

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

What's it like to be a Kid Governor?

March 20, 2026

Jane 00:20

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you, and we find interesting people to answer them. A lot of the time those experts are adults, but as we've learned in the 10 years we've been making But Why, you all are experts in your own rights. Our guests today are governors. They're finding ways to learn about civics and government and make their home states better places all while they're in the fifth grade.

Jane 00:52

Now in the United States, voters in each state elect a governor who then serves a two or four year term as the top government official in that state, governors get to approve or veto bills for new laws sent to them by that state's legislative branch, and they run the day to day business of the state, and they're adults. If that sounds like something you'd like to do, maybe you'll get into politics when you get older. In a few places, you don't have to wait. Five states participate in a civics education program called Kid Governor. Fifth graders in those states develop political platforms focusing on an issue they care about. Participating schools will vote for one student that they want to put forward for statewide candidacy. Seven students across the state are nominated as final candidates. They create campaign videos about the issue they want to focus on and why kids should vote for them. And then students around the state get to choose. The six finalists who are not elected governor get to serve in the eventual kid governor's cabinet. The five states with Kid Governors are Connecticut, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Vermont.

Jane 02:01

Since we live in Vermont, one of the states that now has a kid governor, we thought we'd check out what it's all about. And since Melody and I both spent a lot of our careers working in news as hosts, reporters, editors and producers, we thought it would be fun to host a kid press conference where the Kid Governor and cabinet could answer questions from kid reporters. Today on the episode, we're going to hear a little bit from that kid press conference and what it's like to be the Kid Governor of Vermont or a member of the cabinet. And we'll also hear from Kid Governors in Connecticut and Nebraska.

Jane 02:36

When we hosted our kid press conference, I started by asking the 100 or so people in the room if they'd ever watched or listened to a press conference before some of them raised their hands. Then I asked if they ever thought about becoming politicians at some point. Again, a smattering of hands went up. Fewer hands were raised when I asked who wanted to become a reporter, which was a little sad for

me, but not all that surprising, to be honest. But I wanted to see if there was something everyone in the room might agree on.

Jane 03:08

All right, one more question, anyone here think it's important to know what's going on in your community, in your state, in your country, around the world, what the big issues are and what the leaders who have power are doing to address the issues. Anyone here think that's important? Food. I was worried not all the hands would go up, and just about all the hands went up. You are in the right place today.

Jane 03:35

Before we got to the kid governor, I then invited Vermont's Secretary of State up to the podium. The Secretary of State in each state is in charge of making sure elections run smoothly and fairly, and for the states participating in the Kid Governor program, it's the Secretary of State who runs it. Here's Vermont's Secretary of State, Sarah Copeland Hanzas.

Sarah 03:57

I am so excited that all of you are here. I'm excited that you get to hear from the Kid Governor and her cabinet, and I'm excited that you get to ask them questions too, because one of the most important things about living in a democracy is that we get to ask our leaders questions, and we get to tell them ideas that we have. Have you ever thought about or what would you think about doing this instead of that? That is our job as citizens in a democracy, is to ask our leaders questions. And I think it's so exciting that we are here today with the But Why podcast and the whole team from Vermont Public, thank you all for being here. I want to tell you just a few little snippets about the Kid Governor program. We had over a thousand fifth graders this year participate in the Kid Governor program. 47 schools across the state, and over 20 students ran for Kid Governor, including some of the kids in the audience today. We like this program because it does more than just hold a mock election. It actually teaches kids how to put together a platform, how to put forward an idea of something that they want to fix in the world. And the exciting thing is, is that our office gets to work with this fabulous group of cabinet and governor, and we get to help try to implement some of their ideas. So remember, in a democracy, it is our job to hold our leaders accountable for the things that we think are important. So I'm looking forward to hearing your questions today and team, Kid Governor and cabinet, I'm looking forward to hearing your answers. Thank you so much for being here.

Jane 05:40

Because this event was a press conference, and all the people in the audience were the press, I wanted to make sure we all understood the role of the press, reporters and other journalists who help make sure you know what's going on in the world, and who ask tough questions of politicians. So I invited my friend and colleague Bob Kinzel to give us some tips, Bob is one of our political reporters here at Vermont Public where But Why is made, and he's been covering governors since the 1970s.

Bob 06:09

I've covered Vermont politics for pretty much my adult life, and one of the reasons I enjoyed it so much, and I still enjoy it, is the access that we have to public officials and being able to ask them questions.

It's really quite remarkable in Vermont, and it's something that I really enjoy. And I also have the feeling that all of you who are here today, you're here because you care, otherwise you wouldn't be here, so I think that's a great sign for the future.

Jane 06:38

All right, so Bob, what is the point of a press conference. What is a press conference designed to do?

Bob 06:43

There are two different types of press conferences. One might be the Secretary of State might hold a press conference to talk about a ballot initiative, so it's very narrowly focused on that particular issue. Another one might be the governor's weekly press conference. Now the week. It's an incredible tradition in Vermont that the governor holds a weekly press conference and the governor will come in. Governor Scott this week came in yesterday, talked about his housing initiative, and then said, okay, I'll take questions from the floor. This does not happen in many other states that it's a wide open press conference. You can talk about anything.

Jane 07:24

So often the politician or the person who calls a press conference has something that they want to say, something they want to get out to the public through the press. And then often they do take questions. What do the reporters who are the attendees at a press conference? What are they trying to get out of it?

Bob 07:42

I think we're trying to understand what the issue is. And I'll take the example with the Secretary of State of a ballot initiative. She might be talking about mail in balloting, and we allow mail in ballots 45 days before an election. And so we're trying to understand what is the issue that the Secretary of State trying to tell us about? And then you may have some questions about it. Well, how is this going to work? What's the cost of this? Why do you think this is a good idea? Sometimes the best questions are the simplest ones of just, why do you think this is a good idea, and to be able to get a response in that way. Now, sometimes people don't answer questions, and then we ask the question again.

Jane 08:27

What do you do after the press conference? Because you've gotten the information that you want, but your job isn't done?

Bob 08:34

No, my job is just started. So I go back to our office here in Montpelier, and I think about, what is the story here? What is what we'll call the lead of this story, and then start to fill in the blanks as we go along and tell the story as best as I can do.

Jane 08:52

You have advice for the kid reporters in our audience today of how they might think about framing a question, or what they might ask, the kinds of things

Bob 09:00

I would say, keep your questions simple. Don't piggyback them. Don't say, Well, I'd like to know this and what about that? And while you're at it, let's talk about this. So make your first question just very concise. What is it that you want to know? Ask that question and then listen to the answer.

Jane 09:22

Well, this was really helpful, Bob. Thank you very much for helping us understand what our job is here as the people who are watching the press conference, and thank you for your reporting.

Bob 09:32

Oh, thank you.

Jane 09:36

At this point, Vermont's Kid Governor and her cabinet joined us on the stage. So we have coming up today to speak with us. Kid Governor Roslyn Fortin of Highgate, come on up, Rosalyn.

Roslyn 09:53

Hi. My name is Roslyn, and I'm Vermont's Kid.Governor. I'm from Highgate, Vermont and attend Highgate Elementary School. My platform is homelessness. I chose homelessness because everyone deserves a safe place to live, and I want to help bring awareness and hope to people who need it. And did you know that Vermont is the fourth highest in the country for homelessness? I have also learned that working together is really important in projects like these, because you need lots of ideas. Hear others' ideas, and you need lots of teamwork, too. Thank you.

Roslyn 10:26

In addition to Roslyn, there are six cabinet members who join her in making their voices heard. Here's just a tiny bit about what each of them is focused on.

Gaelen 10:35

I'm Gaelen McNaughton. I attend Wethersfield School. My platform is improving school lunches, because I always hear kids complaining about the taste and nutrition.

Karin 10:47

My name is Karin Ashley. My platform is mental health. And I chose mental health because I used to live in Japan and in Japan, like you can like, trust people, but when I came to America, our school had to do safety drills, and you don't have to do those in Japan, and I was thinking that the main reason, usually, for people like intruding schools is when they were little, they didn't have a good time at school, so I decided to make that my issue.

Lincoln 11:25

Hello. My name is Lincoln Ratta. I go to Lincoln Community School. I currently live in Lincoln, Vermont, but I was born in Highgate. My platform is healthcare accessibility. Three percent of people in Vermont are uninsured, or about 22,000 people. Vermont has a shortage of doctors, dentists, nurses and other

medical professionals. Also, since we live in such a rural state, it takes some time to get to the hospital or other helps that people need.

Rumano 12:04

Hi, my name is Rumano. I go to Champlain Elementary School in Burlington, Vermont. My platform is called Vermont Strong Inside and Out. I wanted to run for Kid Governor because I started noticing that a lot of people in my community were struggling with their mental health. I saw kids feeling stressed and adults feeling overwhelmed, and it made me realize this is something we should talk about more and work on together. That inspired me to run and try to help make a difference. My platform focuses on helping students take care of their minds and support each other.

Westyn 12:50

My name is Westyn Danforth. I go to Bradford Elementary. I'm also from Bradford, Vermont. My platform is anti bullying. I chose anti bullying, because I believe it's a very important topic. One out of every five kids get bullied. I believe that that number can be lowered

Jane 13:11

The sixth member of the cabinet, Phoebe, was sick the day of the press conference and wasn't able to attend the event. Her platform is addressing mental health issues. Now, remember how Bob Kinzel told us that politicians will often start with a little bit of information, and then reporters get to ask whatever questions they might have on those topics or others. After the opening remarks from each member of the cabinet and the Kid Governor, it was time for the kids in the audience to ask those questions. Here are just a few of the ones they directed to Vermont's kid governor.

Kid 13:42

This is for Roslyn. Do you know anyone that's homeless?

Roslyn 13:47

I don't know anyone that's homeless, but I have like, seen like, I don't personally know anybody that's homeless, but I have seen like homeless people.

Kid 13:56

What can Vermont do to help the homeless?

Roslyn 13:59

I think Vermont could help by like donating, donating like clothes that they don't use, or like, like clothes, or like blankets or something, or they could donate to local homeless shelters. And yeah.

Jane 14:29

One of my favorite questions of the evening went to Gaelen, whose platform is to improve school lunches. There were a lot of kids in the audience who had questions about that.

Kid 14:38

This question is for Gaelen. I have a couple people in my school with dietary restrictions and allergies. Do you have any ideas to help their meals become better?

Gaelen 14:50

Yeah, so recently, we changed things for lactose intolerant. Um. Um, they never get chocolate milks. So we have chocolate almond milk now for those kids who can't have the regular milk because they thought it was not fair to not have the same things that the kids without the allergies have, and we have sun butter and jelly sandwiches. And sometimes we have gluten free, dairy free, most of the time not free meals, but others, we always have parfait sandwiches and other things like that. But that's I'll keep that in mind, because a lot of meals are not compatible with dietary problems like that.

Jane 15:52

I like that question and answer in particular because it showed a reporter asking a question about people in their community who might not be getting served well by school lunches, and Gaelen, who is working to improve them, was able not only to share what he's been doing at his school to try to make sure everyone gets to enjoy chocolate milk if they want to, but also that then the question reminded him to think a little bit more deeply about what else he could do in his role. Thanks to the Vermont Kid Governor and Kid Cabinet and all of the kid reporters in the audience for making our kid press conference such a big success. Coming up, we'll hear from Kid Governors in Connecticut and Nebraska.

Jane 16:33

This is But Why. I'm Jane Lindholm, and today we're learning about Kid Governor a civics education program where fifth graders take part in a statewide election to choose a Kid Governor for a one year term in their state. Five states have a Kid Governor this year, and each governor is working to raise awareness and take action on a specific issue. In Connecticut, Kid Governor Tessa wants to address inclusion for students with disabilities.

Tessa 17:02

It's great to be able to make a change in Connecticut and work with a team to help make the state a better place.

Jane 17:11

What changes are you hoping to make to Connecticut that would make it a better place?

Tessa 17:17

I'm hoping to make it more inclusive and more non judgmental towards disabled children.

Jane 17:27

How do you get to do that as a as the Kid Governor? How do you use that platform to try to achieve those goals?

Tessa 17:34

Well, I'm going to use my three platform steps, which are creating videos to show how to include students with disabilities, creating a buddy system where fifth graders pair with students with disabilities, and creating a buddy lunch table where students can sit together and have an inclusive lunch.

Jane 17:58

I know you're only a couple of months in so far. But how are you implementing it? Like, how who's helping you? How do you use this role to, like, make that happen statewide?

Tessa 18:08

Well, my school, my teachers, my friends, my family have all been helping me, and I've been doing a lot of interviews. I've been at a couple of events where I've told people about my platform and helped raise awareness about what's happening, but so far, we haven't moved forward on my platform as much we will get started soon, though.

Jane 18:33

That sounds a lot like politics at the adult level too. You run with all of these ideas, and then you get started, and it's hard. There's a lot to do, and there are a lot of different people who have to get involved. And sometimes things are harder than just saying, Here's what I want to do, and I'm the governor, and I get to implement it. Are you experiencing some of that?

Tessa 18:53

A little bit. There are some kids who don't know who I am, so I have to explain myself over and over. And then there are some kids who I think a little afraid to talk to me, because, well, I'm much more state and statewide known than most people have, than people most people have met.

Jane 19:19

Yeah, so are they intimidated a little bit to talk to you do you think?

Tessa 19:22

I think so.

Jane 19:23

So what do you do when you think people either don't know who you are or are intimidated to talk with you.

Tessa 19:29

If they don't know who I am, I try to explain a little bit. And if they're intimidated, I try to just talk to them like I would to my friends or to somebody before I was Kid Governor.

Jane 19:40

And does it work?

Tessa 19:41

Most of the time.

Jane 19:43

If there are other kids who are fourth graders this year who are thinking, maybe I want to do this, or maybe my state doesn't have a Kid Governor program, and I think I'd like to encourage them to have one. Do you have advice?

Tessa 19:54

I would say, go for it. The Kid Governor community is an awesome program, and it's a great way to learn about civics, and it's also a great way to think about what you want to do, how you want to change your state. And I would say that if you're feeling nervous, just take a deep breath and make sure you have people who are proud of you, no matter what.

Jane 20:23

That was Kid Governor Tessa of Connecticut. Meanwhile, in Nebraska Kid Governor Charlie wants to raise awareness about cancer, an issue that's really important to her.

Charlie 20:33

I know that I'm a natural leader, and I really want to help people with that. At first, I didn't actually think of it as, like, this big.

Jane 20:56

When did you start to realize, uh oh, I've gotten myself into something big?

Charlie 21:02

When I was one of the seven candidates for the statewide election, because I honestly didn't think I would get that far. I was the only one from my school to be in the statewide election, because the other one, Delaney, my best friend, she, for some reason, didn't make it into the statewide election.

Jane 21:27

So then you were in the statewide election, and kids from all over Nebraska got to vote. And one, I mean, kids in your school know who you are, so they might know. Oh yeah, Charlie's a natural leader, this makes sense. But kids around the state don't necessarily know who you are, and so one of the things that you had to do was have a platform that you run on some ideas of the things that you'd like to work on to benefit your state if you were elected Kid Governor, what's your platform?

Charlie 21:54

My platform is cancer awareness.

Jane 21:57

How did you choose that?

Jane 21:58

Both of my sisters, their father died of cancer. I wasn't born yet, but their father died of cancer, and I just I've never experienced what it felt like, but I came pretty, pretty close to because in 2024 my my father had a heart attack.

Jane 22:31

So this feels personal to you?

Charlie 22:33

Yes.

Jane 22:34

Yeah, and it affects people you love.

Charlie 22:37

Yes.

Jane 22:37

So how do you hope to bring awareness to people in Nebraska or to the issues of cancer and cancer research and Cancer Care and Prevention?

Charlie 22:48

First off, I want to raise money for places that can help people with that, like Camp Kesem. And I also just want to have people to be aware and know how hard cancer is if a friend or family member doesn't, and for people who do have friends or family members that have cancer, I want them to know that you're not alone and that we can help.

Jane 23:25

Is Camp Kesem a camp for kids who've been affected by cancer in their families?

Charlie 23:30

Yes, so Camp Kesem is for kids ages six through 18, for kids whose family members or friends even have been affected by cancer, and my sisters went there when their father died.

Jane 23:54

So part of your platform is raising money for organizations that that help people who are affected by this. Clearly your platform resonated or spoke to kids who were voting for who the governor should be. So you won the state election. How did you get the news?

Charlie 24:14

We waited a while for the news, but one Friday after school, Mr. Billisbach, our science and social studies teacher, he called me down to his room after school, and then I said that we needed to talk about something so I didn't assume I was in trouble. I just didn't know what was going on, and then he broke the news that I won, and my brain was just spiraling. I could not believe it at all.

Jane 24:53

That was Kid Governor Charlie in Nebraska. There are two other Kid Governors, Livia in New Hampshire, who's working to address the dangers of smoking, vaping and drugs, and Katelyn, the Kid Governor in Oklahoma who wants to address issues of animal abuse. So far, only five states have Kid Governors. If your state isn't one of them, maybe you can help get it started. Ask your teacher to look into the program. Even if you don't want to be Kid Governor, we have some homework for you. We want you to think about an issue in your community that you think needs attention. Then come up with three ideas for how you could work to address that issue. Write them down. Then talk to an adult about what you can do to move forward on your goals. After all, it's not just governors, kid or adult, who get things done in our communities, you too can make a difference.

Jane 25:42

That's it for this episode. As always, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record, you asking it on a smartphone using an app like voice memos, then have them email the file to questions@butwhykids.org. Our show is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo, and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. If you like our show, please have your adults help you give us a thumbs up or a review on whatever podcast platform you use to listen to us, it helps other kids and families find us. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.