

PROJECT Citizen

We the People: Project Citizen is a curricular program for middle grade, high school and post-secondary students that promotes competent and responsible participation in local and state government. It is the goal of the program to add to students' knowledge, enhance their skills, and deepen their understanding of how we can all work together to make our communities better.

To commemorate **Constitution Day** or **Citizenship Day, September 17th**, this newspaper will run a 5-part educational series, beginning, Monday, September 17 and running through Friday, September 21, that will focus on key aspects of the Project Citizen program. The features will focus on using the newspaper to ***Identify Problems, Gather Information, Look for Possible Solutions, Persuade Others and How to Make an Effective Presentation.***

Citizenship - noun -
The status of a citizen with its attendant duties, rights, and privileges.

For more information, including free teacher training and textbooks of ***Project Citizen*** in New York State, contact the Law, Youth and Citizenship Program at the New York State Bar Association. You'll find them online at ***www.lycny.org***.

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1. Identifying Problems

Every community, no matter how good, faces problems that might require public policy solutions. From providing safe, clean schools that offer a quality education to all students to protecting the rights of its individual citizens, communities and states use their laws, rules and regulations to help solve these types of issues.

Through your own personal experiences, you may know about a local problem. Or, you might not be aware that there are issues causing your parents and your neighbors concern. Either way, it's important to identify the problems, judge their importance, and investigate possible causes in order to start dealing with them.

Public Policy - A concept or set of ideas that guides a course of action or a procedure used in dealing with public issues or problems. Public policies are embodied in laws, rules or regulations or agreed upon procedures used by government to protect the rights of the people and to promote the general welfare.

Newspaper Activity:

◆ In small groups, look through several editions of the local newspaper for articles about problems or concerns in your community. Try ranking them by importance, identify what people or stakeholders are affected by the situation. Do the articles provide information about the possible causes for these problems? If not, where might you find more details about these issues? As a class, select one problem that is important to you and your community and one you might actually be able to resolve by proposing public policy.

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2. *Gathering Information*

Once you've selected one problem to focus on, it is important to gather information from a number of reliable sources to gain a deeper understanding of it. When comparing information from different sources, some will be more accurate and non-biased than others.

Different sources may take different, even opposing positions depending on the point-of-view being expressed.

Reliable - *adjective* - Dependable in achievement, accuracy, honesty, etc.: *reliable information*.

Sources of information might include: Libraries, Newspapers, Internet, Professors and Scholars, Lawyers and Judges, Community Organizations, Legislative and Administrative Government Offices.

Newspaper Activities:

- ◆ Look through the newspapers and collect any articles that relate to the issue you've decided to focus on. Remember, the clippings might include news articles, editorials, letters to the editor or even political cartoons. Be sure to include information about current and/or proposed policies aimed at solving the problem.
- ◆ After reading the newspaper materials, write down any questions you still have on the topic. Using other sources, research the answers to your questions.

3. Looking for Possible Solutions

Now that you've done research and have a better understanding of the problem and who is affected, it's time to consider the best possible solution.

As a group, the class should review all the gathered information and brainstorm a solution. Draft a specific public policy proposal that puts into words the idea your class decides on and is willing to support.

Be sure that your policy is practical and realistic and can be supported by facts. It can not violate existing state

or national law. Your class may want to reference the U.S. and the New York State Constitutions.

Solution - noun -

The method or process of solving a problem.

The answer to or disposition of a problem.

Newspaper Activity:

◆ Look through several editions of the local newspaper for articles that explain a potential solution to a problem. Is the solution good in the short-term or long term? What are some obstacles that might hinder or stop a solution to the problem? Does the solution involve public policy, private action or a combination? (Example: Pollution - a law requiring recycling of all plastic products, individuals collecting plastic containers and finding ways to reuse or recycle.)

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4. Persuading Others

In order to get public policy changed or adopted, it's necessary to gain support from individuals, groups and government officials. The newspaper contains many examples of persuasive writing. Advertisements are written to persuade you to buy a product or service.

However, the persuasive writing meant to affect the public good can be found in the editorial pages of the newspaper. A good editorial establishes a position, reviews opposing thoughts, and supports its conclusion with supporting details. It

often gives the reader a specific "call to action." Opinion columnists, cartoonists and letters to the editor are other examples of persuasive expression.

Persuade - verb -
Win approval or support for. Cause somebody to adopt a certain position, belief, or course of action; convince.

Newspaper Activity:

Our nation's founders realized someone needed to hold the government accountable for its actions. The First Amendment, freedom of the press, ensures that newspapers and other media continue to serve as the "public's watchdog." Publishing information and commentary on controversial topics are two ways newspapers exercise this responsibility.

◆ Look through editions of the newspaper for editorials. Note how these persuasive pieces use facts to support their opinion. Use these editorials as a model for the arguments you can use to gain support for your proposed public policy.

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5. Making an Effective Presentation

The last step in this process may seem the easiest to some and impossible to others. You and your classmates are now experts on the problem you've selected and know the public policy you think is best. You've worked on your persuasive arguments. Now you just have to present your ideas to other people.

To communicate effectively, you must state your facts in a simple, concise and interesting manner.

Present - verb -
To bring before or introduce to the public; offer for consideration. To show or exhibit.

Newspaper Activities:

- ◆ Look through several editions of the newspaper. Find several examples of page layouts that grabbed your attention. Collect several and try to determine the common elements that made these pages work. Is it the use of color, a great headline, a compelling image, an interesting chart or graph? How does the paper use white space? Choose one and describe why it effectively communicates to your class.
- ◆ Organize your work and create a final newspaper "front page" to report the problem, current policy, your proposed policy and action plan to get the policy adopted. Be creative.

If you've enjoyed this series and investigating solutions to local issues, you might want to get more involved with *Project Citizen* in your area. For more information go to www.lycny.org.