THE CIVIC ACTION PROJECT:
COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR ALL STUDENTS

Objectives of the Project:

- Identify the knowledge and skills that are gained through interaction with government and civic life
- Practice teamwork, problem solving, and civic participation
- Analyze problems and determine multiple solution options
- Support decisions with evidence, practice, and follow up

How a Civic Action Project Works:

- Students work together to conduct research about important problems in their community
- They choose one of the problems that they think most needs a solution
- They identify alternative solutions to the problem and weigh advantages and disadvantages of each
- Students then propose one policy solution that includes interaction with government action
- They propose an action plan for their chosen policy solution
- Their steps and results are recorded and demonstrated in both documented research and a display of some kind
- Students present their results or even take part in a simulated agency hearing where they are asked questions about their project

WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?

Public Policy is a concept or set of ideas that guides a course of action or a procedure used in dealing with public issues or problems.

Policies are:
- Embodied in laws, rules, or regulations
- Agreed upon procedures used by government to fulfill its responsibilities
- Serve to distribute certain benefits, manage resources, or manage conflicts

Examples of Public Policies:
- A law that forbids selling alcohol to persons under the age of 18
- A law that forbids smoking in public institutions
- A law that forbids carrying guns in schools
- Regulations about work time in places of business
- A school district policy about absenteeism

Public Policy can:
- Include any kind of community problem or issue
- Center on all questions or problems that are sometimes called "general welfare" issues (a Constitutional term)
- Include education, medicine, economics, social care, housing, safety, or any other areas of public concern

Participants in Public Policy making include:
- Executive or Legislative branches of federal, state, or local government
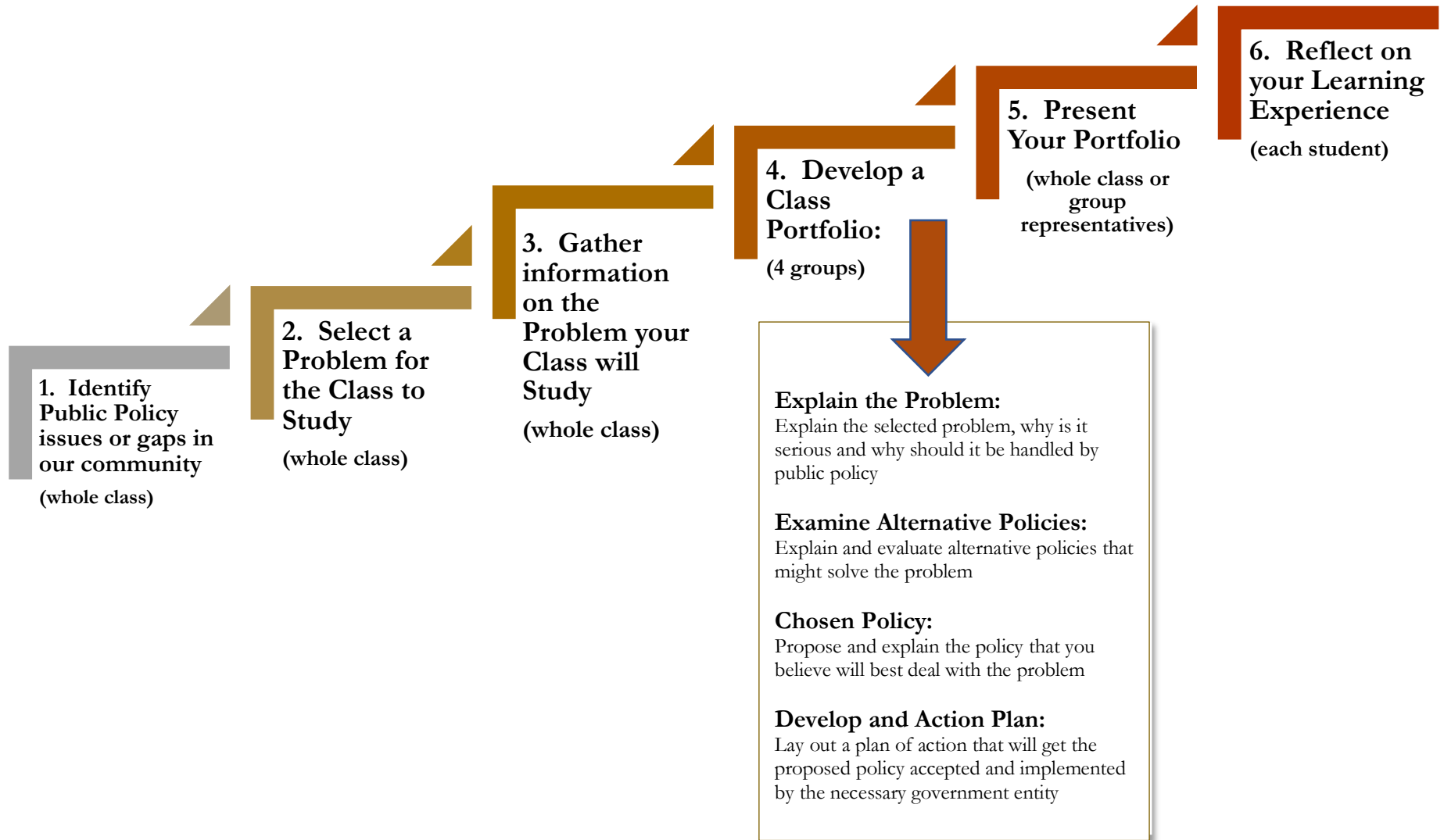- Government agencies
- Citizens who influence decision makers

Different Types of Policy:

Private: the section of society where people pursue their own private interests within the scope of the law, free of unreasonable and unfair intrusion by the government.

Civil Society: the section of society where people associate with each other voluntarily to pursue interests they share. They might pursue these interests as individuals or members of groups or organizations. Community groups enacting civil society policy can also keep the government in check.

Public/Government: the section of society that includes formal government institutions at local, state, and national levels. These might be legislative, executive, and judicial branches at all three levels.

Community Action Project Step by Step:

1. Identify Public Policy issues or gaps in our community

(whole class)

2. Select a Problem for the Class to Study

(whole class)

3. Gather information on the Problem your Class will Study

(whole class)

4. Develop a Class Portfolio:

(4 groups)

5. Present Your Portfolio

(whole class or group representatives)

6. Reflect on your Learning Experience

(each student)

Explain the Problem:
Explain the selected problem, why is it serious and why should it be handled by public policy

Examine Alternative Policies:
Explain and evaluate alternative policies that might solve the problem

Chosen Policy:
Propose and explain the policy that you believe will best deal with the problem

Develop and Action Plan:
Lay out a plan of action that will get the proposed policy accepted and implemented by the necessary government entity

The Civic Action Project:
Portfolio & Evidence Collection

1. A Portfolio demonstrates all the work your class has done. It is a way to display and explain the policy solution you have worked so hard to develop.

2. The Portfolio needs to have coherence – the sections are sequential and substantively relate to each other. The four main sections that should be displayed for their stakeholder audience are:
   a. **Explain the Problem**
   b. **Examine Alternative Policy Solutions**
   c. **Demonstrate the Chosen Policy Solution**
   d. **Argue for an Action Plan**

3. Any one student should be able to present all four sections to demonstrate their understanding of public policy, but the final presentation can be done in groups. All students need to understand the content of each section to do work as a small group.

4. All students need a clear understanding of the problem before working on different sections of the project.

5. An important role for the teacher is to facilitate the learning by helping students to:
   - Set criteria for what makes a good problem for a Civic Action Project
   - Narrow the problem
   - Develop consensus
   - Discuss alternatives
   - Provide intentional time for students to communicate across groups
   - Help them see how research from one group will impact or assist other panels

6. Students should have experience with many sources of evidence as possible. Evidence should be authentic, from your community, and associated with the problem. Surveys, interviews, and local media can be included. The Internet is only one source of information. Teach students to carefully evaluate, summarize, and select sources for their Portfolio.

The Project Portfolio

Portfolio Part 1: Display Board or Digital/Multimedia Visuals

- Title of the project and school
- Appropriate titles for each section/panel
- Community supporters who helped
- Government involvement clear
- Well organized
- Information is thorough
- Appropriate graphics and pictures
- Attention getting!

Portfolio Part 2: Documentation

Can be done in a binder for display or a digital folder of documentation

General:
- Cover Page
- Clear Sections
- Table of Contents
- Names of students and teacher

The Problem:
- Problem Summary
- Graphic presentation
- Problem identification form
- Other:
  - Interview form
  - Printed sources
  - Radio/TV/Websites
  - Publications
- Bibliography/Source List

Alternative Solutions:
- Summary of alternative policy solutions (with advantages & disadvantages)
- Graphic presentation
- Bibliography/Source List for each

Chosen Policy Solution:
- Narrative of the Chosen Policy
- Advantages
- Disadvantages
- Level of government responsible and what it needs to do
- Graphic presentation
- Bibliography/Source List

Action Plan:
- How to gain support from:
  - Individuals
  - Groups
- How to gain support of government
- Graphic presentation
- Bibliography/Source List

Evaluation:
- Constitutional opinion form
- Student evaluation form
- Teacher evaluation form

Civic Action Project Tips for Teachers

1. Choose a relevant problem. Let the students choose the problem they want to address. If the students choose they will be much more invested in the issue and the whole process will be much more exciting for everyone.

2. Make contact early. Start contacting community members, local civic leaders, experts, etc., as early as possible in the process. Correspondence with public officials can take some time. Be sure to brainstorm your contact list with your kids sooner rather than later so students will have time to include the responses in their portfolio.

3. Practice, practice, practice. Have students practice their presentation for the whole class, for the administration, for a faculty meeting, for the class pet turtle, in front of the mirror at home… Each time their audience (except, maybe, the turtle) will give them new questions to consider and they will become more comfortable and knowledgeable about their presentation.

4. Be flexible. There are many different ways to fit a Civic Action Project into your year. The following are some variations that might work for you:

   7-8 Week "Perfect World" Plan:
   During school 2 or more times a week for an hour a day
   - Steps 1-2:   1-2 days
   - Steps 3-5:   2 weeks

   4-8 Week "After School Special" Plan:
   After school club that meets for 30-45 minutes once or twice a week
   - Steps 1-2:   1 meeting each
   - Steps 3-5:   2-4 meetings each
   - For this plan you will need to assign work (research) to the kids they can do at home
   - Allow kids to work on research and writing during some class times
   - Enlisting help for the students (a volunteer parent, possibly) will make their meeting times more effective

   2-4 Week "Maximum Overdrive" Plan:
   Every day 45-60 minute lessons
   - Steps 1-2:   1 day each
   - Steps 3-5:   2 weeks total
   - Warning: You may not be able to contact experts and get responses back with this short time span

5. Set a date for your school showcase, then plan backwards. Allow at least 4-6 weeks to prepare if you have them.

6. Contact community leaders, policy makers, and any other interested experts, professionals, or others who might be interested in helping your students during the project.

7. Let the students know what parts of the project you will grade and what you expect form each student

8. Plan lessons around each stage of the process – you can teach a LOT of content and skills as they work on the project itself.

Useful Handouts:

1. Understanding types of Public Policy solutions
2. Civic Policy Graphic Organizer
3. Guidelines for conducting an Interview
4. Interview Report Form
5. Documentation of information from publications or internet sources
6. Analyzing information about the problem
7. Project Reflection

Understanding types of Public Policy Solutions

Read the first example of a community problem shown in the middle column below and the examples of (1) a public policy solution (by a government institution acting with or without civic society and (2) a solution to the problem solely by civil society.

Fill out the rest of the chart with your own suggestions for public policy and civil society solutions to the problems noted. You can use the last spaces to identify a problem in your own community.

Public Policy Solution	Community Problem	Civil Society Solution
City officials fund a program to give needy individuals vouchers to buy food and clothing from participating merchants	**Poor families in the community need food and adequate clothing**	*Members of a civic organization conduct a drive to collect food and clothing and then distribute it to the needy.*
	School-aged children are out on the streets late at night	
	Parents are not using child protective car seats properly.	
	The lake in the community is polluted and filled with litter	
	Owners of a professional baseball team want to build a stadium in the city	
	Many local high school students have been cheating on exams	

Civics Action Project

Directions: Use the creative problem-solving process to develop a public policy for your community.

The Problem	Alternative Policy Options	Our Policy	Our Action Plan	
The Problem:	Alternative 1: Advantages: Disadvantages:	Our Proposed Policy:	Steps we will follow:	
Current Policy:	Alternative 2: Advantages:	Does our policy protect people's rights? (Is it Constitutional?)	Who would be Supporters:	Who would be Opponents:
Disagreements in the Community:	Disadvantages:	Which Agency of Government is involved?	Sources of information we used:	

Guidelines for Conducting an Interview

Have the following information prepared for yourself so you can thoroughly introduce and explain the project and get the information you need:

Introductions:

"My name is _____"

"I am a (grade level) student at (your school)"

"I am working on a policy project for (name of class)"

"We are studying local problems, how are they dealt with by different policy solutions, and how citizens can participate in their community."

Briefly describe the problem:

Follow up questions:

1. Is there someone else you think I should speak with about this topic?

2. Do you have any printed information you can provide me?

3. Do you know any other sources of information I can pursue?

Interview Report Form

Before beginning the interview be sure to identify yourself and briefly explain the problem you are researching (see Guidelines for Conducting an Interview). If a person does not wish to be named, respect their privacy and indicate only their role in the community.

Name and title of person being interviewed:

The person's role in the community (example: parent, community volunteer, business person, etc.):

Record the interviewee's responses to the following:

1. Do you think the problem I have described is important? Why?

2. Do you think others in our community believe this is an important problem? Why?

3. What might be the cause or causes of this problem?

4. Do you think this is a problem that should be dealt with by:

- Government acting alone? Why/Why Not:

- Government with the assistance of Civil Society? Why/Why Not:

- Government with the assistance of Private Individuals? Why/Why Not:

5. What policy, if any, is already in place to deal with this problem?

    5a. If a policy does exist ask the following questions:

- What are the advantages of this policy?

- What are the disadvantages of the policy?

- How might the policy be improved?

- Does the policy need to be replaced?

- What disagreements about this policy, if any, exist in our community?

    5b. If there is no policy currently in place to deal with the problem, ask the following questions:

- What sort of policy do you think might be needed to address the problem?

- What level(s), branch(es), or agency(ies) of government are responsible, or should ve responsible, for dealing with the problem?

6. Do you have any suggestions for where I might get more information about this problem and the different positions people take on the problem?

Documentation of Information from Publications or Internet Sources

1. Briefly describe the problem being researched:

2. Identify the library, office, agency, organization, website, or other where you obtained this publication:

3. Title of the Publication: _____

4. Author(s): _____

5. Date of Publication: _____

6. According to this publication, what community(ies) is/are affected by this problem?

7. According to this publication, how serious is this problem in the community?

8. How widespread is the problem in other communities and states?

9. Is there a public policy that deals with the problem? (circle one)   YES / NO

   If yes, answer the following questions:

      a. What form does the policy take (law, regulation, judicial order, etc.):

      b. Briefly describe the public policy. Does it involve action by the government, cviil society, the private sphere, or a mix of all?

      c. Is the public policy dealing with the problem adequate, or is it being poorly enforced or implemented? Explain:

   If there is NO policy, explain why you think there is no policy:

10. What level(s) and branch(es) of government is/are responsible for dealing with the problem?

11. What disagreements about this public policy, or the current way of dealing with it, exist in the community?

12. Who are the major individuals, groups, or organizations expressing opinions regarding the problem?

NAME: _____

Analyzing Information about the Problem

1. List the sources of information you're using (from documentation you've completed):

2. State the problem clearly and concisely:

3. Explain the importance of the problem and the need to deal with it:

   o   How serious is the problem?

   o   How widespread is the problem?

   o   How urgent is the need to address the problem?

4. Is there a public policy already in place that deals with the problem? If so, describe what it is and its effectiveness. If not, explain why you think there isn't a policy in place.

5. What level and/or branch of government or governmental agency should be responsible for dealing with this problem?

6. Should the government seek the assistance of civil society and/or the private sphere in dealing with the problem? Why?

7. Who are the major individuals, groups, or organizations taking sides on the problem? For each, describe their
   o interest in the problem
   o solutions they are suggesting
   o the advantages and disadvantages of their suggestions
   o how they are trying to influence the government or community to adopt their solutions

8. If your class develops a policy to deal with this problem how might you influence government, business, the community, or other groups affected to adopt your policy?

NAME: _____

Project Reflection

1. What have you learned about how your community and public policies are organized and enacted?

2. What responsibilities of public officials or members of the community did you find most influential as you did this project? Why?

3. What conflicts or challenges did you encounter while doing this project? How did you resolve them?

4. Which parts of the project did you enjoy most and why?

5. Explain how the following attitudes and character traits are important for members of a community in a democracy – and how/if any of these were involved in this project?

Individual responsibility:

Self discipline:

Civility:

Courage:

Respect for the rights of others:

Respect for law:

Honesty:

Open-mindedness:

Critical thinking:

Negotiation and Compromise:

Persistence:

Civic-mindedness:

Compassion: