Civic Action Project

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# Civic Action Project

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A Teacher’s Introduction to CAP

The qualifications for self-government are not innate. They are the result of habit and long training.—Thomas Jefferson

As Jefferson and many of the other founders realized, if America’s experiment in representative democracy were to survive, each new generation of its citizens needed to be educated about the Constitution, our system of government, and the rights and responsibilities of a participating citizenry. It is, after all, the people who make a democracy work.

In fact, the perceived need for ongoing civic education of the populace was one of the primary reasons for establishing public and free education in the United States. Advocates from Horace Mann to John Dewey recognized that a civically ignorant population would not remain a free population.

The challenge of educating each new generation of U.S. citizens has been borne by schools and teachers since the middle of the 19th century. Today, most states require instruction in state and U.S. history to help students understand the ideas, events, and the people who shaped our nation. They require instruction in world history to place our nation’s story in an international and global context. Most also require instruction in civics and government so that students understand their constitutional heritage and the workings of government at the national, state, and local levels.

Unfortunately, national and state studies demonstrate that students graduate ill prepared to take on their role as informed and effective citizens. Levels of content knowledge are insufficient and students lack the dispositions to effectively participate.

CAP offers a solution.

What Is CAP?

CAP is a different kind of civics and government course. Think of it as a culmination of what students learn through the course of their social studies education, a chance to apply what they have learned in the real world experience of taking civic action.

Students and adults learn best by doing. In the science curriculum, students learn the scientific method by being challenged to form a hypothesis, conduct experiments to test it, and draw conclusions on the basis of the data collected. In speech classes, students learn public speaking by organizing their ideas, writing a speech, and presenting it. In college, students often participate in a practicum, where they apply the theory of the classroom to the real world.

CAP is a practicum for high school students in civics and government. In it they see how the content of a government course can apply to the real world. By taking civic actions, they also practice what real citizens do when they go about trying to affect policy or solve a real problem. These actions can be many and varied, including getting informed about a public issue or problem, thinking critically about it, discovering how government is involved and makes decisions, developing a position, engaging in civic dialogue, building constituencies, working
together toward a common goal, doing civic writing, making presentations, advocating for and defending positions, meeting with officials, and making decisions.

It’s the stuff that empowered citizens do to solve a community problem, influence policymakers, advocate for resources, and support or oppose legislation. By conducting civic actions, students can learn how government really works, gain the skills and confidence to participate themselves, and understand the importance of what they are doing in their government course.

**The CAP Classroom**

In some ways a CAP classroom is similar to a high quality traditional government course classroom. Students cover the required government content and standards, participate in class discussions and other learning activities, and are evaluated on the basis of their achievement. Every effort has been made to link the CAP curriculum to standards, model research-based methods, and provide multiple opportunities for qualitative assessment.

But in the CAP classroom, the teacher has additional goals and expectations and a different role. In the CAP classroom, teachers not only cover the material but provide opportunities for students to actually learn how to be engaged and effective citizens.

To do this, the teacher serves as a coach and a guide to students through the civic action process as they select a problem or issue, research it, determine and take civic actions, and report and document the experience. The teacher motivates, challenges, critiques, and assesses student progress.

The student’s role is to be accountable for completing the civic action process, just as with a science project or term paper, to the best of their ability. Along the way they must seek guidance when necessary, work with their peers to solve problems, manage their time to meet deadlines, and document their work. To help them, CAP provides structure, tips and “how-tos” for conducting civic actions and templates for reporting on their activities.

**The CAP Curriculum**

The CAP curriculum consists of a series of 14 policy-related lessons connected to the civic action process. Through the readings and interactive classroom activities contained in the lessons, students learn how government content applies to policymaking at the local level, how policy is made and can be influenced, and strategies for effective citizenship. The civic action process requires students to select a problem or issue relating to policy, examine and analyze the problem or issue, and consider and implement civic actions to effect change. The curriculum is designed to give teachers a range of options for conducting the civic action process and supports student work with requisite planning support, guidance, content, and practical tips.

The CAP curriculum incorporates a range of interactive learning strategies, which are central to good classroom instruction. They include class discussion, simulations and role-play activities—all promising approaches outlined in the germinal *The Civic Mission of Schools* report. The report identified research-based promising approaches that promote the development of student civic content and capacity gains.
Civic Action

CAP challenges students to apply the content and skills they learn in a government course to the real world by working on an actual problem, issue, or policy. CAP includes a series of forms and resources that guide students through the process. While the teacher introduces and monitors the process, it is important that students take the lead in completing their civic actions. Many teachers encourage students to troubleshoot for each other when they are working to come up with new civic actions or are unsure how to proceed.

Many civic actions will take students out into the community. Notify administrators and parents about the CAP assignment and update them as necessary. Administrators and parents can be helpful resources, providing useful support for student activities.

Grouping Students for Civic Action

There are many ways to group your class for civic actions:

Small Groups. Many teachers divide students into small groups according to the different issues students find interesting.

Whole Class. Some teachers prefer that all students in the class address the same issue or problem with each group focusing on a different set of tasks.

Thematic Semester. Some teachers select a broad theme (e.g., crime) for the semester with small groups each addressing different aspects of that theme.

Independent Work. And in some classes, teachers allow students who want to work independently to select their own issues.

All of these student-grouping models work with CAP. Here are some illustrations for each:

Small Groups

The class is divided into groups of 2–6 students, and each group selects its own issue or problem to work on.

- Some teachers have the class come up with a list of issues or problems, and students select one or two that interest them. The teacher then eliminates any issues that just get one vote. Students are grouped according to like-mindedness. This way, each student is working with at least one other student on an issue of interest.

- Other teachers put students in groups (or have students self-select partners) and let the groups come to agreement on their issue.

As with any small-group work, each student takes on responsibilities that contribute toward the completed assignment. The group coordinates its efforts. You can check in with the group solely through the civic action forms, though if you work on the civic actions in class time you’ll want to circulate to check on progress or to answer questions.

Some teachers prefer that each group member have a specific identified role. Other teachers allow group members to assign the tasks as they come up. Both work. The civic actions should, as with all group work, reflect the contribution of all group members. Often in the small-group model, the group turns in each form, the individuals don’t, although evidence of each person’s contribution should be apparent. If you don’t see the evidence, ask for more.
Whole Class
In this model, the teacher helps the students reach consensus on a single problem or issue. Focusing on this one issue, students form separate groups that each address the problem in a different way.

- In a whole-class model, some teachers impose a structure by having each group share the actions they are considering with the other groups in order to coordinate activities and use each other as resources. Each group can benefit from the feedback of other groups. A group may decide to change actions so as not to duplicate efforts or after discussion decide that duplicate efforts might actually strengthen the impact.
- Or you might have a more delineated structure, providing each group with a distinct function. One teacher came up with these committee functions:
  
  The **Executive** committee acts as the class’s “spokespeople” and assumes responsibility for developing a vision, identifying tasks and deadlines, documenting the completion of tasks, and checking the civic action forms before they are submitted.
  
  The **Marketing & Public Relations** committee is responsible for developing an outreach campaign that creates “buzz” and support for their project, including media activities, and consults with the proper authorities in advance to confirm that all of their group’s activities are safe, legal, and allowable.
  
  The **Research** committee seeks out and provides articles, web sites, and other information about the selected issue, problem, or policy being addressed.
  
  The **Government Relations** committee finds out which government agencies and officials might be resources for the project.
  
  The **Documentary** group focuses on managing the evidence of the civic actions, creating the portfolio documenting every effort and product produced by the class.

- Some teachers use the whole-group model to have their students apply concepts of self-governance. Students decide what needs to be done regarding the civic action forms and comes up with the division of responsibilities.

Independent Work
Individual students may be passionate about a particular issue not selected by any of their peers and could work independently on their own CAP. Teachers might choose to assign CAP in lieu of a typical research paper, wanting each student to do CAP individually.

- You can choose to have regular deadlines when civic action forms from every student are due.
- Or you can maintain a bulletin board or inbox for students to post or turn in their forms as they complete them.
- If CAP will be serving the role of a research paper, you might ask each student to provide evidence of particular types of resources or actions that you would like specifically to assess.

Online Resources
CRF’s CAP web site (www.crfcap.org) has additional information and resources for both teachers and students participating in CAP. This component will be periodically updated and expanded.
Overview

CAP is designed to support your government course by providing students with a primer, a practicum, in how they can affect government and the decisions that governmental bodies make. It will help them in a practical way to gain knowledge and skills of effective citizens and apply what they learn as they take civic actions to address a real issue or problem.

Students will learn about policy and how citizens influence policymaking. Students will choose a problem that government is dealing with, or that they think government should deal with, and try to have an impact. The idea is that students try to affect policy by taking a variety of civic actions.

The 14 lessons provided in this CAP field-test version are designed to support students as they think about ways they can address problems and policies. Possible connections between the lessons and your state standards (civics, social studies, or other applicable standards) are listed. As the lessons are piloted, CRF will gather feedback from teachers to more precisely align each lesson with state standards.

CAP and the Civic Mission of Schools

The CAP program is designed to support research in effective civic education. In 2003, The Civic Mission of Schools was released. This report (from Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) spawned a national Civic Mission of Schools (CMS) movement to improve and increase civic education in the United States.

The CMS report provides six promising approaches for civic learning:

1. Provide formal instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.
2. Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.
3. Give students the opportunity to apply what they learn through community service linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Offer extracurricular activities that involve students in their schools and communities.
5. Encourage student participation in school governance. This can include providing opportunities for students to make decisions in the classroom.
6. Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

CAP provides opportunities to engage students in most of the CMS promising approaches. Each lesson lists the promising approach addressed.
Lesson 1: A Different Kind of Government Course introduces students to the Civic Action Project (CAP) as a practicum for their government course. To help students understand CAP’s rationale, they first discuss why government is a required course and then brainstorm knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions of effective, productive citizens.

Lesson 2: Introduction to Public Policy introduces the link between policy and problems. First, students read and discuss a short article defining policy. Then they discuss policy and its connection to problems. Next, in small groups, they do a newspaper search to find examples of public policy.

Lesson 3: Problems, Policy, and Civic Actions gives students further background in problems, policy, and civic action to prepare them for CAP. First, students analyze problems in terms of causes and effects. Next, they explore how policy can be linked to problems. Finally, they list possible civic actions that can be taken to when working on a problem.

Lesson 4: Introducing Policy Analysis helps students develop a deeper understanding of public policy and the interaction between government and citizens in making policy. They look at case studies and are introduced to policy analysis.

Lesson 5: Policymaking in the Three Branches of Government introduces students to executive, legislative, and judicial policymaking and to policy evaluation. First, students discuss how policy can be made by each of the branches. Then they read about and discuss how the Chicago City Council passed an ordinance to suppress gang activity and how each branch of government was involved in the policy. Finally, students are introduced to a policy-analysis rubric (GRADE) and apply it to the Chicago gang ordinance.

Lesson 6: Analyzing Anti-Gang Policies provides students with practice in analyzing policy. First, as a whole group, they evaluate an anti-gang policy using GRADE. Then in small groups, they are given policies that address gang violence and they evaluate each.

Lesson 7: Policymaking at the Local Level gets students to examine an instance of policymaking at a school board, one of the most common institutions at the local level. First, students read about and discuss a common local (and national) problem, the dropout rate. Then they role play subcommittees of a hypothetical school board, examine documents about the dropout problem, and craft a policy to address the dropout problem. Finally, they exchange policies with other groups and evaluate one another’s policies using the GRADE rubric.

Lesson 8: Law & Policy informs students about how existing law can influence public policy and policymaking. First, students read about and discuss how existing law can influence public policy. Then in small groups, they role play members of a public policy law firm and decide whether a policy of evicting renters violates existing law and whether a new law is needed to protect renters.

Lesson 9: Persuading introduces students to the art of persuasion. First, they read about and discuss the three types of persuasion: logos, ethos, and pathos. Then students prepare two-minute persuasive talks on why the issue that they have chosen to address in CAP is important. Finally, in pairs, students present and critique one another’s talks.
Lesson 10: Building Constituencies introduces students to the importance of building a constituency to support or oppose public policies. First, students complete a brief reading about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Next, they examine documents created during the boycott and identify the civic actions taken to help build constituencies. Finally, in small groups, students brainstorm how they can get support for their CAP issue.

Lesson 11: Setting the Public Agenda introduces students to the public agenda and its importance to policy. First, students read about and discuss the public agenda and ways that citizens can influence it. Then in small groups, students are given different situations and they develop strategic plans for getting their issues or solutions to issues on the public agenda.

Lesson 12: Using the Media helps students learn about the importance of the media in setting the public agenda. First, they read about and discuss how the media help set the public agenda and how citizens can influence the media and even create their own media to help change the public agenda. Then they develop a plan to do one action to use or affect the media. Finally, they begin to implement their plan. As homework, they complete their action.

Lesson 13: Persuading Policymakers informs students that legislative and executive bodies often hold public hearing and how students can make effective presentations at these hearings. First, students read about public hearings and techniques for making presentations at these hearings. Then students role play a city council and people appearing before it attempting to persuade policymakers on hypothetical issues.

Lesson 14: Creating Change Through the Electoral Process focuses on electoral politics and how it deeply influences policymaking. First, students read about and discuss the role that electoral politics plays in policymaking. Then in small groups, students role play campaign workers and create strategies to attract young people to participate in an election campaign.
Lesson 2: Introduction to Public Policy

Overview
In this lesson, students look at the link between policy and problems. First, students read and discuss a short article defining policy. Then they discuss policy and its connection to problems. Next, in small groups, they do a newspaper search to find examples of public policy.

Civic Mission of Schools Promising Approach: 1, 2

Objectives
Students will be able to:
- Define public policy.
- Explain that public policies are created to address problems and needs.
- Explain that a policy itself may sometimes be considered a problem.
- Find and identify problems and policies in a newspaper.

Preparation & Materials
- Newspapers: 1 per 2–3 students
- Handout 2A: What Is Public Policy?—1 per student
- Handout 2B: Newspaper Search—1 per student

Procedure
I. Focus Discussion—What Is Public Policy?
   A. Explain that in this course, students are going to be dealing with policy, analyzing it, and even trying to influence it, and therefore it is important that they understand what policy is. Distribute Handout 2A: What Is Public Policy? to each student. Ask students to read the handout and look for the following:
   - What public policy is.
   - Why it is made.
   B. When they finish, hold a discussion by asking the questions at the bottom of the handout:
      1. What are some examples of policies that you can think of? Which of these are private policies and which are public policies?
      2. What are some institutions that create public policy? What levels of government are these institutions?
      3. Read below different definitions of public policy written by political scientists. Which do you think is the best definition? Why? How would you define public policy?
II. **Connecting Policy and Problems**

A. Explain that the problem they work on needs to have some connection to government and that connection will likely be through policy.

B. Provide students with simple examples of policy/problem connections such as:

1. **Policy:** In the last few years, at least six states have enacted laws restricting cellphone use while driving.

   *What problems do you think these state laws (which are policies) are trying to address?*

   *(Prevent accidents. Accept other reasoned responses.)*

2. **Problem:** People who are extremely overweight are more likely to have serious health problems. More children than ever before are being diagnosed with diseases, like diabetes, related to being overweight.

   *What policies might a school district enact (which is a government agency) to address this problem?*

   *(Ban on vending machines, cafeteria requirements to offer healthy food, mandatory P.E. classes. Accept other reasoned responses.)*

3. **Policy = Problem:** A school has a policy of leaving four minutes between classes, which many students feel is not enough time and results in many students being tardy.

   *What is the problem?*

   *(The policy.)*

   *What can be done about the problem policy?*

   *(It can be eliminated, changed, or replaced with a new policy allowing greater time between class periods.)*

   Explain that policies are often controversial and viewed as a problem by some people. So in some circumstances the problem may be a policy.

III. **Newspaper Search: Problems and Policies**

A. Divide the class into groups of 2–3 students. Provide each group with a recent local newspaper and explain that newspapers are one of the best places to begin exploring issues and problems they might want to address in CAP. Add that newspapers are also great sources for learning about government and public policy.
Distribute **Handout 2B: Newspaper Search** and review it with students. Tell the groups that their challenge is to find as many articles as they can that discuss at least two of the following:

- Government
- Policy(ies)
- Problem(s)

Give them time to complete part 1 of the search.

**B.** When groups have completed part 1 of the search, ask them to quickly review all of the articles they found. Then have them do part 2 of the search. Each group member should:

- Choose one article that describes an interesting/compelling problem.
- Make sure the article selected mentions at least one public policy.
- Answer the questions on Handout 2B.

**C.** Tell students that in the next lesson they are going to return to the same groups and look at the articles they have collected again. (Either collect the articles or have students keep them for the next lesson.) Also remind students that they need to start thinking seriously about the problem/issue/need they will address in CAP.
Handout 2A

What Is Public Policy?

You’ve heard the word “policy” many times:

“Honesty is the best policy.”

“It’s the store’s policy only to give credit and not refunds on returned merchandise.”

“Three tardies and I’ll see you after school—that’s the tardy policy.”

Policies are established ways of doing things. You have ways of doing things and so do businesses and government. The policies that individuals and businesses adopt are private policies. Even so, these policies may affect the community. A fast food restaurant, for example, may have a policy of serving drinks in Styrofoam containers, which can harm the environment.

Public policies are those that governments adopt to address problems. For example, every state government has adopted the public policy of banning the sale of alcohol to minors. This public policy addresses the problem of teenage alcohol abuse. It is expressed in the body of laws, regulations, decisions, and actions of government.

Policies differ from goals. “Teenagers should not drink,” “everyone should have a home,” “people should be able to walk the streets at night safely.” These statements are goals, not policies. Policies are the means of achieving goals. If the goal is to provide homes for people without homes, a policy might be a plan to build 1,000 units of low-income housing. If the goal is to fight crime, a policy might be to put 200 more police officers on the streets of the city.

Many policies are translated into law by government action. For example, to control drunk-driving deaths, a state may pass tougher drunk-driving laws. Or to improve the environment, the federal government may pass an air-quality law. Or to raise money for public libraries, a city may enact a tax increase.

When public policies go into effect, they can deeply impact people’s lives. People can gain or lose significant things, such as jobs, services, and equal treatment. Changes in economic policies can affect whole countries or regions. Changes in education policies can affect whole generations.

Questions

1. What are some other examples of policies that you can think of? Which of these are private policies and which are public policies?

2. What are some institutions that create public policy? What levels of government are these institutions?

3. Read below different definitions of public policy written by political scientists. Which do you think is the best definition? Why? How would you define public policy?

Civic Action Project
Political Scientists Define Public Policy

Public policy is integral to the study of government. Scholars who study government are known as political scientists. In his book *An Introduction to the Policy Process*, political scientist Thomas A. Birkland outlines a few definitions of public policy from other texts on political science:

- Clarke E. Cochran, et al.: “The term public policy always refers to the actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions.”
- Clarke E. Cochran, et al.: “Public policy is the outcome of the struggle in government over who gets what.”
- Thomas Dye: Public policy is “Whatever governments choose to do or not to do.”
- Charles L. Cochran and Eloise F. Malone: “Public policy consists of political decisions for implementing programs to achieve societal goals.”
- B. Guy Peters: “Stated most simply, public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens.”
Handout 2B

Newspaper Search

Part 1

Your team should search your paper for articles that discuss at least two of these three things:

1. **Problem.** As a starting point, think about problems, issues or needs that people are concerned about in the categories of health, environment, social problems (crime, drugs), safety, or education. Problems might also be focused on people (government officials, police, unemployed, workers, etc.) or places (building being torn down, housing, certain streets/neighborhoods, parks). Or, a policy itself may be a problem.

2. **Policy.** Look for mandates, rules, laws, regulations, ordinances, etc. An article may be discussing policies that are being considered, policies that need to be changed, or the need for new policies. One article might discuss more than one policy.

3. **Government.** Remember: There is a broad range of government agencies. Public schools, public transportation, streets, city services (like trash pickup, water, and other utilities), airports, county/public hospitals and clinics, and prisons are all connected to government agencies.

Part 2

After you have found as many articles as you can, each member of your team should:

1. Select one article that is interesting.

2. Write on this handout a sentence or two about each of these things:
   
   A. The problem(s) described by the article.

   B. **Policy** connection(s).

   C. **Government** connections(s).

   D. What interests you about this problem or policy?

*Civic Action Project*