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THE HIDDEN PROBLEM OF
CHILD FARMWORKERS IN AMERICA
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Part IV: Teacher Resources

The Public Policy Approach

A methodological explanation and rationale for this approach to teaching.

Source: Dr. Stephen Schechter, Director, Council for Citizenship Education, Russell Sage College



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The public policy approach is a classic example of the inquiry or issue-based approach to teaching. It also represents an excellent example of the principle of application to teaching. In this sense, the public policy approach is to the social studies what problem-solving is to mathematics.

The lineage of the public policy approach dates back to the larger civics exercise of utopianism, first used by Plato in his little known work, *The Laws*, on the founding of a utopian Greek colony, to be named Magnesia. The first English-language use of the public policy approach is credited to Sir Henry Taylor who wrote a book in 1836, titled *The Statesman*, on the British civil service. The first chapter, "Concerning the Education of Youth Destined for a Civil Career," excerpted below, contains one of the first formulations of the public policy approach to the study of civics.

In the further progress of the pupil, it will be well that [the pupil] should be brought more closely to matters of business, and taught the application of this knowledge. With this view, public documents, which have been printed for Parliament or otherwise, may be made use of. Let a question be selected which has been inquired into by a committee of either House of Parliament; let the minutes of evidence taken before the committee be laid before the pupil with their report; and let [the pupil] be required to report upon that evidence . . . , exhibiting—1st. The material facts of the case as drawn from the evidence; 2nd. The various views and opinions which have been or might be adopted upon the matter; 3rd. The conclusions of [the pupil's] own judgment, with [the pupil's] reasons; 4th. If [the pupil] concludes for legislation, a draft of the law by which [the pupil] would execute [his/her] purposes; 5th. A draft of the speech with which [the pupil] would introduce [his/her] proposed law to the notice of the legislature (Taylor, 1992, 66-67).

Over the decades, this approach has been put into practice by so many educators that it is now truly part of the public domain. In American education, one of its earliest expressions was in the curriculum of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Professors of domestic and foreign policy used the public policy approach in their teaching and in student assignments.

In the 1980s the New York State Education Department (NYSED) invited a group of Syracuse University professors to incorporate the public policy approach into the core curriculum of New York's 12th-grade civics course, *Participation in Government*. In 2002 the NYSED 12-grade core curriculum was revised and expanded by a Maxwell School alumnus, Stephen Schechter; and it is now online at the following address: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/partgov.pdf>.

Other states adapted and adopted the Syracuse/NYSED model into their own curriculum. The Center for Civic Education (CCE) and various other civic education organizations developed their own variations of the public policy approach. Under the direction of a former NYSED official, CCE and the National Conference of State Legislatures offer a middle-school variation, titled *We the People . . . Project Citizen*. CCE is currently completing a high school variation of this popular program.