

Civic Engagement in Public Policy

The citizen's role in the policymaking process



What is Public Policy?

Public policy manifests the common sense and common conscience of the citizens as a whole that extends throughout the state and is applied to matters of public health, safety, and welfare. It is general, well-settled public opinion relating to the duties of citizens to their fellow citizens. It imports something that fluctuates with the changing economic needs, social customs, and moral aspirations of the people. Public policy enters into, and influences, the enactment, execution, and interpretation of legislation.

— *West's Encyclopedia of American Law, edition 2*

Citizens' Role in Crafting Public Policy

Policymaking begins when people in a community perceive that a problem exists. These citizens can organize themselves, research and formulate ideas for how best to solve the problem. The process involves collecting and analyzing data, assessing consequences of the policy options, and gathering support for one proposal or another. Frequently, alternative proposals emerge. Once people agree on an appropriate course of action, they must persuade the appropriate government or governmental agency to adopt the policy.

Steps for Policymaking in the Classroom

1. Identify a community problem that requires a public policy solution
2. Gather and evaluate information on the problem.
3. Brainstorm several potential solutions to the problem.
4. Develop a public policy that would best address the problem.
5. Make an action plan and present the idea to lawmakers to be enacted.

Levels of Government

When advocating for a new policy as a classroom project, students should understand the continuum of lawmaking bodies that represent them: school board, city council, state legislature and Congress. While congressional actions receive a lot of press coverage, citizens will find that it is more feasible to affect public policy closer to home, at the local and state level.

Problem	Bill in Nebraska Legislature
car accidents	penalties for texting while driving
mountain lion threat to safety	permit hunting mountain lions
cumbersome voting practices	early voting, add registration locations
childhood obesity	limit marketing fast food
skin cancer in youth	prohibit tanning for minors
teen pregnancy	mandatory sex health education
limited continued education	in-state tuition for immigrants

What is NOT public policy?

Commonly suggested solutions that are not a public policy approach include:

- fundraisers, car washes, bake sales;
- demonstrations, boycotts, online petitions; or
- volunteerism.

Helpful, persuasive activities

Citizens trying to enact a public policy can educate members of the public and their lawmakers about the problem by:

- attending public meetings, writing letters to their lawmakers and to newspapers;
- persuading other citizens to support a particular alternative;
- submitting proposals of their own; and
- giving testimony at public hearings

For more information on encouraging civic engagement in your classroom, contact:

Unicameral Information Office
(402) 471-2788
uio@leg.ne.gov