare good characteristics of their neighborhoods with bad characteristics and discuss how planning can enhance the good qualities and negate the bad points.
2. Ask students to visualize the perfect neighborhood. How would it be different from their present neighborhoods?
3. Give students a map with "my house" in the center of it. Ask them to sketch the different types of land uses in their neighborhood that are needed in order for the neighborhood to function (i.e. school, park, grocery store, hospital, offices, industrial uses, etc.). Ask them to arrange the uses to achieve the most compatibility of land uses.

## Conclusion

Teaching kids about planning is a great opportunity for planners to get involved in working with their future constituents. Planners can help kids become better informed about what planning is and why it is important while teaching them about local government and preparing them to become responsible adult citizens. **GP**