

How can individuals and groups bring their concerns to public policymakers?

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For grades 7-12

NJ Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (2020):

- 6.1.8.CivicsPI.3.c: Distinguish the powers and responsibilities of citizens, political parties, interest groups, and the media in a variety of governmental and nongovernmental contexts.
- 6.1.8.CivicsHR.4.a: Examine sources from a variety of perspectives to describe efforts to reform education, women’s rights, slavery, and other issues during the Antebellum period.
- 6.3.8.CivicsPI.3: Use a variety of sources from multiple perspectives to examine the role of individuals, political parties, interest groups, and the media in a local or global issue and share this information with a governmental or nongovernmental organization as a way to gain support for addressing the issue.
- 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.CivicsDP.1: Identify an issue of inequality, develop multiple solutions, and communicate the best one to an appropriate government body.

- 6.1.12.CivicsDP.4.b: Analyze how ideas found in key documents contributed to demanding equality for all (i.e., the Declaration of Independence, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address).
- 6.1.12.CivicsDP.6.a: Use a variety of sources from multiple perspectives to document the ways in which women organized to promote government policies designed to address injustice, inequality, and workplace safety (i.e., abolition, women’s suffrage, and the temperance movement).
- 6.1.12.EconEM.13.a: Explain how individuals and organizations used economic measures as weapons in the struggle for civil and human rights (e.g., the Montgomery Bus Boycott, sit downs).
- 6.1.12.HistoryCC.13.c: Determine the impetus for the Civil Rights Movement and generate an evidence-based argument that evaluates the federal actions taken to ensure civil rights for African Americans.
- 6.1.12.CivicsDP.14.a: Draw from multiple perspectives and cite evidence to determine the extent to which nongovernmental organizations, special interest groups, third party political groups, and the media affect public policy.
- 6.3.12.CivicsPD.1: Develop plan for public accountability and transparency in government related to a particular issue(s) and share the plan with appropriate government officials.

How can individuals and groups influence public policy?

Since public policy decisions are made by elected or appointed representatives, individuals and groups can initiate change by bringing their ideas to the public policy makers through:

- Letters to public policymakers and the media

- Phone calls and emails to public policymakers and the media
- In-person lobbying with public policymakers.

To do this, students should develop an ACTION PLAN.

What is an ACTION PLAN?

An ACTION PLAN is a well-thought out outline of how the group intends to achieve the change it wants made.

The ACTION PLAN should identify:

- Who (what groups) might support the public policy?
- Who might be opposed? Why?
- What could you do to ensure that the proposed policy is implemented?
- Who do you need to lobby?
- How can you convince those opposed that it is a good idea?

How can PUBLIC PROTESTS and CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE achieve change?

Why have individuals and groups protested and engaged in civil disobedience to try to achieve change rather than writing letters and lobbying?

Public protests are ways for people to peacefully complain in a public way about something they think is wrong and to build support to correct it. Protests can take the form of an individual writing a letter to a newspaper – or a march of thousands along city streets. Public protests or rallies involving large groups are constitutionally legal under the First Amendment’s rights to free speech, assembly and petition. Since a protest or rally may involve noise and may interfere with traffic, a permit from the local government is usually necessary.

Civil Disobedience is a peaceful public protest against a law, rule or other governmental action that is seen as morally objectionable. It may involve breaking the law, such as marching despite the refusal of local officials to issue a permit, or refusing to leave a seat in a bus when it is required by law (e.g., Rosa Parks). When the issue involved an unfair rule or law, and public policy makers could not be persuaded by lobbying efforts, those pushing for change have resorted to public protests and civil disobedience to bring attention to the need for change.

For example, from the start of the republic until 1836, when a “gag resolution” passed by pro-southern Congressmen (contrary to the First Amendment) to prohibit all discussion of slavery in the House of Representatives, thousands of petitions had been sent to members of Congress urging that slavery be ended. Instead abolitionists were forced to use other means, often

protests. In 1849, Henry David Thoreau wrote an essay, "Civil Disobedience," arguing that citizens must disobey the rule of law when the law proves to be unjust and explaining why he refused to pay taxes in protest of slavery and the Mexican War.

Women, denied the right to vote until 1920, spent decades lobbying and petitioning Congress, to no avail. By the start of the 20th century they supplemented their activities with parades, pageants, street speaking, and demonstrations, and ultimately civil disobedience: breaking windows, planting bombs, handcuffing themselves to railings and going on hunger strikes.

The civil rights movement (1954-68) to end legalized racial discrimination, disenfranchisement and racial segregation included civil disobedience in the form of boycotts such as the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott, "sit-ins" such as the Greensboro sit-ins (1960) in North Carolina and Tennessee, Freedom Rides, mass marches and demonstrations.

None of these instances of civil disobedience actually resolved the issues they raised. Slavery was not ended by civil disobedience but rather by the 15th Amendment. Women did not gain the right to vote because of their actions, but rather by the 19th Amendment. Legal racial discrimination and segregation was not ended by civil rights protests, but rather by the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and changes in state laws. Public protests and civil disobedience bring public attention to an issue: they do NOT resolve it. The issues, proposals and arguments still need to be brought to the public policymakers for changes to occur. This is why the skills for influencing public policymakers through research and persuasion are so important.

Activity: Implementing your Proposal.

As part of the class research and analysis on the problem that was selected, develop an action plan to implement your proposal.

Identify:

- Individuals and groups that might support the public policy you want to implement
- Individuals and groups who might be opposed and why

Prepare:

- Written and oral presentations to convince those opposed that it is a good idea.

Contact:

- Potential allies to determine how to work together
- Potential opponents to try to convince them why your proposal is a good idea
- Media outlets