

## New Jersey Citizens Making Change: Improving Your Community



### Grade Level: 6-8

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

### 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):

- 6.3.8.CivicsPD.1: Deliberate on a public issue affecting an upcoming election, consider opposing arguments, and develop a reasoned conclusion.
- 6.3.8.CivicsPD.2: Propose and defend a position regarding a public policy issue at the appropriate local, state, or national level.
- 6.3.8.CivicsPD.3: Construct a claim as to why it is important for democracy that individuals are informed by facts, aware of diverse viewpoints, and willing to take action on public issues.
- 6.3.8.CivicsDP.1: Identify an issue of inequality, develop multiple solutions, and communicate the best one to an appropriate government body.
- 6.3.8.CivicsPR.3: Take a position on an issue in which fundamental ideals and principles are in conflict (e.g., liberty, equality).
- 6.3.8.CivicsPR.4: Use evidence and quantitative data to propose or defend a public policy related to climate change.
- 6.3.8.CivicsPR.5: Engage in simulated democratic processes (e.g., legislative hearings, judicial proceedings, elections) to understand how conflicting points of view are addressed in a democratic society.
- 6.3.8.CivicsPR.6: Seek the perspectives of multiple stakeholders with diverse points of view regarding a local budget issue and take a position on proposed policy.

- 6.3.8.CivicsPR.7: Compare how ideas become laws at the local, state, and national level.
- 6.3.8.EconET.1: Using quantitative data, evaluate the opportunity cost of a proposed economic action, and take a position and support it (e.g., healthcare, education, transportation).

### **Common Core ELA Standards**

- [RH.6-8.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- [RH.6-8.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- [RH.6-8.3](#) Identify key steps in a text's description of a process related to history/social studies (e.g., how a bill becomes law, how interest rates are raised or lowered).
- [RH.6-8.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.
- [RH.6-8.5](#) Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).
- [RH.6-8.6](#) Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts)
- [RH.6-8.7](#) Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.
- [RH.6-8.8](#) Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.
- [W.8.1](#) Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence
- [WHST.6-8.2](#) Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes
- [WHST.6-8.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- [SL.8.1](#) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly
- [SL.8.4](#) Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.
- [SL.8.5](#) Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest.

### **Essential Questions**

- What is the role of the citizen in the American system of republican democracy?
- What is public policy is 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:**

#### **1. Vocabulary: Civic Concepts**

- What is the “common good”?

Have students discuss what they think is 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 of 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.

- 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 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."

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"?

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.

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.

A completed chart should look like this:

What is the common good?	actions or activities that are shared and beneficial for all or most members of a given community
Where do we find mention of the common good in the Constitution?	<p>“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.</p> <p>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.”</p>
How do we decide what is for the common good?	<p>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.</p> <p>We elect representatives who are supposed to enact and carry out laws that improve society for the benefit of all.</p>
Why is it important in a democratic society for citizens and elected officials to work for the common good?	<p>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.</p> <p>Democracy depends on ALL people—not just elected leaders—recognizing and supporting the common good.</p>

- What is public policy?
  - 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.
  
- Why is it important to learn about public policy making?
  - Ignorance about the public policymaking process leaves us without the tools to get things done.
  - There is confusion about who does what in the policymaking arena.
  - Knowledge, practical experience and citizenship skills empower citizens to influence public policy.

- What is “civil society”?
  - Civil society is the sum of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest the interests and will of its citizens
  - Individuals come together (associate) to pursue interests they share and these associations monitor and influence government
  - 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.
  - Progress is often the result of countless citizens engaging in their own spheres of influence and coming together with others to create ferment and criticism for change.
  - Have students identify some local efforts by civil society organizations to improve the community
  - Have students identify some public policies implemented to improve the community
- What advantages does public policy have?
  - Civil society solutions depend on the voluntary efforts of individuals and may end.
  - Public policy solutions are authoritative and continue until changed.

## 2. Citizens making decisions for the common good

- 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 was 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? (One example is Tocks Island)
- **The controversy over the Tocks Island Dam Project**
  - Vocabulary:
    - Hydroelectric power: power from the production of electricity by waterpower
    - Reservoir: a man-made lake where water is kept for use
    - Displaced—removed from one’s home
  - Background:
 

A proposal to build a dam at Tocks Island to create a huge reservoir six miles upstream from the Delaware Water Gap had been around a long time. It had four purposes: flood control, water supply, hydroelectric power and recreation. The most exciting spin-off was that the project would have created a national recreation area serving both New York and

Philadelphia metro areas including New Jersey. It would have been the largest dam project east of the Mississippi River.

The project involved the purchase of 70,000 acres of land and the construction of a reservoir that would be 40 mile long and a mile wide. Some 600 families and property owners whose land would be flooded had to be displaced. Some of these families had lived on and worked the land for centuries.

Construction was to begin in 1967 and by 1972 the reservoir was to begin filling and be fully operational by 1975. Opposition to the project began almost immediately among landowners on both sides of the Delaware whose properties were to be taken by the government.

- Gather research regarding the Tock Island Dam project:
  - <http://www.nps.gov/dewa/historyculture/stories-tocks.htm>
  - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5ZyFpr4I\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5ZyFpr4I_Y)
- Based on the research, develop responses to the following questions (Use Handout 3: Graphic Organizer):
  - What were the trade-offs?
  - How was the decision was 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 residents on either side of the Delaware River changed following the condemnation of their property?
  - What did the people in the towns receive in compensation for giving up their homes?
  - Do you think that the decision to build a huge dam was for the common good? Explain your conclusion.
  - Do you think the decision to ultimately NOT build the dam was for the common good? Explain your conclusion.

### 3. Citizens take Action for the Common Good

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 4)
- 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.

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* by Dr. Seuss
- Involve your students in a mock hearing before the EPA using *The Lorax* characters.
  - Give Handout 5: Directions for an 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?

#### **4. Community Service versus changing public policy**

Students identify several local problems. Perhaps there are poor people in the community who need assistance with adequate food or clothing, or elderly people who need help shoveling the snow in the winter.

For each problem identified, students consider possible solutions.

- What would be a solution that can be done by civil society?
- What would be a solution that can be done through public policy?
- Which would provide a more long-lasting solution?

## **5. Students Take Action: Address a Local or State Problem**

Have students identify and address a community problem in depth:

- 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, including local or state issues such as:
  - Antibiotics and pesticides in our food
  - Climate change and its impact
  - Diminishing farmland
  - Eroding beaches
  - Growing inequality
  - Growing Obesity
  - Lack of awareness and support for the arts
  - Lack of awareness and support for those with disabilities
  - Lack of jobs for young people
  - Lack of local recreational facilities
  - Lack of town/state pride
  - Limited summer camp opportunities
  - Limited use of library facilities and programs
  - Local historical sites unknown and/or falling into disrepair
  - Local water pollution
  - Low youth voter turnout
  - No coordination of community service needs/opportunities
  - Pedestrian safety crossing streets
  - Problems at animal shelters
  - Road safety
  - Taxes pushing people to move
  - Unclean beaches
  - Undocumented immigrants in New Jersey
  - Unhealthy food served in school
- Students discuss and prioritize the community problems that have been identified by considering the following (Handout 6):
  - 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 select one or several problems for the class or groups of students to research, gathering and evaluating information on the problem
- Groups of students examine and evaluate the pros and cons of various alternative solutions
- Then students identify the public policy that they think, based on their research and evaluation, will best address the problem
- Students consider whether the policy they developed meets the requirement of a good law (Handout 7) by asking:
  - Does it have a legitimate purpose?
  - Is it fair?
  - Is it clear?
  - Is it flexible?
  - Can it be enforced?
  - Is it consistent with constitutionally guaranteed individual rights?
- Finally, the 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) and prepare (and send!) persuasive letters explaining their plan to the appropriate individual
- 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*, 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](mailto:store@civiced.org).

### **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**

Projects may be organized into digital portfolios that document the student work and emailed to Robert O'Dell, executive director of the New Jersey Center for Civic Education, at [ro205@scarletmail.rutgers.edu](mailto:ro205@scarletmail.rutgers.edu) for the annual New Jersey State *Project Citizen* Digital Portfolio Showcase, which is held the first Friday in June.

The projects may be sent in any digital format, such as a powerpoint, Photostory, a website, a video, a movie using Movie Maker, Live Binders, or any other type of computer-based presentation that you can send by link to a website.

The digital portfolios 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.

Each year, the best middle school and best high school projects are uploaded to <http://civiced.rutgers.edu/projectcitizen.html> where they can be seen by others. You can see projects from 2012 on, as well as the rubrics for evaluating them and a short video, online at this website.

## Handout 1: What is the Common Good?

What is the common good?	
Where do we find mention of the common good in the Constitution?	
How do we decide what is for the common good?	
Why is it important in a democratic society for citizens and elected officials to work for the common good?	

## Handout 2: *Letting Swift River Run*

1. What were the trade-offs?	
2. How was the decision was made?	
3. Who was responsible for the decision?	
4. Were the people living in the area included in the decision making process?	
5. How were the lives of the residents living in Swift River Valley changed following the condemnation of their property?	
6. What did the people in the towns receive in compensation for giving up their homes?	
7. Do you think that the decision to let Swift River be dammed was for the common good? Why or why not?	
8. Are there any situations in New Jersey similar to Swift River? Research and identify them.	

### Handout 3: Tocks Island

1. What were the trade-offs?	
2. How was the decision was made?	
3. Who was responsible for the decision?	
4. Were the people living in the area included in the decision making process?	
5. How were the lives of the residents on either side of the Delaware River changed following the condemnation of their property?	
6. What did the people in the towns receive in compensation for giving up their homes?	
7. Do you think that the decision to build a huge dam was for the common good? Why or why not?	
8. Do you think the decision to ultimately NOT build the dam was for the common good? Why or why not?	

Handout 4: *A River Ran Wild*

<b>Cause</b>	<b>Effect</b>
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?	

## Handout 5: 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 6: Prioritizing Issues: Is it Important? Is it Feasible?

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

SCOPE: How many people are affected by this issue?	
INTENSITY: How important is this issue?	
DURATION: Is this a new problem or one that has been around for a while?	
FEASIBILITY: Is the issue narrow enough or too broad? Is there enough information about the issue?	

## Handout 7: Is it a Good Rule or Law?

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

Questions	Responses
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. How did working on this project change my attitude about my personal responsibility for my community?	
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?	

