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SUBJECT: How Education Can Help Resolve Public Issues
(Lesson Plan to supplement pages 1-6)

CONCEPT: There are two roads to public issues education. For some people, it begins with an issue that is already on the public agenda but is not getting resolved because of conflict (for example: spotted owls, hog odors, siting of landfills). For others, it begins with a problem at the individual or family level but where the causes are partly "environmental" (example: poor nutrition is a result partly of personal decisions but also of environmental conditions such as poverty and lack of access to food stores), in which case public decisions may be needed to change the environment. For people following either of these roads, politics -- the process of public decision making -- is part of the problem. People affected by public issues are sometimes uninvolved or poorly represented; issues are polarized; decisions fail to get made. Yet there are more constructive ways to address public issues, in both theory and practice. There are success stories throughout the country. Progress is slow, however, because few people have experience with collaborative, consensus-oriented forums. People interested in making a difference can help organize and facilitate such forums. But, doing so is different from more customary roles such as information provision or advocacy. People need help in visualizing these roles and seeing ways they can actually perform them.

LEARNER OBJECTIVES: At the completion of this lesson, learners will be able to:

1. Develop a shared awareness of how public decisions are typically made.

2. Envision strategies for improving the public decision making process.

3. Describe one or more roles in which they are comfortable.

BEFORE PRESENTING THIS MATERIAL:

1. Review pages 1-6 in *Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues.*

2. Prepare a transparency of "Roles/Functions for Public Issues Educators."

3. Review and duplicate "Considerations Prior To Public Issues Education Involvement", "Public Issues Educators Respond" and "More Tips and Guiding Principles" handouts or have copies of *Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues* for each participant.

4. Arrange for presentation of an example of "politics as usual." This could involve one of the following: (1) a role play with conflicting parties dealing with an issue and trying to make or influence a decision, (2) a videotape of a contentious meeting, (3) a videotape of news reports about one or more public issues likely to be of interest to participants, or (4) selected newspaper stories about political issues. The point here is to illustrate "politics as usual." Most examples will be negative. Try to find some positive examples of public decision making.

5. Read "Case Study: Cameron County Ag and Wildlife Coexistence Committee." Preview and arrange for showing the videotape of the Cameron County case study (videoconference produced October 26, 1993) or a similar example showing more constructive ways to address public issues.

Public Issues Education: Essential Tools for Extension Educators. Videoconference series produced by University of Wisconsin-Extension in conjunction with Extension Service-USDA Telecommunications Office. October 26, 1993; January 25, 1994; February 22, 1994. Available on videotape.

MEETING AGENDA FOR MATERIAL PRESENTATION:

1. Introduce the topic of how education can help resolve public issues.

2. Share learner objectives.

3. Provide a brief illustration or reminder of "politics as usual." This could be a role play by volunteers from your audience, a videotape of a contentious local meeting (city council, public hearing, etc.), video footage of local, state, or national news coverage of one or more public issues, or selected newspaper stories about public issues. Ask:

   — What do you think of this way of making public decisions?

   — What is annoying, destructive, or unhelpful in this approach? (Record these on newsprint.) How typical is the example?

   — What was done right? What was helpful in the example?

4. Shift the discussion to how the process could be improved. Ask participants to imagine their own community five or ten years in the future, after people have worked successfully to improve the way the community addresses contentious issues. Give them a few minutes to think. Then ask:

   — How is it done? How are contentious issues addressed? In the intervening ten years, what had changed from the way issues are currently addressed?

   — What else could be done to improve public decision making?

   — What leadership would be necessary to make a difference? Who could do it?

   — What would be the obstacles? (Policy makers who don't want more public involvement? Advocates who don't want to compromise? Others?) How are those people hurt by politics as usual? What advantages would they find in a different approach?

5. Show the Cameron County case study (or another example of constructively addressing a contentious issue). Discuss contentious issues and obstacles, and ask how they were dealt

with in this example. Ask:

— Who took the leadership for a more constructive approach?

— Who else played critical roles?

— What did they do?

— Did the policy makers benefit from this approach?

— Did the advocates benefit?

— What about the educators or facilitators (e.g., the extension agent in the Cameron County case)?

— What did they gain or lose?

6. Ask each participant to think of an issue in which he or she is, or could be, involved. Ask participants to think about their personal skills and "comfort" level in dealing with issues. Use handout "Considerations Prior To Public Issues Education Involvement" for personal assessment.

7. Look at the list of roles (transparency or pages 3-4 of *Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues*). Would you be comfortable performing those roles? If not, could you get someone else to do it effectively? What roles *could* you play? What training or other resources would you need?

8. Discuss how public issues educators respond to beginners' concerns (handout or page 5 in *Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues).* Choose some of the boldface statements and frame them as questions—e.g., "I don't have the process skills. What can I do?" Ask your audience how they would answer those questions. Then give the experienced educators' answers and discuss further if appropriate. (You may choose to use the handout after the discussion).

9. Discuss some of the tips and guiding principles for public issues education (handout or page 6 of *Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues).* Ask: Why are these important? What can educators or facilitators do to make them happen?

ROLES/FUNCTIONS FOR PUBLIC ISSUES EDUCATORS

A public issues educator's roles or functions may include being:

- a *convener*
- a *program planner*
- a *facilitator*
- an *information provider*
- an *adviser/analyst*
- a *forecaster*

Source: Dale, D. D. & Hahn, A. J. (eds.). (1994). Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues. Public Issues Education Materials Task Force of the National Public Policy Education Committee and PLC and PODC subcommittees of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Extension.

CONSIDERATIONS PRIOR TO PUBLIC ISSUES EDUCATION INVOLVEMENT

1. What are my personal skills in working with groups? (facilitation, goal setting, delegating, open mindedness, conflict management, bringing people together, etc.)

2. What types of people are concerned about this issue?

3. How many people are affected by this issue?

4. Is controversy low or high; widespread or narrowly focused?

5. How much time can you invest in the concern?

6. When will (must) decisions be made?

7. How can all stakeholders become involved in discussion?

Source: Stevens, G. L. & Vance, K. L. (eds.). (1995). Inservice Guide, A Supplement to Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues. Public Issues Education Materials Task Force of the National Public Policy Education Committee and PLC and PODC subcommittees of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension.

PUBLIC ISSUES EDUCATORS RESPOND

We asked experienced public issues educators how they would respond to some of the concerns often raised by beginners. Their answers follow.

"I'd like to do public issues education, but I don't know how."
Tim Wallace: What we need to do is just get started, and find out what the real gaps are, instead of just imagining them.

"I don't have the process skills."
Fred Woods: You've got someone on your state Extension staff who does. It shouldn't be a problem to ask for help on process skills, just as you ask for help on subject matter skills.

Georgia Stevens: Let's clarify the issue first, *then* identify the skills we'll need to move ahead.

"This sort of process takes too long."
Ron Faas: It might be a situation of "take the time now or take it later." Also, there may be alternatives to the amount of time it seems like it would take.

Tim Wallace: It does take a lot of energy and a lot of time, but you can phase it in.

"I'm a community person. I don't have a base in an academic institution."
Tim Wallace: Communities have many resources, including universities, that they can draw on.

Fred Woods: Extension can help. Every state has at least one person with public issues education responsibility, and Extension can provide access to the relevant academic base.

"I can't generate interest, even though a real and important issue exists."
Georgia Stevens: If it's a genuine issue, there's bound to be interest. It's more a matter of uncovering the interest by bringing interested parties together.

Tim Wallace: Others must not be on your wavelength; you'll have to do a lot more sounding of the community—asking questions, then listening to the feedback.

Fred Woods: Is it your interest, or is it truly a community interest? If it truly is something the public should be interested in, maybe it's not stated in the proper way and you should work on framing the issue in a way that is meaningful to the community.

"I'm caught in the middle."
Fred Woods: That's the challenge and the fun of doing public issues education—doing solid educational work in the midst of controversial issues, and yet not becoming part of the controversy.

Tim Wallace: As facilitator, you can respond like this: "Well let's take a look. Is your point of view up here? If so, we've got it."

Ron Faas: Clarify your educational role; you may be caught in the middle because people misperceive that role.

Tim Wallace: "...And remember, my role is a facilitator and a questioner: I'm not here to advocate *any* point of view. That's *your* responsibility."

Fred Woods: Tell the same story to all the parties concerned.

Wes Daberkow: "Caught in the middle" implies there are only two options. One way to take off some heat is to generate more options.

How will I know I helped make a difference?
Fred Woods: Remember that you don't measure making a difference by *your* opinion of whether the best choice was made. It's whether people feel that they made an informed decision.

"I prefer to be an advocate, not a neutral educator."
Tim Wallace: Your credibility is at stake as a community leader. You've got to be objective about the outcomes, although not neutral about the process used for resolution.

Ron Faas: It's important for facilitators *and* participants to distinguish between advocating an outcome and advocating process. It is appropriate—almost inevitable—for the educator to advocate a process.

"The group I'm working with is stuck in gridlock; the issue seems impossible to resolve."
Tim Wallace: The facilitator can say to the group: "Time out! Put yourself in the other person's shoes and write down why *you* think *they* think *you're* being unreasonable."

Fred Woods: Training in mediation and conflict resolution will help.

Ron Faas: If the educator is less experienced, this may be a time to call for help. Consider calling in a negotiator or mediator to take stock of the situation, maybe help work out an appropriate course of action—possibly formal dispute resolution.

"Someone is dominating the process. What can I do about it?"
Fred Woods: Remind them that others must have their opportunity to be heard as well. If possible, before you start, try to set rules with which all agree, to keep any one group or individual from dominating.

Source: Dale, D. D. & Hahn, A. J. (eds.). (1994). Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues. Public Issues Education Materials Task Force of the National Public Policy Education Committee and PLC and PODC subcommittees of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Extension.

MORE TIPS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

▲ "One element that was missing from many of the projects' interventions was 'intensity.' Successful public policy education programs require an educational intervention that is sufficiently intense or powerful to accomplish the intended aims for the intended audience and issue."

▲ "The likelihood of successful public policy education programs is enhanced when they are planned and implemented by a coalition of organizations."

▲ "Strong coalitions are not automatically formed by the coming together of two or more organizations. Rather, they must be created and carefully nurtured..."

▲ "Coalitions typically have benefits for individual and organizational members. However...individual leadership development and organizational change should not be substituted for meaningful progress in the policy arena."

▲ "Public policy education can be effective in the absence of a formal coalition, but not in the absence of the spirit or broad intentions of a coalition—specifically, the commitment to meaningfully incorporating diversity—by offering policy alternatives that reflect different points of view and, at root, different values—in the form and function of the program offered."

▲ "Different modes of public policy education are legitimate and appropriate for different audiences, issues, and contexts. The dialogue mode warrants increased attention..."

▲ "The empowerment mode...is under-utilized, suggesting a future need to more concertedly reach out to groups and individuals who are currently affected by but not involved in the policy process."

▲ "Attention to process as well as content is a critical feature..."

▲ "The media are an underutilized but potentially strategic resource for public policy education."

▲ "Tensions between education and advocacy are inevitable...Guidelines saying 'educate, don't advocate' are not completely adequate."

▲ "...Purposeful attention to evaluation design would (be) helpful at the beginning of project development."

▲ "Project staff should not be the sole evaluators of their projects.

▲ "Outcomes for participants...were reported far more frequently than impacts on public issues or on the policy making process, even though the latter is clearly of interest...More emphasis is needed on the assessment of issue or process impacts."

▲ "Realistic and significant targets for (sustainable outcomes include) changes in the way participating organizations understand, value, or conduct their work (capacity-building outcomes)."

Source: Hahn, A. J., Greene, J., & Waterman, C. (1994). Educating About Public Issues: Lessons from Eleven Innovative Public Policy Education Projects. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Cooperative Extension, 1994.

CASE STUDY: CAMERON COUNTY AG AND WILDLIFE COEXISTENCE COMMITTEE

Key people

Wayne Halbert—Committee Chair; Director, Harlingen Irrigation District; a cotton grower

Steve Thompson—U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Manager, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge

Terry Lockamy—county agricultural agent, Cameron County Cooperative Extension

Bobby Crum—staff of growers' cooperative chemical division

Rose Farmer—manager, National Audubon Society's Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary

Situation

One of four Texas counties in the Rio Grande Valley's delta region, Cameron County is located in the state's southern-most tip. Cotton is the major cash crop, grown on over 120,000 acres with a dollar value of more than $100 million. Other major crops include corn and grain sorghum, often grown in rotation with cotton.

The region is rich in birds and other wildlife. Six endangered species dwell here, including the jagurundi, the ocelot and the aplomado falcon. Until the mid-1940s, the aplomado nested in Cameron County. After that, it was rarely seen until the Peregrine Foundation, a wildlife organization, established a release program with release locations in the Laguna Atascosa Wildlife Refuge in 1985.

The chronology in the sidebar lists the events leading to a solution for this potentially volatile issue concerning cotton growers and endangered species in Cameron County.

Chronology

1973 Endangered Species Act becomes law.

October 1987 Cameron County agriculture agent receives word via Texas A&M chemist that the EPA has proposed banning 14 pesticides considered essential in cotton production. The ban, designed to protect the aplomado falcon, would take effect in February, 1988. Agent shares this information with Extension's Field Crops Committee.

Late fall 1987 Growers organize letter-writing campaign and begin calling political leaders to express their concern. EPA withdraws the proposed ban, but regulatory action seems likely by September, 1988.

January 1988 Growers, convinced the issue has not been resolved, pursue a collaborative approach. With encouragement from the Field Crops Committee, county agent helps organize the Ag and Wildlife Coexistence Committee.

February 1988 County commissioners authorize the Ag and Wildlife Coexistence Committee. The committee meets, develops working relationships, shares information, and develops recommendations for pesticide use and buffer zones.

Summer 1988 Recommendations are presented to the community at a public hearing. County commissioners endorse the recommendations and forward them to EPA and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

1988-1991 Various parties encourage federal agencies to consider the community's recommendations.

Source: Dale, D. D. & Hahn, A. J. (eds.). (1994). Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues. Public Issues Education Materials Task Force of the National Public Policy Education Committee and PLC and PODC subcommittees of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Extension.