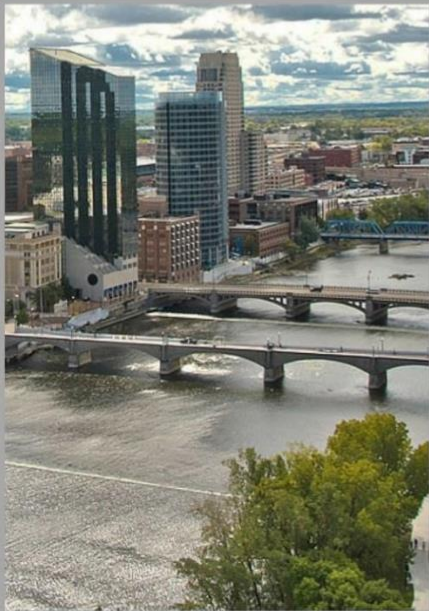




# Sidewalks to Skylines

Empowering the Next Generation of Community Planners

A student engagement toolkit



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Questions about the toolkit may be directed the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development at 517-353-9555.

## Acknowledgments

This toolkit was first published in 2018 and was made possible by the collaborative efforts of the Michigan State University Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED), the Michigan State University Multicultural Apprenticeship Program, the MSU CCED Planning Outreach Advisory Committee and the MSU Museum. The team also sought advice and guidance from the Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) Social Justice and Equity committee.

In 2026 a revised edition was produced to incorporate changes in accessible technology and links to external resources. Much of the original toolkit produced by Ms. Madison Sorsen who served as CCED Senior Research Assistant and CCED Director, Rex LaMore Ph.D. has been retained. This update was curated by Mr. Jackson Schmaltz, CCED Research Assistant.

We thank the leadership of past partners who have helped us create this toolkit and hope that this updated edition will assist professional planners and perspective planners in building more just and sustainable communities in the 21st Century.

Editors:

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Jackson Schmaltz

## Executive Summary

This toolkit is designed to serve as a tool that planners can use to engage with high school and middle school students about planning as a profession. This toolkit outlines an easy-to-follow process designed to introduce students to planning and provide young people with the opportunity to give feedback to professional planners on local planning issues they have identified. Planning is defined as “the process by which we attempt to shape the future” (Brooks, 2002). Public planning professionals in democratic societies help officials anticipate the future, facilitate needed infrastructure and economic development, in addition to brainstorming sustainable strategies to make communities livable (Brooks 2002).

This toolkit has five specific learning outcomes:

1. Expose students to planning as a career, specifically land use planning
2. Expose students to different elements of planning (process, products, and skills)
3. Connect students to local and regional planners and explore planning as a profession
4. Identify planning issues in communities
5. Collect student generated images of “planning” across Michigan communities

This toolkit will take planners through a step-by-step process articulating how to achieve these learning outcomes. By exposing young students to planning, we hope to raise awareness of planning as a profession and attract prospective planners to any of Michigan’s accredited planning programs.

## Step 1: overview

This is an overview of the steps necessary to implement this project. We encourage planners to review the steps and modify as it pertains in the community. Each step will be expanded upon in the proceeding pages.

**Step 1:** Local planners contact local high school or middle school.

**Step 2:** Planners visit school and educate students on planning or provide teacher(s) with a planning-based lesson plan.

**Step 3:** Introduce the photographic short assignment

**Step 4:** Collect the images captured by students and assemble them into a collage. Print and/or project the collage during the follow presentation with students.

**Step 5:** Present to the selected school and discuss the images.

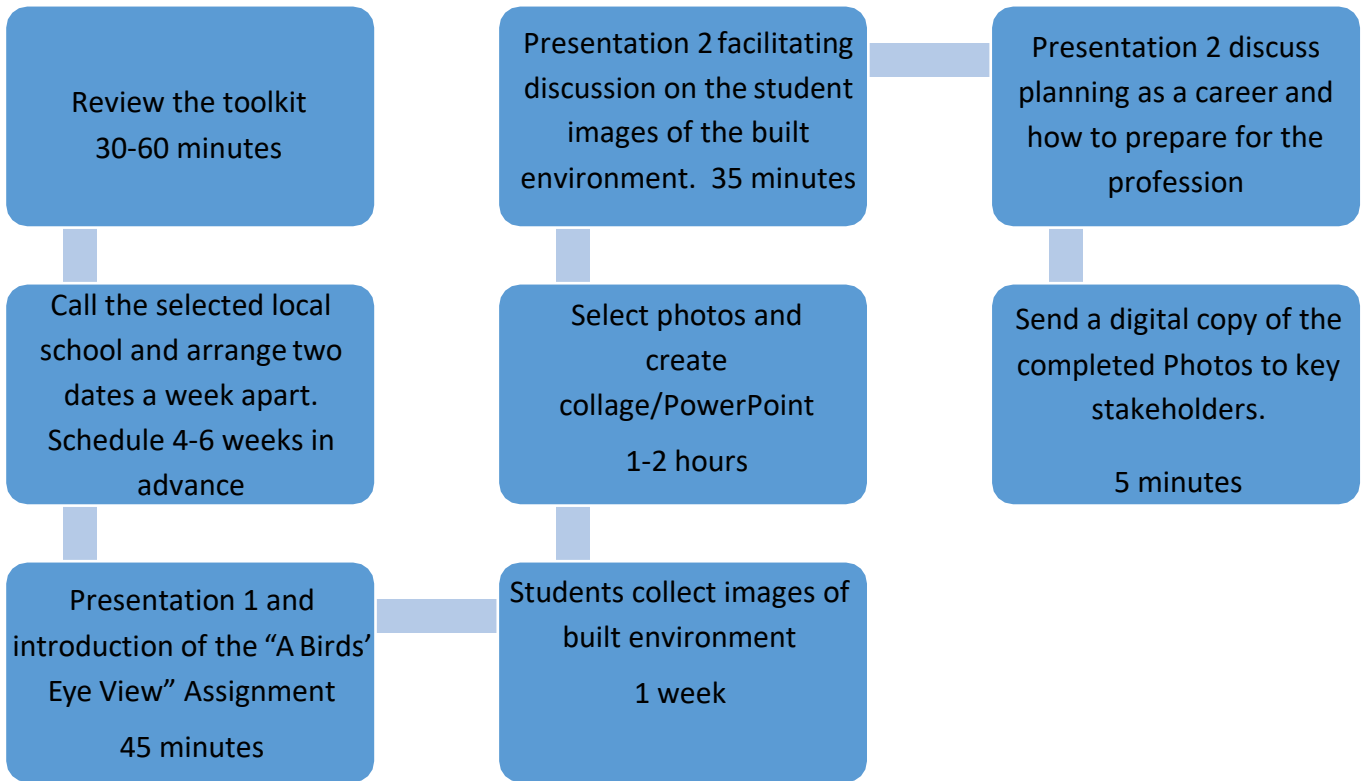
**Step 6:** Discuss the planning profession and ways to prepare yourself for a career in planning

**Step 7:** Take information from the images to plan community improvement projects.

**Step 8:** Share your collage with the MSU CCED, Michigan Association of Planning, selected school(s) and other stakeholders.

This is a collaborative effort between the local planner, high school and/or middle school teachers as well as students. We encourage you to supply the toolkit to your partners.

## Timeline



## Step1: Contacting your local school

For planners in areas where there are more than one school, we encourage you to start with the school which best represent your region's diversity. You may also consider choosing a school where you believe students will be the most receptive to this topic. If it is not possible to arrange the project with a high school, we recommend getting in touch with its corresponding middle school. Due to the flexibility of middle school curricula compared to high school curricula, getting into a middle school classroom may be easier compared to a high school classroom. The project is simple and well within the capacity of middle school students. This activity would also fit well into an after-school program if the middle school and/or high school had one available. If you are not sure what schools are in your region, search for your [Michigan School District](#) using the school district maps.

A quick Google search using the school's name should bring up the school's website. Typically, contact information for the school's staff will be on the left-hand side of the screen. Information can also be found with some navigating using the tabs at the top of the site or the search bar. If you have personal professional contacts to help pave the way, use them. Getting in the door, will be the hardest part of the project.

- First, call the building and introduce yourself; then ask to be transferred to the curriculum director and/or school principal.
- Explain the project briefly using the executive summary on page 3. Afterward, ask the curriculum director and/or school principal if a member of the planning department can present to students. The presentation will include a discussion on planning's role in shaping communities and planning as a career. Connecting to the teachers whose class (or classes) you'll speak to is key. Request the contact information of teachers interested in project. This will connect you with them directly.
  - **Tip:** The teachers with the following subjects are most likely to be interested: government, history, economics, business and social science
- Connect with the teachers by arranging **two** dates to give the presentations. Preferably one before the photographic short assignment and one after. Supply the teacher with this guidebook. More detailed suggestions on presentation material will be discuss on pages 11 and 16.
  - Presentation 1: discuss the definition of planning, what a planner does, the importance of planning, how you can become a planner and hand out the photo assignment.
  - Presentation 2: discuss the planning elements in the collage/PowerPoint you created out of the images captured by students, and how to pursue it as a career.

## Step 2: Presentation One

The presentation should take 30-45 minutes. Begin by introducing yourself and describe how your interest in planning came about. Educate students on the depth of urban management and your current role within it. It may be helpful to explain planning by relating it to concepts that students are already familiar with. You could ask students about the game *City Skylines 2* and discuss how building cities in the game is an example of urban planning.

When teaching students about planning, using an interactive method to engage them during the presentation is incredibly important. If students are not engaging with the presentation, they are most likely not listening and not interested. To keep the students' attention consider one of the following methods:

1. **Play a planning game:** They are interesting and really help with understanding the topic. If capacity for everyone to play individually isn't feasible have the students team up into groups. The games should be geared toward exploration of city management, poor planning and its community effects, and lack of resources in planning.
  - a) Micropolis <https://www.games-db.com/play/micropolis/>
  - b) Building Rush <https://www.coolmathgames.com/0-building-rush>
2. **Slideshow presentation:** Discuss the roles and responsibilities of planners as well as the roles and responsibilities of your agency. Remember to use language that high schoolers are comfortable with and keep their interest. If you choose this approach, have prompting questions that keep students involved and interactive with the presentation.
3. **Video:** Show a video providing examples of planning. This allows mixed presentation techniques with less lecturing. Avoid videos longer than 4 minutes long because students will get bored. Have prompting questions used to discuss the video. It might be useful to combine the PowerPoint with the video and prompting questions. This "[What is urban planning video](#)" would be a good video to use.

Now that students have an introduction to planning and how you became a planner, you can introduce the assignment. Using their phones students will be asked to take pictures of planning aspects in their communities and send them to their teacher specified in step 2. Remind them you will be back to discuss this with them later.

Finally, leave copies of American Planning Association flyers with the school to pass out to all students that are interested in planning.

### Step 3: Picture Assignment

Assign “A Bird’s Eye View of Planning”. Students will take photos of the built environment in their community. Photos should capture opportunities and challenges of the built environment. Suggest that each student take 2-4 pictures. Provide an example or a list of specific planning aspects you want the students to look at, like; residency, roads, parks, places In your community you can see or maybe want change.

Have the students send their pictures to the teacher. It is suggested that the teacher use email, but if they have an easier method they would prefer to use to collect the pictures from the students such as PowerPoint, Google Slides, or other easy access general education resources. Once you have received the pictures send the pictures to the Planner.

Once the teacher sends the pictures, the planner should create a collage to go back to the class and present the pictures.\*

\*See step 4

## Step 4: Create the Photo Collage\*

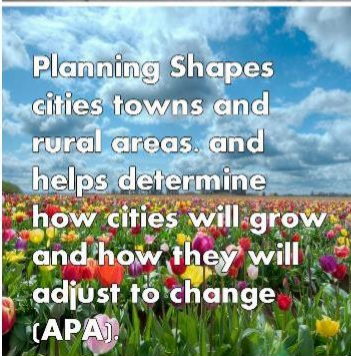
\*Skip to step 5 if you are using PowerPoint and do not intend to create a collage.

Collected student photos will be combined into a collage of the community. When students send their photos, the planner can save the photos to a computer. Select the photo you wish to use by right hand clicking on “save image as.” Those photos can be uploaded into a collage maker that will piece the photos together. You can choose the common, or interesting issues and opportunities highlighted in their community through the photos. When all the photos are downloaded or saved onto the planner’s computer, upload selected photos into the collage maker. We have a few suggested collage makers listed below. After the collage is created, present the collage to the students and discuss planning in regard to the pictures.

Options for photo apps:

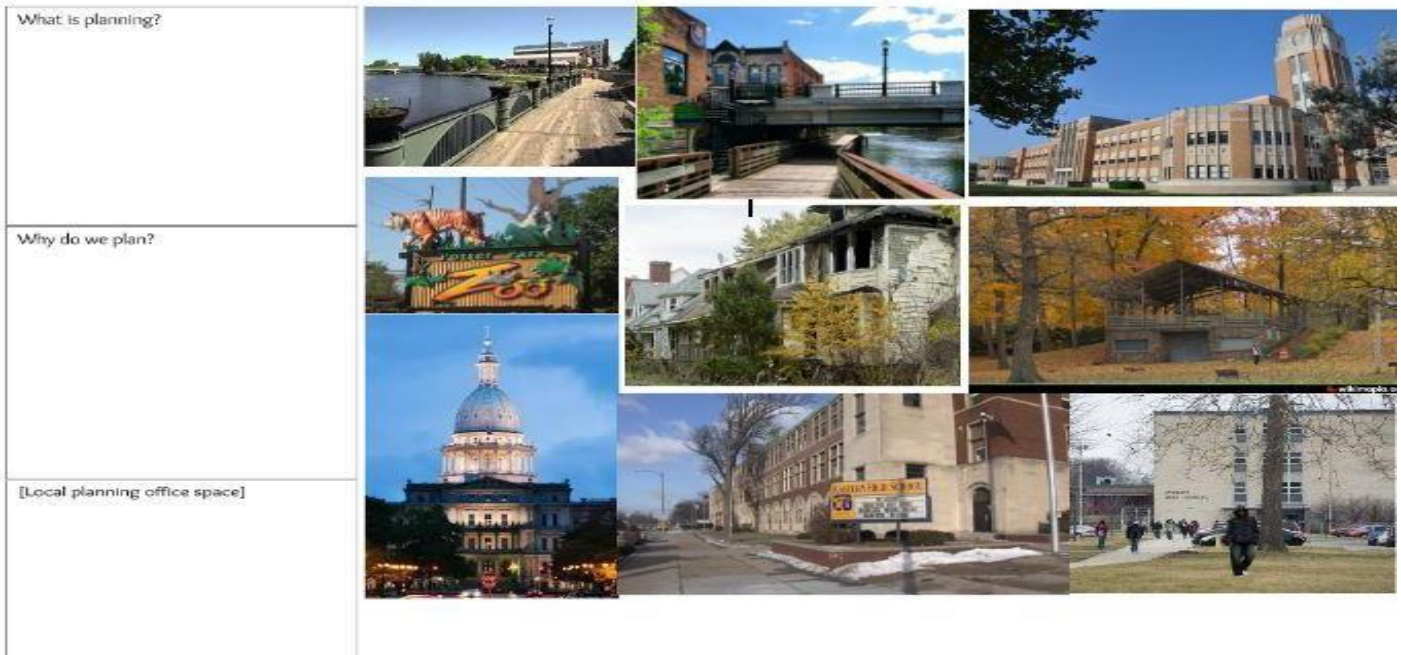
- [Be Funky Collage Maker](#)

A Bird's eye view of Lansing, MI 2017



- Pieced together using a [google document](#)

## Planning Better Communities



### **Tip**

When selecting photos to place in the collage, think about what the students identified are relevant to planning issues in their community. Use the photos to help students learn about planning in regards to the challenges the community faces and steps that may already be in motion to address issues that they have identified.

After importing the selected photos, look for a template with the number of photo spaces you would like to include. We have created sample collages for you to consider. We suggest including contacts to the Accredited Planning Schools in Michigan to make students aware of these professional programs.

## Step 5: Presentation 2

Present to the students a second time, discussing the selected photos along with the “issues and opportunities” they presented in their community. **Note:** The collage or PowerPoint may be printed or projected depending on preference/capacity.

Ask students questions about the pictures in the collage.

- What is this?
- How is this used?
- How could this usage be improved?
- What is your reaction when you see this? (Include the input of planner)
- What inspired you to take the picture?
- Does this image represent good planning or poor planning? Why?

Discuss what the pictures represent and the ability/inability of planning as a solution in relation to the issues those images identified.

## Step 6: The Planning Profession

Discuss your path to the planning profession, training and how students can prepare themselves to become professional planners. Mention the programs at accredited planning schools in Michigan. To give students other avenues to explore planning, planners could offer students a chance to attend or visit a planning event or meeting in the community. Try to encourage students to ask questions about planning, your experience, and the accredited programs. Lastly, remember to thank whoever in the school assisted with the project. (the teachers, students, and principal) handwritten thank you cards, or electronic thank you emails would likely be appreciated.

## Step 7: What Now?

Choose a group of students who you believe contributed to the activity or are very interested in the career of planning and invite them to attend a local community event and possibly present their collage, in whichever selected medium, to your planning commission.

With this collage/PowerPoint you could: reach out to your other key stakeholders such as public advisory/city council or other interested people.

Should the student(s) wish to learn more about planning as a profession, here are relevant links to opportunities in Michigan:

List of universities in Michigan with accredited planning programs:

- [Michigan State University](#)
- [Eastern Michigan University](#)
- [Wayne State University](#)
- [University of Michigan](#)

Other related institutions

- [Central Michigan University](#)
- [Western Michigan University](#)

## Step 8: Sharing Data

To help build a broad understanding of the interest and concerns of young people in planning, please consider sending a digital copy of the completed photo collage/PowerPoint to the teacher you engaged with, the Michigan Association of Planning ([info@planningmi.org](mailto:info@planningmi.org)), and the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development ([ced@msu.edu](mailto:ced@msu.edu)). Explain where and when the event was held with highlights of what was discussed.

## Conclusion

As professionals in the planning community we recognize that creating viable sustainable communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require an informed and engaged citizenry representing a broad cross section of residents. It is our hope, that increasing the exposure of young adults to planning that we can improve the quality of life in our communities and perhaps attract students, from diverse geographical and racial backgrounds into the planning profession.

We hope that you will see this toolkit as a guide to connecting with the youth within your community and help to show them planning and how it relates to daily life. We hope this can help to prepare you to present these ideas, and feel free to put your own interpretations into these presentations.

Thank you for using this toolkit and helping us reach out to the leaders of tomorrow!

## Bibliography:

Brooks, M. (2013). *Planning Theory for Practitioners*. Lanham: American Planning Association.

*What is Planning?*. (2017) (pp. 1-2). Chicago. Retrieved from  
<https://www.planning.org/media/document/9119032/>