

# PROJECT CITIZEN

## PUBLIC POLICY AS A PRIMARY COMPONENT OF PROJECT CITIZEN

### Public policy as it is used in Project Citizen

**Project Citizen** focuses on the development of public policy to deal with a specific problem in the community and the recommendation of that policy to the appropriate government or governmental agency. It is important, therefore, that students understand the term public policy.

The phrase public policy is at the heart of the American notion of a republic "*res publica* – the public thing." As defined in the student text, public policy is "an agreed upon way that our federal, state, or local government fulfills its responsibilities, such as protecting the rights of individuals and promoting the welfare of all the people. Some public policies are written into laws by legislatures. Other policies are contained in rules and regulations created by the branches responsible for carrying out and enforcing laws."

One of the main goals of this program is to help students learn how to participate in their own governance. While there may be many different approaches to solving community issues or problems, we want students to examine problems that are best dealt with, at least partially, by government. The solutions students develop to these problems, then, should include recommendations as to what public policies government should be responsible for implementing. The policies they suggest also may include recommendations regarding the shared responsibilities of the people in a community.

### Toward a working definition of public policy

It may be advantageous to consider several other definitions of public policy, written by scholars in the field, to fully grasp its meaning. Here are a few examples:

...the study of what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes.

Thomas Dye

...the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the lives of citizens.

B. Guy Peters

...the combination of basic decisions, commitments, and actions made by those who hold or affect government positions of authority. In most instances, these arrangements result from interactions among those who demand change, those who make decisions, and those who are affected by the policy in question.

Larry N. Gerston

## **Public policymaking process**

It is important that students understand the central role of government (local, state, national) in formulating public policy. They also should understand, however, that government's role is only one part of the process all citizens in a community should be encouraged to participate as well. Democratic decision-making requires both the consent of citizens to be governed and their participation in that government.

Policymaking begins when people in a community perceive that a problem exists. Perceptions about a problem may emerge from the media, politicians, citizen groups or the institutions of government. Next, people formulate ideas for how best to resolve the problem. Often people with ideas try to persuade government to adopt their ideas and put their solutions into practice. In this process, there are likely to be differences of opinion over what should be done about a particular problem and who should do it. Frequently, alternative proposals emerge. The entire process includes collecting and analyzing data, assessing consequences of alternative actions, and gathering support for one proposal or another. Once people agree on an appropriate course of action, they must persuade the appropriate government or governmental agency to adopt the policy. Once the policy is adopted, it then has to be carried out.

**Project Citizen** takes young people out of the world of orderly boxes and precise diagrams and into the universe of issues and policies that float in and out of the policymaking arena. In short **Project Citizen** is intended as a "hands-on" description of what comes out of the political process. It's not particularly neat, but it is an approach to explaining how political life really works. [Paraphrasing Larry N. Gerston in *Public Policymaking: Process and Principles*]

## **The citizen's role in the policymaking process**

It is important that students understand the role of citizens in formulating public policies. Citizens can be involved at all levels of the process by attending public meetings, writing letters to their representatives and to newspapers, making phone calls, monitoring proposals and counterproposals, participating in demonstrations, persuading other citizens to support a particular alternative, conducting research, submitting proposals of their own, and giving testimony at public hearings. This list is not exhaustive, but it illustrates that there are numerous opportunities for citizens to participate in the decision-making process.