



County Commissioners and Independent Boards

Overview

In this lesson students will participate in a budgeting simulation in which they learn about the responsibilities and interactions of county boards of commissioners and state mandated county independent boards.

Grade

10

Course

Civics and Economics

North Carolina Standard Course of Study

- Objective 2.09: Describe the services provided by selected government agencies and how funding is provided.
- Objective 3.01: Identify the principles in the North Carolina Constitution and local charters.
- Objective 3.02: Explain how the North Carolina Constitution and local charters define the framework, organization, and structure of government at the state and local level.
- Objective 3.09: Describe the services provided by state and local government agencies and how funding is provided.
- Objective 5.01: Evaluate the role of debate, consensus, compromise, and negotiation in resolving conflicts.
- Objective 5.05: Explain how local government agencies balance interest and resolve conflicts.

Essential Questions

- What are the main responsibilities of the board of county commissioners?
- How is authority shared with other elected officials and independent boards within counties?
- From where do independent county boards derive their authority?
- What are the main responsibilities of the various independent county boards?
- How allocation decisions are typically made within counties?

Materials

- County Commissioners and Independent Boards PowerPoint; available in the Consortium's Database of Civic Resources (Goal 3) or by e-mailing a request to hinson@sog.unc.edu.
- PowerPoint presentation capabilities or printed handouts
- PowerPoint Notes Sheet
- Budgetary Meeting Notes, handout attached
- Commissioner and Independent Board Role Assignments, attached
- Sample EOC questions & key, attached

Duration

1 block period

Procedure

Exploring Your County

1. Engage students in a brief conversation about their county. Specifically, ask them to think about some of the county's characteristics or attributes that give it a distinct personality and reflect the character and history of the people who live there. Next, ask them to think about some of the important issues facing the county, or some of the things they like most and least about living in their particular county. Finally, ask them to think about authority in their county. In order to foster discussion, you may want to specifically ask:
 - Who is "in charge"?
 - Who makes the laws?
 - Who enforces them?
 - Who makes funding decisions?
 - Who makes decisions about public education?



Explain that the elected board of county commissioners makes many of these decisions, but that they actually share authority with a variety of other elected officials and independent boards.

County Commissioners and Independent Boards

2. Distribute the PowerPoint notes sheet, attached, one per student. Explain that during the 10-15 minute PowerPoint presentation students should follow along, answering questions on their notes sheet as appropriate. As you present, you may want to ask volunteers to read from each slide to help keep students engaged. Stop at slide 15 of the presentation ("Part II") and review the notes sheet to ensure that students understand the material thus far and have recorded the correct answers on their sheets.

Take a few extra minutes to have volunteers explain their answer for the last question (#6) regarding shared authority at the county level. Reiterate the fact that while independent county boards are responsible for making many important decisions and for administering their own budgets, the board of county commissioners is responsible for dividing the county budget such that each board is given a share based on their need and the priorities of the board of commissioners.

3. Continue on to Part II and ask students to consider the following question:
 - What do allocation decisions tell us about the needs of a county and/or commissioners' priorities, if anything?

As an example of how different counties allocate money differently, display the breakdown of Durham County and Buncombe County's 2008-09 budgets respectively. Ask students to think about what the breakdown of each says about the counties needs. When you reach the final slide, have students think of some possible reasons for the difference in allocation decisions between Durham and Buncombe County. Ask students the following questions:

- Which needs appear to be the greatest in each county? What are some possible reasons for these needs?
- What do commissioners risk by allocating money in certain ways?
- Why is it important that "other" things are funded? What are the most important "other" divisions?

Commissioners and Independent Boards Funding Simulation

4. Next, tell students that they are about to participate in a simulation that represents a decision-making scenario in county government. Explain that each year the board of county commissioners in every county has to determine how to allocate funding to each independent board. Depending on the role assigned to them, tell students they will either be presenting their case for funding on behalf of their independent board to the county commissioners, or conversely, deciding how to allocate funding to the independent boards from the perspective of the county commissioners.
5. Teachers have two options for leading the simulation:
 - **Small Group Simulation:**
 - Divide the class into groups of 8 students. Assign the following roles in each group and provide each students with the appropriate attached handout:
 - Assign at least 3 students to assume one of the attached commissioner roles (randomly choose among the 5 supplied commissioner roles, ensuring that no two students in the same group receive the same commissioner role; for larger classes, there can be 3-5 commissioners in a group.)
 - Assign 5 students in the group to play one of the 5 independent board roles (ensure each board is covered in each group)
 - Give 1 "budget allocation decision and presentation notes" sheet to each group; ask each group to come up with a name for their county
 - **For larger classes, you can have as many as 5 commissioners
 - Give students a few minutes to read over their respective roles. Tell them that their county has \$200,000,000 to budget. While this seems like a lot of money, the budget is actually pretty tight this year. In fact, other county agencies like public safety, transportation, economic development, parks and recreation, etc. have already been allocated half of total budget, or \$100,000,000. As a result, each independent board must vie for their desired portion of the \$100,000,000 left.
 - Tell the students playing independent board representatives that, based on their roles, they will have 5 minutes to prepare a 2-minute oral budget request to the commissioners in their groups. During this time, commissioners should select a chairperson, who will call the budget meeting to order, and write a brief introductory speech based on their assigned role, in which they share with the class who they are, what their priorities are, and why they feel this way.
 - After 5 minutes of planning, the commissioners will call the budgetary meeting to order and deliver their brief introductory speeches. Next, each independent board representative will have up to 2 minutes to present their case to the board of commissioners. Once all representatives have had an opportunity to make their case, the



board of commissioners will have 5-8 minutes to deliberate and decide how to allocate the money in their county. Remind the commissioners that they can allocate funding however they wish among the independent boards, but that they should remember that there are great needs in the county aside from their own, personal priorities. Thus, they should take all presented cases into consideration. While they deliberate, students assigned to independent board roles should discuss among themselves how they believe commissioners will allocate funding based on their priorities.

- Once all groups have finished their meetings and commissioners have made their funding decisions, each group should record how they decided to allocate money within their county and why they made such decisions on the “budget allocation decision and presentation notes” sheet. Each group’s commissioners will be responsible for reporting back to the remainder of class based on the group discussion.
- After all groups have reported back to the class, teachers should lead a discussion regarding the similarities and differences among various groups, connecting this to how various counties within North Carolina may also differ in the way they allocate funds. Have students also return to their notes sheet and consider what some of the risks/challenges the county may face based on the decision made in each group. After a few moments of independent thought and writing, discuss these potential risks/challenges as a class, again relating them to actual risks/challenges counties in North Carolina face.

- **Whole Class Simulation:** (If teachers prefer, the activity can be completed as a class instead of in groups.)

- Assign 5 students to assume one of the attached commissioner roles and divide the rest of the class into 6 groups, which will represent the independent county boards.
- Distribute commissioner roles to each student selected to serve as a county commissioner and one of the six independent board roles to each group representing the various boards. Also give one member of the board of commissioners the “budget allocation decision and presentation notes” sheet (later in the activity the board will come together to fill out the sheet).
- Give students a few minutes to read over their respective roles. Tell them that their county has \$200,000,000 to budget. While this seems like a lot of money, the budget is actually pretty tight this year. In fact, other county agencies like public safety, transportation, economic development, parks and recreation, etc. have already been allocated half of total budget, or \$100,000,000. As a result, each independent board must vie for their desired portion of the \$100,000,000 left.
- Tell students in the independent board groups that based on their roles, they will have 5 minutes to discuss their group’s role and prepare a 2-minute oral budget request to the board of commissioners. They should select a representative to present their request to the board of commissioners. During this time, commissioners should select a chairperson, who will call the budget meeting to order, and write a brief introductory speech based on their assigned role, in which they share with the class who they are, what their priorities are, and why they feel this way.
- After 5 minutes of planning, the commissioners will call the budgetary meeting to order and deliver their brief introductory speeches. Next, each independent board’s representative will have up to 2 minutes to present their group’s case to the board of commissioners. Once all representatives have had an opportunity to make their case, the board of commissioners will have 5-8 minutes to deliberate and decide how to allocate the money in their county. Remind the commissioners that they can allocate funding however they wish among the independent boards, but that they should remember that there are great needs in the county aside from their own, personal priorities. As they make their decisions as a board, they should record them on the “budget allocation decision and presentation notes” sheet. While they deliberate, students assigned to independent board roles should discuss among themselves how they believe commissioners will allocate funding based on their priorities.
- Once all groups have finished their meetings and commissioners have made their funding decisions, each group should record how they decided to allocate money within their county and why they made such decisions on the “budget allocation decision and presentation notes” sheet. Have the board of commissioners select a representative who will be responsible for reporting their allocations decisions to the independent boards.
- After the allocations decisions have been presented, teachers should lead a discussion whereby students remain in character and voice their concerns about the decisions reached. Encourage students to consider what some of the risks/challenges the county may face based on the allocations decisions. Next, tell students to come out of character and ask how they feel about the allocations decisions from their own standpoints as citizens.

6. Congratulate students on a job well done and debrief with the following discussion questions:

- Did you find it easy to make decisions? What did you find most difficult?
- Was consensus easily reached among the commissioners? Explain.
- What factors influence county commissioners in the decisions they make?
- If one board is overfunded because of a commissioner’s priorities, what could it mean for a county?



- What needs did you feel were greatest in your county?
- Personally, which independent boards do you feel should have priority in your county? Why?

Differentiation

Students with special needs

- Ensure that students are placed in mixed ability groups
- Allow students to partner with a fellow student leader and share the same commissioner or independent board representative role
- Students who are unable to participate in the small group or whole class simulation can be assigned the role of "Reporter;" Reporters should take notes on what they witness throughout the process and prepare a summarizing news article or TV report that they turn in and/or read/deliver to class at the end of the activity

AIG

- Have students research and/or interview their local county commissioners
- Have students research their own county's Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (available on your county's website) to determine how funding has been allocated locally. Have them prepare a brief written assignment in which they discuss the allocation decisions, possible reasons for the decisions, and risks and challenges associated with the particular decisions.

Multiple Intelligences Addressed

Linguistic
Body-kinesthetic
Interpersonal
Intrapersonal



Name: _____

County Commissioners and Independent Boards PowerPoint Notes Sheet

Directions: Follow along with the PowerPoint presentation and answer the following questions as appropriate. Be prepared to discuss your answers after the presentation.

1. Where do county commissioners derive their authority from? How is this different from colonial times?
2. What are 3 responsibilities of the board of county commissioners?
3. Aside from county commissioners, what are some other elected positions at the county level?
4. How many independent boards must a county have by law?
5. Give a brief description of the responsibilities of the following boards:
 - ABC Board
 - Board of Education
 - Board of Elections
 - Public Health
 - Mental Health Services
 - Social Services
6. Explain, in your own words, how authority is shared at the county level.

Answer Key

1. County Commissioners derive their authority from the state constitution. This differs from colonial times when “justices of the peace” appointed by the governor were given authority in local government.
2. Setting local property tax rate, adopting a budget, and passing local laws
3. Sheriff, Register of Deeds, Clerk of Court
4. 6
5. See PowerPoint



Simulation Roles

Commissioner Patrick:

You were elected as the “education commissioner,” since you are always arguing that the county budget must include plenty of money for local schools. Right now, you (and the other commissioners) know that several local schools’ test scores have been pretty low, at least partially due to outdated textbooks and because of poor teacher retention. Additionally, you know that a few of the schools are in desperate need of structural upgrades. Several local schools don’t even have wheelchair ramps. You feel like the community, as well as your fellow commissioners, know that schools need money first. You are up for re-election this year and know that if the schools do not get a sufficient allocation, you may not get re-elected. Even still, you are passionate that the schools get the money they need.

Commissioner St. George:

Your son is an extremely hard-working social worker in the county, who constantly complains about the lack of funding for foster care and social services. He has shared countless stories with you about how he and his fellow social services/foster-care colleagues are overworked due to the small number of social workers relative to the large workloads. Some of the stories involve child abuse and neglect, and quite frankly what you’ve heard has deeply saddened you. Further, many of the buildings for Social Services are old and dilapidated. Issues such as this can cause the system to fail, and it is the innocent children who suffer... Since you were elected county commissioner you have been an adamant supporter of the social services/foster-care system, because you feel that hundreds of children would receive much better care if there were additional funds allocated to foster care. For the sake of your own son and the many, many children he is dedicated to helping, you feel that the social service board should be sufficiently funded. You feel that other commissioners and the community feel the same way.

Commissioner Erskine:

For as long as you can remember, restaurants in the county have drawn visitors from miles around. In fact, several local restaurants have been written up in popular cooking magazines, leading to a surprising boom in vacationers and tourism. The county has benefited greatly from local food sales taxes from these restaurants. However, in the past 2 years there have been several instances of rats and roaches spotted in restaurants, and even news-worthy outbreaks of food poisoning due to bacteria found in meats served at several restaurants. The worst came a few months ago when a woman nearly died from eating rancid chicken, prompting national news media to spotlight the state of restaurants in the county. When speaking with employees at public health, you learned that the restaurant had received bad ratings in previous inspections and was nearly a year overdue for its annual inspection! Unfortunately, the restaurant inspection division has been unable to fill vacant positions due to low salaries, and as a result they are falling behind on their scheduled inspections. If the division could upgrade its pay scale, you believe the county would be able to fill positions and inspections would stay on schedule, meaning restaurant quality would return to its previous state.



Commissioner Faye:

You are extremely disappointed with the state of mental health care in the state, and particularly, in your county. There has been a recent rise in violent crime in your county, which you believe is strongly correlated with a lack of adequate mental health care. In recent years, mental health care has clearly not been adequately funded. The mental health clinic is dilapidated and severely understaffed. You are certain that with adequate funding, citizens in your county will be better able to seek the treatment they need, and crime will decrease.

Commissioner Williams:

A few years ago your county experienced an election fiasco not unlike what happened in a Florida county during the 2000 presidential election, where faulty equipment and poorly prepared election officials may have altered the course of history. You are an adamant believer in democracy and feel that elections are one of the greatest ways for “the people” to make their voice heard. You also know that little has been done in your county to correct some of the problems that occurred a few years ago with the elections equipment, and suspect that elections personnel would benefit tremendously from some additional training. You believe that the root of the problem has been historically low funding for the board of elections.

Public Health Department

The entire nation is currently experiencing a health crisis, and the effects are being felt strongly throughout the county. Until four years ago, the county health department provided free and low-cost health insurance for families with children, pregnant women, and disabled adults, who could not otherwise afford reliable healthcare. The health department also provided free shots and vaccinations for children and free checkups for local school sports teams. Not surprisingly, in the last four years, the county has become increasingly unhealthy. Young children are getting sick more often, and because so many are without vaccinations, sickness spreads very quickly. In fact, one county school last year reported that over a 2-week period, the average daily attendance was only around 60 percent due to an outbreak of a particularly bad strain of influenza. Another school had two confirmed cases of meningococcal meningitis, a highly contagious and potentially deadly communicable disease. Both students were ultimately treated, and while one recovered entirely, the other suffered severe nerve damage and is now almost entirely deaf. You feel that this is unconscionable, and that adequate funding could have prevented many of the health problems the county currently faces.

To make matters worse, the health department’s restaurant inspections staff has several vacant positions it cannot afford to fill with current funding levels. As a result of low staffing numbers, restaurants being inspected only half as much as they should be. Health scores have dropped dramatically, and the incidences of food poisoning and other sicknesses from eating local restaurant food are on the rise.

You feel that a healthy county is of the utmost importance. You have grown increasingly frustrated with every case of children missing school (or worse) because of sickness that probably could have been prevented if the health department had been adequately funded. After an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county public health department needs **\$25,000,000**.



Board of Education

Schools in the county have recently experienced a downward trend in End of Course test scores in virtually every discipline.

Teachers and parents alike believe this trend is due, at least in part, to county funding originally earmarked for education being spent on other public services in the past several years. As a result of this lack of funding, textbooks are outdated, the buildings are in need of major maintenance and repair, each school has only 10-15 computers (which are all at least 4 years old), and worse yet, the county cannot retain good teachers because of much more attractive offers in neighboring counties. In order for the county to continue receiving additional funding from the state for educational expenses, and for teachers (who are currently paid less than the state average) to receive pay bonuses and other incentives to stay in the county, this trend must be reversed. You know that there are other important public services in the county in need of funding just as much as the board of education, but you feel that every year public education is not adequately funded, thousands of kids in your county suffer as a result.

County commissioners determine how much funding to allocate to schools (only teacher salaries are provided through state funding; all other funding is determined locally). School boards then determine how to allocate these funds. After an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county school board needs **\$55,000,000**.

Department of Social Services

For a variety of reasons, social services in your county are in increasingly high demand. With the recent downturn in the economy, unemployment rates have doubled, rendering more and more families economically disadvantaged. Currently, the social services department runs a very successful “back-to-work” program for citizens who have had difficulty making ends meet. However, demand for the program is increasing far more quickly than the small staff is able to handle. You fear that if the department is not adequately funded, the effects of the downturn will linger far longer than necessary, leading to increased homelessness and possibly even crime as people grow desperate. The county also runs a small homeless shelter, which provides beds and two meals a day for those in need. Recently, the shelter has been forced to turn away people seeking a meal and a bed for the night. As a result, police have reported an increase in people breaking into vacant houses to “squat.” Last winter, two men who had been turned away from the homeless shelter because of a lack of adequate space were found frozen to death in a nearby county park.

Additionally, you are aware of some major problems in the foster-care system in the county, which you believe are due, at least in part, to an overburdened staff of social workers. Unfortunately, you suspect that some recent cases of child abuse might have been prevented if social workers had had more time to spend on individual cases. You feel that with a few additional positions social workers would be able to spread out their workloads in such a way as to more adequately ensure the safety of children in foster care and prevent burn-out.

You have grown increasingly frustrated with the state of the county’s social services department. You feel that adequate funding would not only help improve the plight of the county’s homeless population and the caseloads of social workers, but that it might even save lives. After an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county department of social services needs **\$40,000,000**.



Department of Mental Health

A recent study that focused on North Carolina counties found that two-thirds of people with serious depression or anxiety disorders were not getting appropriate treatment. Because of historically low funding levels for mental health in your county, you believe your county is on the higher end of those not receiving adequate treatment. The study also found a strong correlation between the prevalence of mental health problems and crime. While you cannot be sure of the extent of mental health problems in your county, you suspect that increasing crime levels in the county are linked with the lack of mental health services.

Your county's department of mental health also provides treatment for people with substance abuse problems and education for high school students about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. These programs have both been very successful. However, you are almost positive that without adequate funding for mental health services, these programs will have to be discontinued next year. In order to help treat people with mental illnesses and continue the county's substance abuse and education programs (which you feel will have a dramatic effect on lowering crime levels in your county), you have determined that the county department of mental health needs **\$25,000,000**.

Board of Elections

The elections equipment in your county is outdated and in dire need of replacement. In fact, a problem with the equipment last year resulted in a doubling in elections costs because once it was discovered that votes had not been correctly cast and counted, the voting process had to be completely redone. People grew frustrated and even outraged with having to go vote again, resulting in a decreased rate of participation that was absolutely abysmal. Other voting irregularities were also reported in previous years, which you believe has made many people lose their faith in the county's democratic system. This is a problem that must be addressed, and unfortunately, significantly more funding than the board of elections typically receives will be necessary.

Based on an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county's board of elections needs **\$1,500,000**.

OPTIONAL (for whole class version of activity, or for classes with over 24 students):

Alcoholic Beverage Control

Last year, four local high school students were killed in a car accident. The driver and all three passengers had been binge drinking at a party and made the unwise decision to get in a car. The decision cost them their lives. You recently learned that the incidence of binge drinking among high school students has increased dramatically since the ABC board in your county stopped their education programs in local high schools due to a lack of funding. You are convinced that education can greatly reduce binge drinking, and even save lives. A local division of MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), led by the mother of one of the car accident victims, has been working with you to put together a comprehensive alcohol education program for local schools. The problem is that the state's funding alone is not adequate to fund the sort of program you envision.

You know that there are other important public services in the county in need of funding just as much as the ABC board, but you also feel that if even one life is saved as a result of ABC education, the funding will be well worth it. Based on an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county's ABC board needs **\$8,000,000**.



Budget Allocation Decisions and Presentation Notes

Our County: _____

Total funding to allocate: \$100,000,000

Allocation decisions:

Public Education

Amount:

Reasoning:

Public Health

Amount:

Reasoning:

Mental Health

Amount:

Reasoning:

Social Services

Amount:

Reasoning:

Board of Elections

Amount:

Reasoning:

Some risks/challenges our county may face in light of our allocations decisions:

Sample EOC Questions

1. Which of the following replaced governor appointed “justices of the peace” with an elected board of county commissioners to represent citizens’ interests on a local level?
 - a. The NC Constitution of 1776
 - b. The NC Constitution of 1868
 - c. The NC Constitution of 1971
 - d. North Carolina General Statute 47-2
2. What elected body has general responsibility in North Carolina counties?
 - a. The board of commissioners
 - b. The NC General Assembly
 - c. The North Carolina Sheriffs’ Association
 - d. The Register of Deeds
3. Recently, a county commissioner’s sister became deathly ill after eating contaminated chicken at a local restaurant. After a brief investigation, it became clear that due to a lack of funding, restaurant inspections in the county were occurring far less frequently than scheduled. The restaurant the commissioner’s sister ate at was nearly a year overdue for their inspection. Based on this information, which county board or department is in need of increased funding?
 - a. The ABC board
 - b. Mental Health Services
 - c. Public Health Department
 - d. Department of Social Services
4. The social services independent board is responsible for which of the following?
 - a. Regulating restaurant cleanliness and providing shots to prevent illness
 - b. Registering voters and maintaining voter registration information
 - c. Providing treatment to substance abusers
 - d. Helping children through foster care, adoption, and counseling programs
5. The board of county commissioners sets local property tax rates, adopts the county budget, and passes ordinances and resolutions to establish county policies. Additionally, boards of commissioners are responsible for:
 - a. Setting departmental policies for independent boards
 - b. Allocating funding to independent boards and approving independent board budgets
 - c. Enforcing the laws of the county
 - d. Maintaining records of real estate ownership and other vital records
6. Before children can begin attending public school, they must get a series of shots and vaccinations which are typically available for free or for a reduced fee through the county government. Which of the following county boards or departments provides these services?
 - a. Public Health Department
 - b. Mental Health Services
 - c. Board of Education
 - d. Department of Social Services

7. The federal food stamp program is administered at the county level. Which independent county board is responsible for administering the program?
 - a. The ABC board
 - b. Mental Health Services
 - c. Public Health Department
 - d. Department of Social Services

8. A county commissioner and her husband recently adopted a child. Through this experience of adoption, the commissioner learned of numerous problems in the foster-care system. She found that social workers are overworked, and many of the buildings they work in are old and terrible. As a result, she has made it her mission as a commissioner to see to it that adequate funding is allocated to reduce the workload of social workers and to provide much needed maintenance to their buildings and office spaces. Which board would this county commissioner most likely attempt to allocate relatively more funding for?
 - a. Department of Social Services
 - b. Mental Health Services
 - c. The Adoption Board
 - d. Board of Education

9. Unlike a city or town governing board, the board of county commissioners shares authority for setting county policy with other officials, some of which are also elected. Which of the following is an example of an elected county position?
 - a. Director of Mental Health Services
 - b. The Clerk of Court
 - c. ABC Manager
 - d. Director of Social Services



Sample EOC Questions Key

1. B
2. A
3. C
4. D
5. B
6. A
7. D
8. A
9. B

