

# CIVICS IN THE CLASSROOM

by Paul Lorentzen

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This second article in the "Civics in the Classroom" series is devoted to what we mean when we talk about "the government" -- for if civics is government based on citizenship (as we said in the first article), it seems essential that we have some common conception of the term "government."

"The administration and control of public policy in a political unit" and "the office, function or authority of a governing body" are two definitions found in the dictionary. What makes understanding what people are referring to in our country difficult when they say "the government" is the fact that in 1789 we purposefully opted for and hence operate on the political principle of federalism: are we talking about local or state or national/federal government--or all three--when saying "the government" this, "the government" that?

This distinction matters not only substantively, but is also significant when considering public sector (government) employment opportunities. And the underlying aim of this series of articles is to help and encourage young persons to consider the public sector when thinking of possible work areas.

Here there is no need to go into the historical reasons for the Founding Fathers adopting a federal form of government, other than to say it made eminent sense as the 13 colonies under the articles of Confederation would not have ratified the Constitution without this basic design. The most important factor for us is to understand that little about our political system can be discussed meaningfully unless the distinction between the national and state (and hence

local) governments is kept in mind. As distinguished from most other democratic countries in the world, we do *not* operate under one centralized government. So what exactly is being referred to when we in common parlance say "the government"?

Say you are considering work having to do with the environment, or education, or crime prevention, or commerce--or whatever? These are some typical fields in which both the public and the private sectors have important roles. In thinking about entering any one of them, you will want to understand how public sector (government) jobs and career opportunities are affected by our federal system. As a general rule and in summary fashion, the distinctive functional areas of the three governmental levels are:

- Performance of day-to-day operations and provision of services--"where the rubber hits the road"--characterizes local government.

- While some operational tasks are performed by state government agencies, the more significant state role is to provide standards/regulations/oversight for local government operations and to ensure required implementation of federal laws/regulations.

- In addition to performing such functions as national defense and for-

eign affairs, as provided by the Constitution, the national/federal government is involved in almost every societal function--primarily in setting and enforcing nationwide/uniform standards/regulations, but also in performing some actual operations (e.g. coinage, tax collection, postal service, flight control, and certain law enforcement operations).

The great majority of public sector jobs exist at the state and local government levels--think of school, police and fire, business/professional licensing, transportation, housing/construction operations and systems. If your proclivity is to perform substantive operational tasks providing fairly visible/tangible results--the many million of state/local government jobs in these and many other fields offer work opportunities.

At the national/federal government level, over half of the some four million jobs are devoted to national defense, either in the uniformed services or the civilian ranks. Every occupation and trade is found in the other federal departments and agencies, with professional and technical positions far outnumbering those of the proverbial "government clerk." An attraction at this level is the potential opportunity to be involved in projects that have nationwide policy or operational impact--but with generally long-delayed and less tangible results.

For young persons not to explore this huge public sector employment market when jobs and career fields are being considered makes little sense.

*(Professor Lorentzen will be contributing a monthly column)*