A Guide to Project Citizen

Virginia Civics Education (VA Civics) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded in 2018 that promotes constitutional literacy, critical thinking, and civic engagement, empowering the next generation of leaders in Virginia. Through support for the We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution and Project Citizen programs, VA Civics works to transform all students in Virginia into informed, active, and engaged citizens.

In supporting the We the People and Project Citizen programs, VA Civics provides professional development opportunities for teachers, develops and supplies teaching resources, supports classroom activities, and runs annual regional and state We the People competitions and Project Citizen showcases.

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Introduction to Project Citizen

Project Citizen provides a practical first-hand approach to learning about our complex system of government and how to monitor and influence it. Through the curriculum, students will work together to research their community to discover problems and then identify solutions in the form of policy that require government involvement. Students also have the opportunity to display their research and policy suggestions through showcases, a way for students to display their research and present their policy solutions to their classroom and/or community. Showcases are also held at the state and national levels, where classes have the opportunity to participate and share their work with other classes from across their state or nation.

The Goals of Project Citizen

- In Project Citizen, a group of students works cooperatively to identify a problem in their community that is best addressed by a public policy enacted by an appropriate government authority.
- Once the problem is identified, the students conduct research on it. They evaluate alternative policies for solving the problem, and then develop their own solution in the form of a public policy proposal.
- As a final step they create a political action plan to enlist a government body or agency to adopt their proposed public policy.
- Participants develop a portfolio of their work and present their project in a hearing showcase before civic-minded community members or those government officials possessing policymaking authority.
- Participants learn how to express their opinions, decide which level of government and which agency is most appropriate for dealing with the problem identified, and how to influence policy decisions at that level of government.

Project Citizen Textbooks
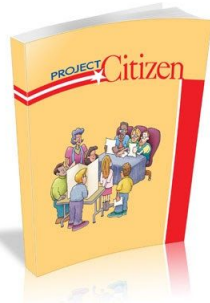
Level 1 Textbook

The Level 1 text (suggested for grades 5–8) enhances instruction by providing tips from Project Citizen teachers and emphasizes the fundamentals of the public policymaking process.
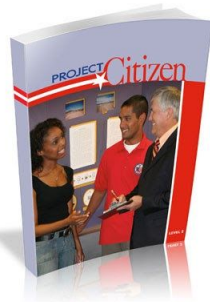
Level 2 Textbook

Designed for use by secondary students (grades 9–12) or adults, the Level 2 text introduces students to the citizen's role in the public policymaking process. It can also be used with groups of adults who are interested in becoming more effectively involved in community affairs.

Textbook Overview

- Introduction to Project Citizen & Introduction to Public Policy
- Identifying Problems to be Dealt with Through Public Policy & Selecting a Problem
- Gathering & Organizing Information on the Problem
- Developing & Presenting Your Research and Portfolio
- Reflecting on Your Experience and Why Citizen Participation is Important to Democracy

(Includes activities and worksheets that walk students through each step of the process)

Skill Development & Outcomes

Fostering Civic Participation

Students will learn to work with **clear, attainable goals** that set criteria for performance, connect with **real-world problems and events**, integrate a variety of related **concepts and ideas**, use knowledge and skills from **multiple disciplines**, cooperate with **peers**, relate assessment activities to instructional activities, and interact with **parents** and **community members**.

Outcomes

Civic knowledge
Civic skills: Intellectual & Participatory
Civic dispositions: Democratic values and principles
Reasoned commitment
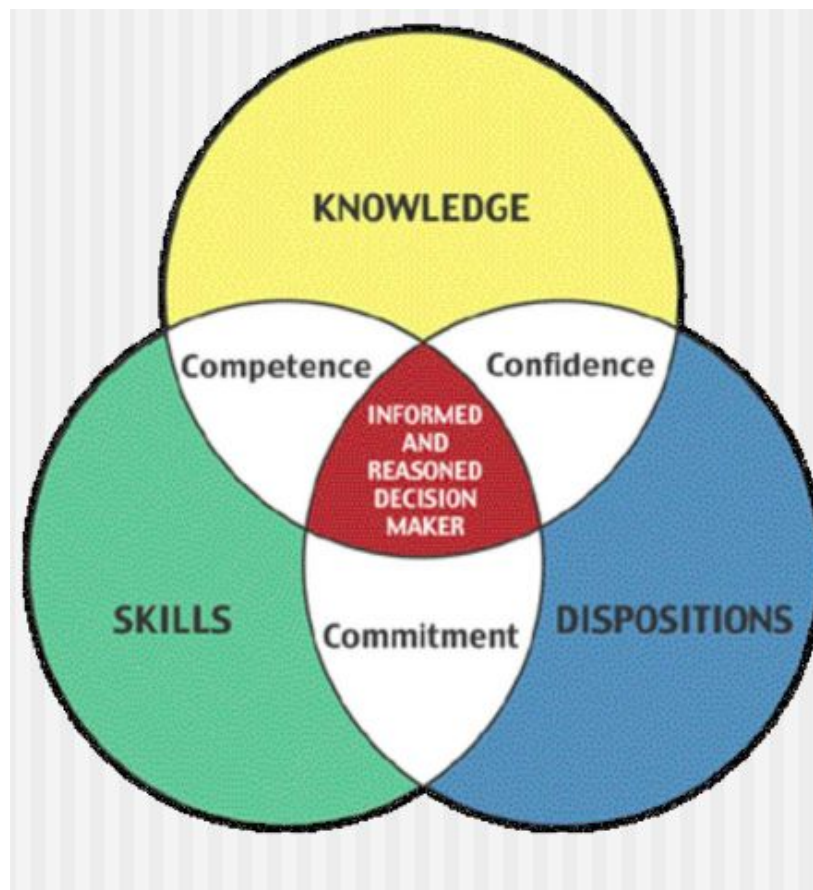
Grade 8
Civics and Economics

CE.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical thinking, geographical analysis, economic decision making, and responsible citizenship by

a) analyzing and interpreting evidence from primary and secondary sources, including charts, graphs, and political cartoons;

b) analyzing how political and economic trends influence public policy, using demographic information and other data sources;

c) analyzing information to create diagrams, tables, charts, graphs, and spreadsheets;

d) determining the accuracy and validity of information by separating fact and opinion and recognizing bias;

e) constructing informed, evidence-based arguments from multiple sources;

f) determining multiple cause-and-effect relationships that impact political and economic events;

g) taking informed action to address school, community, local, state, national, and global issues;

h) using a decision-making model to analyze and explain the costs and benefits of a specific choice;

i) applying civic virtue and democratic principles to make collaborative decisions; and

j) defending conclusions orally and in writing to a wide range of audiences, using evidence from sources.

CE.3   The student will apply social science skills to understand citizenship and the rights, duties, and responsibilities of citizens by

d)   examining the responsibilities of citizenship, including registering and voting, communicating with government officials, participating in political campaigns, keeping informed about current issues, and respecting differing opinions in a diverse society; and

e)   evaluating how civic and social duties address community needs and serve the public good.

CE.4   The student will demonstrate personal character traits that facilitate thoughtful and effective participation in civic life by

f)   practicing thoughtful decision making; and

g)   practicing service to the school and/or local community.

CE.10 The student will apply social science skills to understand how public policy is made at the local, state, and national levels of government by

a)   examining the impact of the media on public opinion and public policy;

b)   describing how individuals and interest groups influence public policy; and

c)   describing the impact of international issues and events on local decision making.

Inquiry Based Learning

Project Citizen fits nicely into the 4 steps of inquiry-based learning. The steps below explain how teachers can help students through the process.

The 4 Steps of Inquiry-Based Learning   *from Edutopia

1. Students develop questions that they are hungry to answer. Have them develop a problem statement that requires them to pitch their question using a constructed response, further inquiry, and citation.

2. Research the topic using time in class. It's crucial to have some of this be classwork so students have access to the head researcher in the room—you. You aren't going to do the work for them, but you are going to guide them and model methods of researching reliably.

3. Have students present what they've learned. Students should create and present a culminating artifact. Students can develop a website using Weebly, or perhaps a slideshow using Google Slides.

4. Ask students to reflect on what worked about the process and what didn't. Reflection is key. And it isn't just about asking them to think back on their opinion of the topic. It's about reflecting on the process itself. Have students focus on how they learned in addition to what they learned.

K-12 Service Learning Standards

Project Citizen meets Service Learning Standards

From National Youth Leadership Council

Meaningful Service

Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.

Link to Curriculum

Service-learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.

Reflection

Service-learning incorporates multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.

Diversity

Service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.

Youth Voice

Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

Partnerships

Service-learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.

Progress Monitoring

Service-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement and sustainability.

Duration and Intensity

Service-learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.

What is Public Policy

Public policy is an agreed-upon way that our federal, state, or local governments fulfill their responsibilities, such as protecting the rights of individuals and promoting the general welfare of the people. An important part of dealing with a public policy problem includes identifying the government official or agency that has the responsibility and authority to act on the problem.

Not all problems in a community require government to take action. Families, neighbors, or community organizations are often the best means for handling many problems that exist in a community.

Fill out the rest of this chart with your own suggestions for public policy and civil society solutions to the problems

Public Policy Solution	Community Problem	Civil Society Solution
City officials fund a program for needy individuals to "buy" food and clothing from participating merchants using vouchers.	Poor families in need of food and warm clothing	Churches in the local community organize a drive to collect food and clothing and then distribute it.
	School-Aged Children are out on the streets late at night	
	Parents are not using child protective car seats properly	
	The lake in the community is polluted and filled with litter	
	Owners of a professional football team want to build a stadium in the city	
	Many students in the local high school have been cheating on homework and tests	

Online Resources to Help Define Public Policy:

Center for Civic Education   Khan Academy

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
A high brick wall surrounding a public park owned by the city.

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
The wall was crumbling and unstable because it was poorly maintained by park workers.

All the King's Horses and the King's Men
Emergency response capacity was somewhat limited. The public health services included an obsolete horse-drawn wagon and an inadequate emergency room at the public hospital.

Couldn't put Humpty together again
Mr. Dumpty was permanently disabled and unable to work or take care of his own personal needs.

Divide into small groups. Pick a movie and answer the following questions. Present your movie and answers.

Q: Who was the main character?

Q: What is their "Problem?" Why is this a problem?

Q: What could they have done to solve their problem?

Q: Choice 1: Advantages? Disadvantages?

Q: Choice 2: Advantages? Disadvantages?

Q: Choice 3: Advantages? Disadvantages?

Q: What's their best choice?

Q: What's their best course of action?

**The Problem
Alternative Policies
The Policy
The Action Plan**

Questions for Students to Consider

Q: Can we use this format to identify and solve problems in our personal lives?

Q: What kind of problems do we have in our community?

Q: How can we fix these problems?

Q: Who helps fix these problems?

These are some important additional questions students should consider before selecting a problem:

- Is the problem selected important to us and other people in your community?

- Does government have some responsibility to deal with this problem?

- Will there be sufficient information about the problem to develop a good project?

- Is there a realistic possibility of solving the problem selected?

Identify a Problem

A group of students works cooperatively to identify a problem in their community that is best addressed by a public policy enacted by an appropriate government authority.

Collect evidence to prove the problem is a good problem

- Interviews with concerned residents, students, parents, school staff, other community members
- Surveys of concerned residents, students, parents, school staff, other community members
- Articles / stories from local newspapers, newsletters or other news media
- Articles that support a similar issue in other places
- Maps that show how your issue is a problem
- Other data collection (e.g., counting cars or bicycles, etc.) to support your argument

Examples of Problems

School Problems	Young People Problems	Community Problems
Backpack weight	Transportation safety	Graffiti
Lunch hours	Curfew	Water safety
Drug testing	Peer pressure	Public transportation
Outdoor eating	Gangs	Racism
Dress code	Obesity	Invasive species
Amount of homework	No place to hang out	Recycling
Phone policy	Vaping	Poor building quality
Bullying	Internet access	Handicap accessibility

Alternative Policies

Students work together in teams to research and analyze a variety of options for addressing the chosen problem through public policy.

Alternative policy ideas

- Proposals that have been suggested by different political parties or interest groups
- Suggestions or bills put forward by elected officials
- Policy ideas put forth in speeches by elected officials or citizens
- Current policies in other towns, cities, states, or countries
- Proposals generated by the students themselves brainstorming ideas

Steps for presenting alternative policies

- Summarize the policy solution in 5 sentences or less
- List the sources used to devise the policy
- Identify who in the community will support this policy
- Identify who in the community might oppose this policy
- Describe 3 advantages of the policy
- Describe 2 disadvantages of the policy
- Explain what level of government is involved
- Explain why this policy is a good solution to the problem

Choose a Policy

Based on their research, students will develop their own solution in the form of a public policy proposal.

Things to consider when choosing a policy

- **Intensity of the Problem:** Which community does this issue most affect and how serious is it for the community? How concerned are people about the problem (how upset are they)?

- **Scope of the Problem:** How widespread is the problem in the community? How many people are affected by it and how?

- **Duration of the Problem:** How long has this been a problem in the community?

- **Resources:** what might people gain or lose because of this problem or how it is responded to?

Next Steps

- Review the alternative solutions
- Discuss how to build consensus and how reaching consensus may not mean everyone agrees
- Choose a method of consensus to determine the policy solution for the problem
- Finalize the chosen policy solution
- Give students an opportunity to reflect on the constitutionality of the chosen policy.

Develop an Action Plan and Portfolio

Based on their research, students will develop their own solution in the form of a public policy proposal. As a final step, students create a political action plan to enlist a government body or agency to adopt their proposed public policy. Students then design a physical or virtual portfolio that summarizes their project, along with a project binder with details and source materials.

Action Plans Should
- Identify influential individuals and groups in the community who might be willing to support the proposed policy and how students might convince them to support their policy
- Identify groups or individuals in the community who might oppose the policy and how they might persuade them to support it
- Describe how they will get the appropriate government entity to support the policy
- Explain what evidence they will use to persuade the appropriate entities to support and implement the policy

Goals of the Portfolio
- Informs an audience of the importance of the problem identified in their community
- Explains and evaluates alternative policies so that an audience can understand the advantages and disadvantages of each
- Discusses their choice as the best policy to deal with the problem and makes the case for their policy
- Demonstrates how their class could develop support for its policy in your community, as well as in the legislative and executive branches of the appropriate level of government

Presenting the Portfolio
- Students present their work in a simulated public hearing before a panel of evaluators chosen from the community
- Presentations last about 10 minutes each

Portfolio Evaluation Criteria
- Understanding of the Problem
- Analysis of Alternative Policies
- Public Policy Development & Persuasiveness
- Implementation of an Action Plan
- Overall Portfolio

Portfolio Tips: What to Include

Written statements	Research
Interviews	Citations
Pictures	Graphs & Charts
Original artwork	Creativity
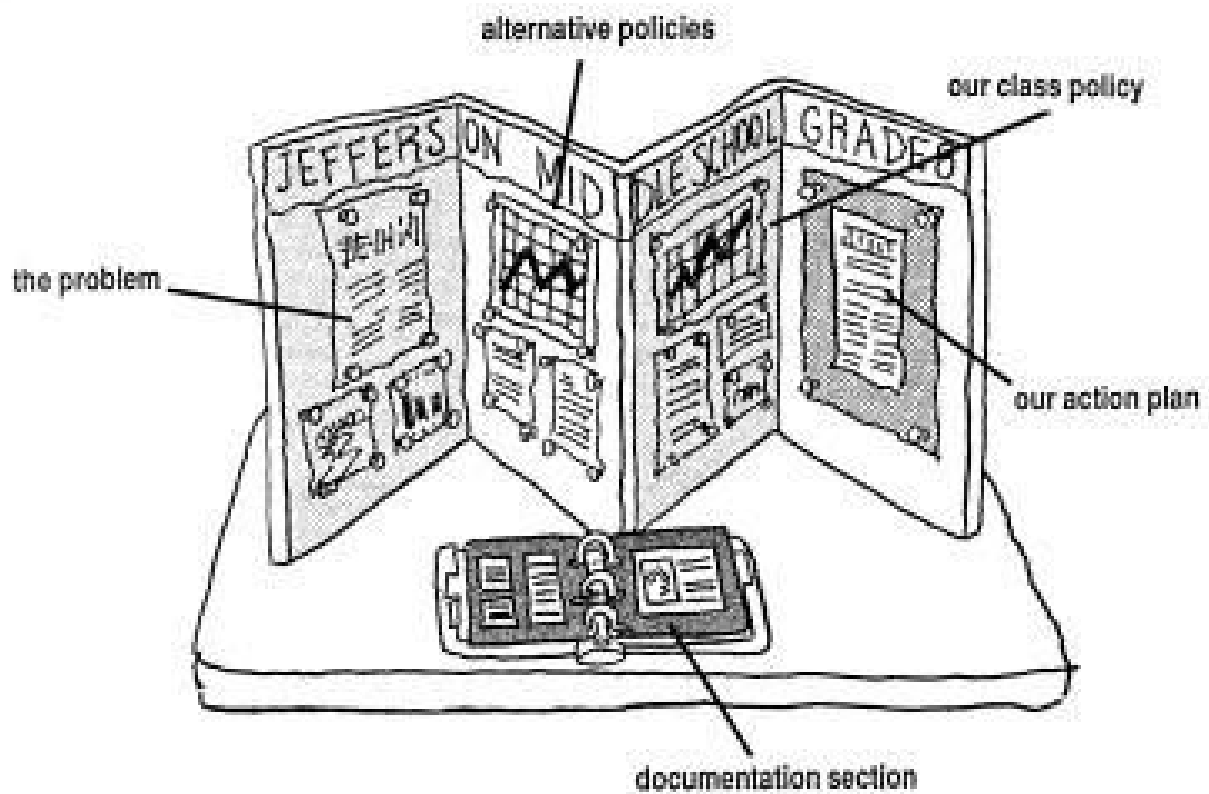
Reflection

Questions to ask students as they reflect on the entire process

- What have you learned about how your community and public policies are organized and enacted?

- What responsibilities of public officials or members of the community did you find most influential as you did this project? Why?

- What conflicts or challenges did you encounter while doing this project? How did you resolve them?

- Which parts of the project did you enjoy most and why?

- Now that the project is complete, what do you feel more confident about for future projects you work on?

Classroom Pacing & Resources

Step 1 Identify public policy issues or gaps in our community
Step 2 Select a problem to study
Step 3 Gather information on the problem
Step 4 Develop a portfolio
Step 5 Present your portfolio
Step 6 Reflect on your learning experience

7–8 Week Plan (the ideal scenario)
During school, 2 or more times a week for an hour a day
Steps 1–2: 1–2 days
Steps 3–5: 2 weeks each

4–8 Week "After School" Plan
After school club that meets for 30–45 minutes once or twice a week
Steps 1–2: 1 meeting each
Steps 3–5: 2–4 meetings each
- For this plan, you'll need to assign work (research) to the students that they can do at home
- Allow the students to work on research and writing during some class times
- Enlisting help for the students (a volunteer parent, possibly) will make their meeting times more effective

2–4 Week Condensed Plan
Every day, 45–60-minute lessons
Steps 1–2: 1 day each
Steps 3–5: 2 weeks total
Note: students may not be able to contact experts and get responses back with this short timeframe

Resources
Anatomy of a physical portfolio
Example of an electronic portfolio
Example of a slide show portfolio
Resources--Student forms, Examples, Research Links