

Working Through a Public Policy Issue: Six Steps to Success

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Too often, our students choose issues that are all but impossible to research or manage. But don't despair! There are myriad public policy issues in your own back yard—this guide will help you and your students find them.

I. REMEMBER THE BASIC THEMES CONCERNED WITH PUBLIC POLICY

- A. Triggering Events: Scope, Intensity, Duration, Resources
- B. The element of conflict is almost always present
- C. Many possible outcomes
- D. Policy makers make the change
- E. However, your students can be *change agents*, or catalysts of change
- F. *It's about process*

II. START WITH A COMMUNITY PROBLEM

- A. "Community" can mean
 - 1. your county/city/town
 - 2. your school district/school
 - 3. your classroom
 - 4. state issues are tough, but doable
- B. Students may have a "knowledge head start" if they are familiar with the issue
 - 1. they'll know people who have "suffered" from a problem
 - 2. they'll know some of the actors, e.g. a local business polluting a local creek
 - 3. they may even know a policy actor, e.g. city council member

III. STAY LOCAL/MAKE IT "HANDS ON"

- A. *Trying to end global warming is great, but...*
- B. Remember Tip O'Neill—"all politics is local"—so it should be with your public policy portfolios. Some issues and possible public policies

Issue	Policy
1. fast traffic in front of a school	stop sign, speed bumps
2. need for students to express themselves	newspaper
3. no student representation	student member on school board
4. jeopardized health from cafeteria food	nutrition policy
5. no place for students to congregate	skateboard park
6. cracked sidewalks	safe sidewalks
7. gang colors	school dress code
8. weapons	metal monitors
9. student cheating	student review board
10. strangers on campus	closed campus
- C. Bear in mind the financial cost factors in pursuing the project—it's an economic AND political reality

IV. LET STUDENTS DIRECT THE SEARCH

A. *It's about ownership*

1. if they pick it, they lick it; if you choose it, you lose it.
2. people buy into what they own
3. students want to see through what they pursue

B. Focus on public policy

1. not service learning: taking on a group project to do good
2. not community service: volunteering at a soup kitchen, cleaning up the highway

C. Your job is to

1. guide
2. motivate
3. help with direction, resources
4. stay on task

V. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS FAILURE

- A. It's about *process* and *values* more than outcome
- B. It's that your students have connected an issue with those who can act on it
- C. It's about understanding the realities, limits and importance of power
- D. Any outcome is a bonus because you've brought them into the public policy process as players, participants

VI. REFLECTION IS KEY

- A. Now that's over, students need to understand the value of their journey
 1. what did they seek to do?
 2. what was the outcome?
 3. what would they do differently next time?
 4. what were the high and low points?
 5. what did they learn about the process?
- B. Show how their recent experience is a window to the future
 1. the same public policy process works in Washington, D.C. or the state capital
 2. as with their local recent experience, their participation can make the difference