OBSERVING YOUR COMMUNITY

YEP! Youth Engagement Planning is a non-profit organization focused on educating young people in grades K-12 by introducing them to urban planning and civic engagement, and creating opportunities for youth to have meaningful participation in advocating for change in their communities and the built environment.

Teacher Instructions

Facilitators: At least 2
Ideal Age Range: K-12 youth
Length of Time: 20-40 min depending on engagement level

Supplies:
- Post-it notes: 6 notes per student
- Pens or markers
- 3 foam boards
  1. Large-scale map
  2. “THINGS WE'RE PROUD OF IN OUR COMMUNITY”
  3. “THINGS IN OUR COMMUNITY THAT COULD BE BETTER”

- 3 easels for holding the foam boards, or foam boards could be mounted to the wall
- Push Pins
- Adhesive spray for mounting maps on foam core
- Large-scale printed color map of broad community area. The size of the map should be around 16-18” x 22-24”
- Optional: Print or draw headings of titles of boards. Headings should be accompanied with a smiling face and an unsmiling face to make the categories more visually clear, especially for younger audiences.

OBJECTIVE

Most basically, this activity is about building geographic awareness. After completing the exercise, students will be able to locate their home and school within a larger geographic area.

Along the way, students will consider which features of their community (parks, retail stores, municipal buildings, other infrastructure) make their community unique. During the exercise, students identify what is special about their community, as well as areas of potential improvement that they themselves could be involved in.

The broader goal of this activity is to encourage students to actively observe their communities and then begin to view themselves as active agents for positive change within those communities.

Building geographic awareness and then inviting assessment are intentionally linked, since the first is a necessary preliminary activity for making the second more concrete.

PRELIMINARY SET-UP

The large-scale color map needs to be ordered for printing around a week ahead of time. Assume more time if using a printing service.

Immediately prior to the activity, the map needs to be mounted to one of the pieces of foam core. Make sure to leave a border on the foam core around the map so that students who live further out can at least indicate the direction in which they live.

Headings also need to be either mounted or drawn onto the other two pieces of foam core. (See explanation in the Supplies list)

Place the mounted map on an easel at the front, center of the activity area. Place the “THINGS WE'RE PROUD OF IN OUR COMMUNITY” board on an easel to one side of the activity area and the “THINGS IN OUR COMMUNITY THAT COULD BE BETTER” board on an easel on the opposite side of the activity area.

Break apart the post-it notes ahead of time, and pre-distribute them, along with the pens or markers, around the table area.

Pick which color(s) of pins will be used for homes (e.g. red) and which color(s) of pins will be used for other community buildings (e.g. orange and yellow). If you want to get really fancy, you can color code the different types of buildings (e.g. yellow for school, orange for library, etc.).
INTRODUCTION: “WHERE DO YOU LIVE?”
1. Ask the students to form two lines, one behind each of the two main facilitators who should be positioned near the mounted map.
2. As each student reaches the facilitator, ask them to identify where they live with pins on the map. For a more attractive final result, be sure to use a consistent.
3. With younger students, the facilitators can place the pins for them while the student points and touches the map.
4. For students who live outside the map area, just place their pin in the 2-3” border, at least indicating the correct direction of their home.

“THERE’S MORE TO A COMMUNITY THAN HOUSES, THOUGH!”
1. Ask the students to return to their seats after they’ve placed their homes on the map. (With younger audiences, call out “How quickly can everyone get seated?”)
2. After everyone is reseated, ask them to brainstorm what buildings and structures signal that they are in their community. Using a different color of pin than was used for the homes, identify 5-6 of these on the map, especially focusing on any locations that multiple students seem to agree are important.
3. If the students have trouble understanding what you’re asking for, provide a few examples of your own in narrative form. (“Even if I fall asleep on the car ride home, I know that I’m close to home if I open my eyes and see…” / “Lots of communities have a school, but my library is special to me and my community.”)

IMAGINING IMPROVEMENTS TO OUR COMMUNITY
1. Draw their attention to the post-it notes and markers already on their tables.
2. Ask them to write down 1-3 things that they are particularly proud of in their community, and indicate their pride by drawing a smiling face on each of those post-its.
3. Also ask them to write down 1-3 things that could be better, and identify each of these with a non-smiling face.
4. Collect their post-its from them as they complete them and post them on the appropriate boards. There needs to be a hard time cut-off for this. Don’t be shy about doing a ten-second countdown. (“10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1… Put down your markers!”)

CONCLUSION: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Ask the students to raise their hands and only call on 1 of them: “Comparing these two boards, was it easier for us to identify things we’re proud of, or things that could be better?” Follow up: If they had trouble coming up with examples for either category, encourage them to really look around them when walking, biking, or riding home that day.
2. Ask the students to raise their hands and only call on 1 of them: “Did the two categories overlap at all?” (You could be really proud of your park, but still think it needs improvement.)
3. Ask the students to raise their hands and call on 2-3 of them: “Why is it important to identify and discuss what you’re proud of, not just the things that need improvement?”
4. Ask the students to raise their hands and call on 2-3 of them: Younger audience: “Can only adults make things better?” / Older audience: “What is the role of younger people in improving their community? How can you plan to make a difference?”

WHAT DO PLANNERS DO?
An urban planner is a professional who works to enhance the quality of life. A planner is a person who helps shape the design and form of a city or place, from buildings to roads, and parks and more. Planners observe and analyze the communities around them and with the help of community members, make recommendations to policy makers for improvements.