County Government Works:
_An Initiative to Raise Awareness and Understanding of Counties_

**Key Elements for Establishing a Student Government Day**

**Calumet County, Wisconsin**

**Student Government Day Program**

Michelle Gormican Thompson
Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA)
michelle@thompson-communications.com
608.577.9405

- **What is the project that you developed?**

Every March for the past 40 years, the Calumet County American Legion Council, in partnership with Calumet County and all the school districts in the county, sponsor a “Student Government Day.” While there is one day at the courthouse, there are weeks of work in the schools leading up to the actual event educating students on all aspects of county government. This includes holding elections in the classrooms for county constitutional officers and researching and discussing mock resolutions on topics such as texting and driving or no smoking ordinances.

On the actual “Student Government Day,” the students work with county board supervisors who have volunteered to participate and go before a county committee to discuss the resolutions, learn about how the committee process works and even elect a chair and secretary of the committee.

Those county board volunteers then take the student through the committee process and the students discuss the resolutions and take their own action. After that happens, the county board then sets up a county board format on that day and the students, with the help of the supervisors, bring the resolutions forward, discuss them and then vote on them.

Once the county board meeting is over, students then visit the offices of the constitutional officers and have a lunch with county board members, American Legion officials and student advisors. In the afternoon, the students then sit in on a court session, where they learn about the role of counties in operating the state’s court system, the process of a case going through the court and also as a deterrent, as some of the cases involve speeding or drunk driving.

- **Who is the target audience of the project?**
The target audience is high school juniors and seniors, as well as international exchange students. Each year, approximately 50 students participate in this program, as well as faculty advisors, county board supervisors and America Legion representatives.

- **What key steps were taken to accomplish the project?**
The American Legion works closely with the Calumet County clerk to coordinate the program. This includes scheduling the “Student Government Day” activities and logistics. The American Legion representatives also work with teachers to set up the program.

- **Of these key steps, which were most important to its success?**
The project is successful because there is open communication between the American Legion, Calumet County and the schools. In addition, the program is held every year at the exact same time and location, so county and school staff, as well as students, plan for it. It has been successful because it gets students learning about county government in the classroom, then gives them an opportunity to put what they’ve learned into action before a real county board. They are given the unique opportunity to see how government works first hand.

- **If you are aware of similar projects, what characteristics make this project stand out?**

- **What did the project cost to accomplish (including staff time)? Are there ongoing expenses?**
While there is no exact quantifiable figure, the American Legion absorbs the cost of the lunch and staff time is minimal other than the actual day of the event. The county staff, such as the clerk, is already working at the board meeting the actual day of the event. Funding is always a concern for the event as school districts face their own funding and staff challenges, but it is the hope the valuable program continues on for many more years.

- **If others attempt to accomplish a similar project, what missteps would you advise them to avoid?**
According to Calumet County Board Supervisor and Wisconsin Counties Association Immediate Past President Alice Connors, every year they are struck with how little students know about county government and its role in their lives. She believes this program has been so successful because the program stays the same every year as far as the educational process and venue. By taking the time to develop the curriculum and have someone from the county board speak with them, it has helped to make the experience more enriching. In early years, the event and format moved around some and by having a consistent program in recent years, it makes the entire day more successful.

- **To determine the eventual success of a project, can you please recommend performance measures that would help assess the quality of the project’s outcome?**
Each year, approximately 50 students participate and it is helpful to follow up with a survey as to what they enjoyed and learned. The partnership between the county, school districts and American Legion is what makes this event happen every year and they are continually tweaking the process to make it better every year.
• Are you willing to help other counties take on similar projects by providing personal advice by telephone or email? If so, how may you be contacted?
Yes, please contact Calumet County Board Supervisor and Wisconsin Counties Association Immediate Past President Alice Connors. She has been a strong advocate of educating and engaging youth during her years of county service, as well as during her term as the 2009-2010 WCA president. “Students need to be educated on the role of government, get involved and ultimately make their community a better place,” she said. “They are our future.”

Supervisor Connors can be reached at mailto:acnrs@frontiernet.net.