

PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION—A MODEL WITH EMPHASIS ON WHAT AND WHEN

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The objective of public policy education is to increase the level of understanding among the people so that they acquire a broader, factual base from which to make public decisions. To accomplish this, the problem must be clearly stated in a manageable form. Alternative solutions and their probable consequences should be discussed in clear, concise terms easily understood by local leaders. A decision-making framework should be constructed.

Public policy education is problem oriented. This distinguishes it from a purely informational program designed to explain “how it is” to the general public.

DECISION MAKING IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

Public decisions are compromises among special interests. The final decision is determined by the people at the ballot box or through their elected representatives. In our political system the “right answer” to a public question is the one agreed upon by the majority of the people within the constitutional constraints of minority rights.

Public decisions are based on facts, misconceptions, half-truths, myths, and values. Facts are just what the word implies, truth which can be verified. Myths, half-truths, and misconceptions are what people think are facts and are treated the same as facts. Values are people’s concepts of what should be, that is, what is “right” or “wrong.” As a public problem emerges, people tend to apply their values to the facts, half-truths, and misconceptions about the problem and arrive at their own particular solution. Many special interest groups within society will propose different solutions, and therefore a compromise must be “hammered out” in the political arena. After the decision makers talk over the problem and reach a palatable compromise, the legislative procedure is put in motion and what was once a compromise becomes a law or legal solution.

How does public policy education fit into decision making in the public arena? It assists the decision makers. It can be a valu-

able input into the decision-making process if it increases understanding and renders the problem more manageable.

WHAT TO TEACH

The problem must be broadly recognized as a problem, at least by the key decision makers and by the people directly affected. If just the professor thinks the problem warrants a public policy education program, the program is doomed to failure. The problem must be recognized as a controversial issue by the people who count.

If a problem is largely scientific, it can be solved by the scientist within whose discipline it belongs. If, however, there is no scientifically correct solution to the problem, it must be solved through the political process.

Public policy problems concern a group, not just individuals. Group decision making is the key. Kansas State recently developed an informational program for Kansas farmers on the current supply and demand situation in agriculture. They were faced with a new and unfamiliar situation, high prices brought about by insufficient supplies to meet an expanding world demand. A public policy approach was followed, that is, the problem was defined, alternative solutions and their probable consequences were discussed, and needed information was provided for farmers to make an individual decision prior to planting wheat. Since a group did not make the decision, an educational program designed to provide information on the question, "Should farmers increase production," would not be considered public policy education. The educational method employed may be similar but the decision-making process is different.

Let us look at some examples of what to teach and discuss why these topics are appropriate for public policy education programs. Four public policy questions come to mind:

1. What should the tax mix be to pay for state and local government?
2. How should local government be organized to provide public services?
3. Who should control our food supply?
4. How should the tallgrass prairie of Kansas be preserved?

These four subjects have several things in common. First, they are highly controversial issues which have a broad interest among the people. They are under discussion and something is going to

be done about them in the future. Second, they are subject to scientific analysis but not subject to scientific solution. There is no "right" or "wrong" answer to these problems. Third, a group decision is required. No one individual will decide. The final decision will be made by the people through the political process.

How can we tell when a public problem is emerging? Following are a few tips for success in problem selection:

1. Keep informed daily. Read the popular press including the small town weeklies in your area.
2. Have a high listening I.Q. Keep your ears attuned to the grass-roots beat.
3. Become personally acquainted with the decision makers on the state and local level. Have contacts dispersed geographically.
4. Travel extensively, talk with the local people, especially those who are well aware of controversial problems and issues.
5. Check with the legitimizers before launching on a maiden voyage. They will let you know if you have selected a problem that is controversial and timely.

WHEN TO TEACH

Timeliness is extremely important along with problem selection. If the "wrong" problem is discussed at the "wrong" time, the program is bound to fail. The problem must be controversial enough to generate interest but not so controversial that rational discussion is impossible. When the trenches are dug and the guns are in position, the time for war, not education, has arrived. Let us examine the four policy questions which were previously mentioned in terms of the most effective time to conduct an educational program.

What should the tax mix be to pay for state and local government? When is the proper time to discuss this issue? Obviously right in the middle of a political campaign is the wrong time. Political campaigns are not really a part of the educational process. During the heat of a political campaign the issue has reached an emotional stage, positions have been taken, and the public has chosen sides.

During the 1972 Kansas gubernatorial and legislative campaign, the tax problem was rapidly approaching the decision-making stage and obviously would be the number one public issue before the

legislature when it convened in January. The most effective time, therefore, to conduct a public policy education program was after the political campaign, during the period before the legislature would convene. Since the issue was already before the public at the time, the situation was "ripe" for an educational input.

How should local government be organized to provide public services? This question is now approaching the decision-making stage. Several years ago it would have been almost suicide to mention consolidating counties or transferring functions from one local unit of government to another. Now this topic is beginning to attract some attention.

Recently I met privately with the county commissioners and a few select influential people of a western Kansas county. The purpose of the "behind the scenes" meeting was to discuss partitioning of the county among the neighboring counties. Why now? Very simply, the courthouse has been condemned. The county's population has declined 25 percent in the last decade. The young people are leaving. The county seat has lost its only filling station and grocery store.

Perhaps a year or two from now, the time will be about right to discuss local government organization in a public policy education forum.

Who should control our food supply? Six months or a year ago people were discussing this issue. It was an issue that was slowly developing. Now, however, with record price levels and shortages around the world, the problem has become more controversial, more pertinent, and more timely. This fall and winter will be an ideal time to bring this problem before the decision makers in a public policy education framework.

How should the tallgrass prairie of Kansas be preserved? A decade ago a Prairie National Park in the tallgrass area of Kansas was proposed. The cattlemen threatened to form a posse and stand guard if necessary. At issue is not whether the prairie should be preserved, but how. The cattlemen contend their track record is excellent; however, the conservationists wish to place 60,000 acres in the public domain. The problem is now approaching a decision-making stage. Various special interest groups have made proposals. A bill has been introduced in Congress. The extremists have mellowed. This fall would be an excellent time to conduct an educational program especially in the immediate area which will be affected.

HOW TO TEACH

Many methods are used in public policy education with varying degrees of success. In Kansas we have elected to use the alternative and consequence approach. Why? First, its track record is second to none. Second, our objective is to equip people to make their own decisions. We attempt to do what our vocation implies, that is, educate rather than advocate a particular solution or espouse a cause. Simply put, we strive for objectivity. No one is perfectly objective, but if an educator strives for objectivity, his clientele will more likely trust him and consequently a more conducive atmosphere for learning will develop.

Using any approach to public policy education requires an initial logistic decision. Should the mass media—newspapers, radio, television, and extension bulletins—be used, or should informal seminars and public meetings be conducted? Public policy education is problem oriented. It seeks to establish a decision-making framework. This requires the “eyeball” method, wherein a dialogue is developed between the educator and the participants and among the participants themselves.

Theory, abstract concepts, and mathematical models are included among the tools of a public policy educator. They are used behind the scenes in preparation for the program, but they would be misused if exposed directly to the decision makers. An effective public policy education program must be conducted in the “language” of the clientele.

WHOM TO TEACH

Extension programs by law must be available without discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, sex, or religion. However, we have limited resources and cannot reach all the people that we are charged with serving. With limited resources, we can best meet our objective by working with decision makers. They have the ability to put into effect the knowledge imparted. They can change the course of events. An effective public policy education program will reach the decision makers without discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, sex, or religion.

THE KANSAS EXTENSION PROGRAM ON FINANCING STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

We have now completed the second year of a successful public policy education program on financing state and local government in Kansas. Why taxes instead of, for instance, welfare, pollution,

or traditional agricultural policy problems? Taxes dominated the 1971 and 1972 political campaigns in Kansas. The heated controversy over financing state and local government began brewing almost immediately after the last major revision in the Kansas tax mix in 1965. The Governor's office issued position papers, interim legislature committees studied the problem, and numerous special interest groups offered proposals. Concerned citizens formed the Kansas Federation of Taxpayers.

Political, agricultural, business, and labor leaders throughout the state urged the university to get with it, to provide some educational input. Scared, and with little on-campus support, we embarked. We succeeded because we chose the right problem, at the right time, worked with the right people, and used the correct method. Our subject was a controversial group problem with many alternative solutions. Something was about to happen. A decision was imminent. We worked with the decision makers, and we remained objective.

The 1973 session of the Kansas legislature will go down in history as a "tax revision" session. The decision makers have publicly and privately acknowledged our input and have given us credit for making their task easier.

What did we teach? First, we defined the problem clearly. What should the tax mix be to finance state and local government in Kansas? Second, we presented a historical analysis of nationwide developments in social and economic conditions and their effect on state and local government expenditures and tax patterns. Third, a comparative analysis of the current situation in Kansas and neighboring states was developed. Fourth, possible alternative tax mixes at both state and local levels and their effects on various interest groups, business, labor, and agriculture were examined. Throughout the discussion we destroyed many popular myths, such as loopholes are bad, exemptions are good, a progressive income tax is equitable, farmers pay the bulk of the property tax, etc.

When did we teach? Primarily during the fall and winter of 1972 and 1973. We took a recess during the political campaigns and intensified our effort immediately prior to and during the first month of the legislative session.

How did we teach? We used the alternative and consequence approach. We talked in the language of our audience. A decision-making framework was developed. The participants were encouraged to participate. Each was given a personal copy of the booklet

entitled "Financing State and Local Government in Kansas." It was loaded with up-to-date relevant facts and figures on the Kansas tax system. It contained numerous sample tax mixes such as a 10 percent reduction in the property tax statewide and the corresponding increase in the sales and income tax that would be needed statewide if we were to continue to finance government at the current level. Sample mixes were also provided for the local level.

The last hour of the seminar was designed to provide the participants with an actual experience in developing a tax mix. They were arbitrarily divided into cross-sectional groups and challenged to develop a tax mix which the group as a whole was willing to defend.

Whom did we teach? First, the county extension personnel. Without their support it is impossible for a state specialist to function in Kansas. They were taught both methodology and subject matter. Considerable time was spent assisting them in identifying the local decision makers. However, an ulterior motive was agent acceptance of a program on the "hottest" subject most of them had ever handled.

Our primary clientele, of course, was a cross-section of state and local leaders, the decision makers.

SUMMARY

There are five necessary steps to the public policy education model:

1. Select a timely and controversial public problem that requires a group decision.
2. Identify and work with the decision makers.
3. Define the problem concisely.
4. Discuss the alternative courses of action and their probable consequences.
5. Leave the selection of the best alternative to the decision makers.

It will work. Our experience in Kansas is living proof.