New Jersey Citizens Making Change: Improving Your Community

Grade Level: 3-5

Lesson Creator: New Jersey Center for Civic Education, Rutgers, the State University of NJ

Time: 6-10 days

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- describe the role of the citizen in the American system of republican democracy
- explain what public policy is and how citizens can influence it
- identify, analyze, select and promote a solution to a local community problem.

New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Studies Standards (2020):

6.1.5.CivicsPl.1: Describe ways in which people benefit from and are challenged by working together, including through government, workplaces, voluntary organizations, and families.
6.1.5.CivicsPl.2: Investigate different ways individuals participate in government (e.g., voters, jurors, taxpayers).
6.1.5.CivicsPl.3: Explain how the United States functions as a representative democracy and describe the roles of elected representatives and how they interact with citizens at local, state, and national levels.
6.1.5.CivicsPl.4: Describe the services our government provides the people in the community, state and across the United States.
6.1.5.CivicsPl.5: Explain how government functions at the local, county, and state level.
6.1.5.CivicsPD.1: Describe the roles of elected representatives and explain how individuals at local, state, and national levels can interact with them.
6.1.5.CivicsPD.2: Explain how individuals can initiate and/or influence local, state, or national public policymaking (e.g., petitions, proposing laws, contacting elected officials).
6.1.5.CivicsPD.3: Explain how and why it is important that people from diverse cultures collaborate to find solutions to community, state, national, and global challenges.

6.1.5.CivicsPR.1: Compare procedures for making decisions in a variety of settings including classroom, school, government, and/or society.

6.1.5.CivicsPR.3: Evaluate school and community rules, laws and/or policies and determine if they meet their intended purpose.

6.1.5.CivicsPR.4: Explain how policies are developed to address public problems.

6.1.5.CivicsCM.1: Use a variety of sources to describe the characteristics exhibited by real and fictional people that contribute(d) to the well-being of their community and country.

6.1.5.CivicsCM.2: Use evidence from multiple sources to construct a claim about how self-discipline and civility contribute to the common good.

6.1.5.CivicsCM.3: Identify the types of behaviors that promote collaboration and problem solving with others who have different perspectives.

6.1.5.CivicsCM.5: Investigate the lives of New Jersey individuals with diverse experiences who have contributed to the improvement of society.

6.1.5.CivicsCM.6: Cite evidence from a variety of sources to describe how a democracy depends upon and responds to individuals' participation.

6.3.5.CivicsPD.2: Use a variety of sources and data to identify the various perspectives and actions taken by individuals involving a current or historical community, state, or national issue.

6.3.5.CivicsPD.3: Propose a solution to a local issue after considering evidence and the perspectives of different groups, including community members and local officials.

6.3.5.EconET.1: Investigate an economic issue that impacts children and propose a solution.

**Essential Questions**

- What is the “common good”?
- How can people who disagree have civil conversations?
- What is the role of the citizen in the American system of republican democracy?
- What is public policy and how can citizens influence it?
- Why is it important for citizens to work for the common good?
- What is the role of the citizen in the American system of republican democracy?

**Activity/Procedures:**

**Day One**

**What is the “common good”?**

Have your students discuss the concept of the “common good”. The class will (or should) come up with a definition such as actions or activities that are shared and beneficial for all or most members of a given community. Although the United States economic system of capitalism protects an individual’s use of private property, sometimes an individual’s (or corporation’s) use of his or her private property may be contrary to the environmental needs (air, water, transportation, safety) that affect all members of a community and requires a decision for the “common good”. That’s why we have regulations to help us try to keep our air or water clean. Local and state issues often have a greater impact on the lives of most people than national issues.
The common good or general welfare does not mean that a law or policy is good for every person—that would be almost impossible—but rather that it is good for society—like building a road, or requiring taxes to pay for infrastructure improvements.

**Activity 1: Have students complete Handout 1:**

- What is the Common good?
- Where do we find reference to “the common good” in our Constitution? Have students look at a copy of the U.S. Constitution to find the answer and fill in the chart.

  “The common good” is the same as the “general welfare”. It is mentioned both in the Preamble as one of the goals or purposes for setting up the government of the United States.

  It is also mentioned in Article I of the U.S. Constitution, which sets forth the powers of the national government: “to lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and “General welfare.”

  That is the purpose of government—to make decisions for the common good—to improve our society while protecting individual rights and safety. The tension between guarding individual rights and interests and maintaining a strong sense of shared purpose and common destiny is inherent in our constitution and has been debated over the past 230 years and continues to be debated.

- How do we decide what is “for the common good”?

  The concept of the common good is based on Classical Republicanism—from the Greek and Roman Republics which were the historical examples that the founders followed. The common good requires placing the needs of the community above those of the individual: the need for each citizen to balance his or her self-interest with the common good.

  In a representative democracy, like the United States, we vote. We elect representatives who are supposed to enact and carry out laws that improve society for the benefit of all. Individuals also have the opportunity to influence decisions by speaking with their representatives, individually, through the media, or most commonly by organizing with other individuals who have similar interests or views to “lobby” those who are making the decisions at local, state and national levels. Democracy depends on ALL people—not just elected leaders—recognizing and supporting the common good.

  A completed chart should look somewhat like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the common good?</th>
<th>actions or activities that are shared and beneficial for all or most members of a given community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where do we find mention of the common good in the Constitution?</td>
<td>“The common good” is the same as the “general welfare”. It is mentioned both in the Preamble as one of the goals or purposes for setting up the government of the United States.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is also mentioned in Article I of the U.S. Constitution, which lays out the powers of the national government: “to lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and “General welfare.”

| How do we decide what is for the common good? | In a representative democracy, like the United States, we vote. Individuals also have the opportunity to influence decisions by speaking with their representatives, individually, through the media, or most commonly by organizing with other individuals who have similar interests or views to “lobby” those who are making the decisions at local, state and national levels.

We elect representatives who are supposed to enact and carry out laws that improve society for the benefit of all. |
| Why is it important in a democratic society for citizens and elected officials to work for the common good? | This concept of the common good is based on Classical Republicanism—from the Greek and Roman Republics which were the historical examples that the founders followed. The common good requires placing the needs of the community above those of the individual: the need for each citizen to balance his or her self-interest with the common good.

Democracy depends on ALL people—not just elected leaders—recognizing and supporting the common good. |

### Day Two: Citizens making decisions for the common good

**Activity: Reading and analysis**

Have students read and discuss the decision-making process and its impact in *Letting Swift River Run* (Janet Yolen, 1992). The residents of a town make a decision for the common good to let Swift River be dammed and turned into a reservoir to supply drinking water for the larger community. Have students complete Handout 2:

- What were the trade-offs?
- How was the decision made?
- Who was responsible for the decision?
- Were the people living in the area included in the decision making process?
- How were the lives of the Swift Valley residents changed following the building of the reservoir?
- What did the people in the towns receive in compensation for giving up their homes?
- Do you think that the decision to let Swift River be dammed was for the common good?
- Are there any situations in New Jersey similar to Swift River?

### Day Three: Citizens take Action for the Common Good

**Activity: Critical thinking**

Have your students identify individuals and/or groups in history, or in their community, who have taken action for the common good, and what they have done and why it improved the community.
Historical figures may range widely, from George Washington to Martin Luther King, Jr., as may local individuals. What is important is the discussion about how each individual voluntarily undertook an effort that resulted in a benefit to the larger community.

In addition, or, alternatively, have your students read and discuss the history, action taken and results in *A River Ran Wild* by Lynne Cherry (1992), a true story about the pollution and ultimate cleaning of the Nashua River in Massachusetts:

- Have students work in pairs or small groups to complete a sequencing graphic organizer and a cause and effect graphic organizer (Handout 3)
- How did the Native Americans treat the land and the Nashua River?
- What impact did the Industrial Revolution have on the Nashua River?
- What role did citizen participation play in the history of the Nashua River?
- What would daily life be like along the Nashua River if concerned citizens had not taken action to clean up the river?
- Consider the connections between land use and the conflicts between Native Americans and European colonists in the 1700s.
- Are there any situations in New Jersey similar to Swift River? (Numerous rivers in New Jersey, most notably the Passaic River, have been the site of industrial pollution and hazardous waste for years. Students could investigate and report about how the river became polluted, what progress has been made cleaning it up, and what they think, based on their research, needs to be done.)

**Alternative activity (or in addition):**

Have your students read or watch (the original version, not the 2012 movie) *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss, a fable where the Onceler ruins the environment by cutting down the beautiful Truffula trees to make “thneeds” and the Lorax, who speaks for the trees, calls upon a young boy who lives in town and has visited him to do something about the situation:

- Compare *A River Ran Wild* with *The Lorax*
- Involve your students in a mock hearing before the EPA using *The Lorax* characters.
  - Give Handout 4: Directions for and EPA Hearing with *The Lorax* to your students:
  - Count off by sixes and assign the following roles:
    - 1s = The Lorax
    - 2s = Brown Bar-ba-loots
    - 3s = Humming Fish
    - 4s = Swomee-Swans
    - 5s = The Once-ler
    - 6s = The EPA Commissioners
  - Prepare for the hearing:
  - The witnesses (everyone but the EPA commissioners) prepare a statement from the perspective of its members:
    - A statement of the problem
    - Details about how the group has been injured
    - A request for some relief or improvement of the situation
  - The EPA Commissioner prepare questions to ask the injured parties and select a chief commissioner.
Each character testifies before the board about the problems caused by the Onceler and what might be a good solution.

- Conducting the hearing
  - The EPA Commissioners should sit at a table at the front of the room.
  - There should be a table facing the Commissioners for the witnesses who are testifying.
  - Each witness will make a 1-2 minute statement; each commissioner may ask up to 3 questions.
  - After the commissioners have heard all the testimony, they will hold an open, public hearing in which they will discuss possible actions they might take.
  - After 10 minutes of deliberations, the chief commissioner will announce a decision and the reasons for the decision.

- Debriefing the Hearing
  - What happened at the hearing?
  - What were the possible solutions suggested?
  - Were the solutions workable?
  - Do you agree or disagree with the EPA commission’s decision?
  - Is the solution feasible? Will it work?

Day Four: Students Take Action:Identify a Local or State Problem to Address

Activity: Have students identify a community problem to address

- Students identify several potential problems to address. Students may brainstorm from scratch with each student identifying a problem or the students could select from a list provided by the teacher
- Students may do some preliminary research on the issue that they would like to address and present it to the class.
- Students discuss and prioritize the community problems that have been identified by considering the following (Handout 5):
  - Scope: How many people are affected?
  - Intensity: How important is this issue? Student might look at existing data or reports or do their own survey)
  - Duration: Is this a new problem or one that has been around for a while?
  - Feasibility: Is there enough information available to come up with a solution
- Students agree (or vote) on one problem for the class or groups of students to research, gathering and evaluating information on the problem.

You may want to preface the process of agreeing on ONE problem by first discussing how to have a civil conversation.

How can people who disagree have a civil conversation?

Discuss how people who disagree can have a civil conversation and then bring the issue to the classroom and ask for class rules for having civil discussions with your class.

Conclusions might include the following:
- Wait to be recognized by the teacher before speaking.
- Don’t interrupt or talk over someone else who is speaking.
• Listen for content in the statements of others, even if you disagree. Don’t engage in side conversations that distract from the speaker who has the floor.
• Don’t assume that you know what someone else means. Ask questions that help you understand perspectives different from your own.
• Relate your comments to those of previous speakers.
• Don’t get personal. No demeaning or inappropriate comments, facial expressions, or gestures.
• Differentiate between facts and opinions. Both are valid when expressed appropriately.
• Listen more than you speak.

You may want to post these rules for classroom conversations and have your students follow them.

Day Five: Many governments

Activity: We are citizens on many levels:

Have your students play the game, “Citizen Me,” which you can use to create a citizenship pyramid evaluating citizenship on five levels (home, school, city, state and nation). “Citizen Me” is one of many civic-based resources, lessons and games from iCivics, which can be found at https://www.icivics.org/. “Citizen Me’ allows students to understand that they are part of several different communities.

Activity: Federalism and Separation of Powers: Which level of government and agency has the authority to address the problem the class identified?

Share Handout 6: Federalism and Separation of Powers with your students. This provides an opportunity for your students to review what federalism and separation of powers are and to appreciate that there are three branches of government (separation of powers) at the national state and local levels of government. Then, have your students identify the level of government (national, state or local) and the branch (separation of powers) that has the responsibility for the problem that the class has decided to address.

Day Six: How do we make change? What is public policy?

Discuss the concept of “public Policy” with your class.

• Public policy is the concept or idea that guides a course of action or procedure in dealing with public issues or problems.
• It includes the decisions, commitments and actions made by those who hold or affect government positions. So public policy is made by school board members and school superintendents, as well as town council members, mayors, governors, members of the state legislature, heads and members of state and local agencies. State agencies include DEP, State Dept. of Ed., Attorney General, etc. Local agencies include the local police, local health department, local recreation department, etc.
• Public policies resolve conflicts, are authoritative and are usually embodied in laws, rules or regulations.

Conclude that we need to learn about public policy making so that we have the tools and the skills to make changes to improve our communities. Knowledge, practical experience and citizenship skills empower citizens to influence public policy.
• What is “civil society”?
  o Civil society is the sum of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest the interests and will of its citizens
  o Individuals come together to pursue interests they share and these associations monitor and influence government
  o Initiatives affecting the general welfare, such as soup kitchens, used clothing, etc., are sometimes undertaken by “civil society,” that is, self-organized private groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, PTAs, unions, religious organizations, etc.
  o Have students identify some local efforts by civil society organizations to improve the community
  o Have students identify some public policies implemented to improve the community

• What advantages does public policy have?
  o Civil society solutions depend on the voluntary efforts of individuals and may end.
  o Public policy solutions are authoritative and continue until changed

Day 6-8: Research, identify and evaluate possible solutions to the problem.

Activity: Find a solution to the problem that the class has identified and bring your solution to the appropriate governmental body

• Divide the class into groups of students to research, identify, examine and evaluate the pros and cons of possible public policy solutions to the problem

• Then have the class as a whole identify the public policy that they think, based on their research and evaluation, will best address the problem

• Have your students consider whether the policy they developed meets the requirement of a good law (Handout 7) by asking:
  o Does it have a legitimate purpose?
  o Is it fair?
  o Is it clear?
  o Is it flexible?
  o Can it be enforced?
  o Is it consistent with constitutionally guaranteed individual rights?

• Then, have your students develop an action plan to get their policy adopted by the appropriate governmental agency (which may be the State Legislature, the Governor, an executive agency, a local town council, municipal or county agency, or local school board)

• Finally, have your students prepare (and send!) persuasive letters explaining their plan to the appropriate individual

Day 9: Student Reflections

Have your students, individually and as a class, reflect on what they learned by using their research, critical thinking and communication skills to influence public policy to improve their community, by using Handout 8 to reflect and respond to the following questions:
1. What did I personally learn about public policy from working with my classmates?
2. What did we learn as a class about public policy by developing our portfolio?
3. What skills did I learn or improve upon by working on this project?
4. What skills did the class learn or improve upon by working on this project?
5. What are the advantages of working as a team?
6. What are the disadvantages of working as a team?
7. What contributions did I make as part of the team?
8. What did the team do well?
9. How can I improve my skills in collaboration, problem-solving, research, writing and public speaking?
10. How can the class improve its skills in collaboration, problem-solving, research, writing and public speaking?
11. What would we want to do differently if we were to develop another project aimed at influencing public policy?
12. What would we want to do differently if we were to develop another Project Citizen portfolio?
13. How did working on this project change my attitudes about personal responsibility for my community?
14. How did working together on this project change my attitudes about what a citizen or group of citizens can do/to improve their community?

Teachers may want to consider using the framework provided by Project Citizen, a project-based civic education program for students grades 3-12 that emphasizes responsible participation in local and state government. The materials have been developed by the Center for Civic Education, have been reviewed and found to be highly effective by independent evaluators, and are inexpensive in print or ebook format at store@civiced.org. A Level One book is available for grades 3-8.

Assessment

Teachers grade each student’s participation in the development of the public policy project as well as their written reflections.

Extension: New Jersey State Annual Project Citizen Showcase

Class projects may be organized into digital portfolios that document the class work and presented at the annual New Jersey State Project Citizen Showcase, which is held in person at Rutgers University in Piscataway in early June.

The digital portfolios and presentations are reviewed by a panel of evaluators who assess the projects according to a series of rubrics. The project with the highest points is sent as New Jersey’s representative to the National Project Citizen Showcase sponsored by the national Center for Civic Education in California.

You can see projects from 2012 on, as well as the rubrics for evaluating them and a short video, online at http://civiced.rutgers.edu/projectcitizen.html. Starting in 2025, upper elementary classes (grades 3-5) will be invited to prepare and present projects to improve their communities, along with middle and high school classes, at the annual Project Citizen Showcase. For additional information contact Robert O’Dell, executive director of the New Jersey Center for Civic Education, at robert.odell@rutgers.edu.
### Handout 1: What is the Common Good?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the common good?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do we find mention of the common good in the Constitution?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we decide what is for the common good?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is it important in a democratic society for citizens and elected officials to work for the common good?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Handout 2: *Letting Swift River Run***

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>What were the trade-offs?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>How was the decision made?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>Who was responsible for the decision?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><strong>Were the people living in the area included in the decision making process?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><strong>How were the lives of the residents living in Swift River Valley changed following the condemnation of their property?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><strong>What did the people in the towns receive in compensation for giving up their homes?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td><strong>Do you think that the decision to let Swift River be dammed was for the common good? Why or why not?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td><strong>Are there any situations in New Jersey similar to Swift River? Research and identify them.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Handout 3: *A River Ran Wild*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did the Native Americans treat the land and the Nashua River?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What impact did the Industrial Revolution have on the Nashua River?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What role did citizen participation play in the history of the Nashua River?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would daily life be like along the Nashua River if concerned citizens had not taken action to clean up the river?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Handout 4: A Mock EPA Hearing regarding *The Lorax*

Count off by sixes and assign the following roles:

1s = The Lorax  
2s = Brown Bar-ba-loots  
3s = Humming Fish  
4s = Swomee-Swans  
5s = The Once-ler  
6s = The EPA Commissioners

Preparing for the hearing:

- The witnesses (everyone but the EPA commissioners) prepare a statement from the perspective of its members:
  - A statement of the problem
  - Details about how the group has been injured
  - A request for some relief or improvement of the situation

- The EPA Commissioner prepare questions to ask the injured parties and select a chief commissioner.

Conducting the Hearing

- Each witness will make a 1-2 minute statement; each commissioner may ask up to 3 questions.

- After the commissioners have heard all the testimony, they will hold an open, public hearing in which they will discuss possible actions they might take.

- After 10 minutes of deliberations, the chief commissioner will announce a decision and the reasons for the decision.
Handout 5: Prioritizing Issues: Is it Important? Is it Feasible?

To prioritize which issues are most important and feasible, consider:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCOPE: How many people are affected by this issue?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTENSITY: How important is this issue?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DURATION: Is this a new problem or one that has been around for a while?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEASIBILITY: Is the issue narrow enough or too broad? Is there enough information about the issue?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Handout 6: Federalism and Separation of Powers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Executive</th>
<th>Legislative</th>
<th>Judicial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National Government</strong></td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Congress: Senate and House of Representatives</td>
<td>U.S. Supreme Court Appellate Courts Federal District Courts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Government</strong></td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>State Legislature: Senate and Assembly</td>
<td>NJ State Supreme Court NJ Appellate Courts NJ Superior Courts (by County)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>County Government</strong></td>
<td>County Executive President</td>
<td>Freeholder Board</td>
<td>No separate courts (see above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Municipal Government</strong></td>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>Town Council</td>
<td>Municipal courts (limited jurisdiction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Board</strong></td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>School Board</td>
<td>Administrative Office of the Courts—Commissioner of Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Does the proposed rule or law have a legitimate purpose?

2. Is it fair?

3. Is it clear?

4. Is it flexible?

5. Can it be enforced?

6. Is it consistent with constitutionally guaranteed individual rights?
# Handout 8: Student Reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What did I personally learn about public policy from working with my classmates?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What did we learn as a class about public policy by developing our portfolio?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What skills did I learn or improve upon by working on this project?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What skills did the class learn or improve upon by working on this project?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What are the advantages of working as a team?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What are the disadvantages of working as a team?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What contributions did I make as part of the team?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What did the team do well?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How can I improve my skills in collaboration, problem-solving, research, writing and public speaking?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How can the class improve its skills in collaboration, problem-solving, research, writing and public speaking?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. What would we want to do differently if we were to develop another project aimed at influencing public policy?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. How did working on this project change my attitude about my personal responsibility for my community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. How did working together on this project change my attitude about what a citizen or group of citizens can do/to improve their community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>