

PUTTING IT IN PRACTICE

LESSON 12: CIVIC PROFESSIONALISM

CASE STUDY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 💡 **Develop a capacity to navigate different perspectives and engage in public-problem solving.**
- 💡 **Learn to identify strategies for working with a diverse set of stakeholders to facilitate positive change.**

LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson asks participants to examine a case study in which they have to identify strategies for navigating different perspectives and priorities in complex situations. The case study involves a role-playing activity to engage participants in issues surrounding youth advocacy and public policy. Facilitators are highly encouraged to bring in cases of public-problem solving that are contemporary or related to their own areas of expertise.

SUGGESTED PLAN [ø 75 minutes]

LESSON PREPARATION

1. Review the case study or identify/craft your own. The resolution to the Youth Advocacy and Public Policy case study below can be found on the Providence Student Union website, which can be shared with students after the discussion of the case study. See Walk in Our Shoes Campaign at: <https://www.pvdstudentunion.org/walk-in-our-shoes>.
2. Make copies of the Youth Advocacy and Public Policy case and associated roles (provided at the end of this lesson) for all participants, or prepare to make these materials electronically accessible.
3. Decide in advance how you will assign roles to participants. Methods of assigning roles can vary based on the number of people involved; for instance, you may want to assign complementary roles to multiple students (as noted in the case description) based on the estimated number of participants in the session to be able to give a role to all students.

ACTIVITY INTRODUCTION [🕒 25 minutes]

Introduce the concept of the case study as a way to explore complex public policy issues to participants. Give them time to read the case study before explaining the rest of the activity. Encourage them to read to understand the scenario at hand.

Explain that they will now participate in a role-playing activity based on this case study to understand the complexity of public policy issues and how people respond to them. Explain that you will assign each participant a role in the case study, and they will be expected to navigate the case study in the character of their assigned role.

Assign roles to participants and ask participants to review the case with their roles in mind, taking notes as needed.

Suggest that participants with the same or similar roles meet in small groups to discuss how their characters might proceed in the forthcoming role-playing activity.

ROLE PLAYING [🕒 25 minutes]

Directions for the role-playing activity are embedded in the case study below.

LARGE-GROUP DEBRIEF [🕒 25 minutes]

After the role-playing activity, bring the class back together for critical reflection on the case. Ask participants to reflect on their experiences taking on the role they were assigned. At the same time, invite them to bring their own ideas and perspectives to the debrief.

Some guiding questions to consider include:

- What was your experience like acting in your role? Was it a role you personally related to? Did you agree with the response you gave in character?
- What conflicts or tensions did you encounter, either in the case study itself or in your conversation about what to do about it? What aspect of the case study seemed most challenging to address?
- What skills would be required to navigate this situation? Do they vary depending on which role you take on in the case?
- After discussing this scenario, what questions do you still have?
- How would you imagine this case might be best resolved?

CASE STUDY: YOUTH ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC POLICY

The youth organizers of the citywide Providence Student Union (PSU) in Providence, RI, have selected a new issue to work on for the year: expanding the city's free public-bus pass program for transporting students to school to include all high school students living up to 2 miles away from school. This is an important issue for many young people in Providence, as free bus passes are offered only to students living more than 3 miles from school—leaving many students out in the cold.

The PSU determined this issue through a participatory process which included students from every high school in the city, ultimately finding the current policy unfair. Students living 3.1 miles from their respective high school had to pay for the bus (at \$70 per month), get a ride, or walk to school—a big challenge, especially in winter months. As one response, the savvy young organizers led an event, entitled “Walk in Our Shoes,” where they invited key stakeholders, including the CEO of the public transit authority, the mayor, parents, teachers, and members of the board of education, to walk to school from one student's house, 2.9 miles from her school.

“Walk in Our Shoes” got good press, and at the end of the march, the PSU delivered a petition signed by many hundreds of students asking for a commitment to reduce the minimum distance for free transportation in the next budget. “If we're not getting kids to school, how can we expect them to learn?” remarked one high school student. “It's a no-brainer.”

While the newly elected mayor had promised to support this demand during his election campaign, he has since learned that the issue is more complicated than he realized. Bus passes for the additional 2,000 students affected would cost \$1.5 million a year, and the city already faces a multimillion-dollar budget deficit as well as crumbling infrastructure in many areas, including in old school buildings.

Further, the mayor has just hired a new superintendent of schools with the shared vision of investing in education reform, including a new initiative focused on creating community schools throughout the district. These reforms do not have funding in the city's \$662 million school budget.

CASE STUDY: YOUTH ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC POLICY

Finally, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) is facing its own yawning budget deficit and doesn't have enough buses to bring an additional 2,000 students to the city's high schools at peak times. The only way this plan could work is if the city's high schools staggered their starting and ending times, enabling RIPTA to rotate buses on busy school routes.

Staggering school start times is not as easy as it sounds, however. It requires approval by the teachers' union, which is in the midst of a tense negotiation with the school board over its latest contract. The city is asking teachers to pay more for their health care and work more school days, and the union is in no mood to agree to other concessions without additional compensation.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

ALL-GROUP QUESTIONS:

- What are some of the competing priorities in this situation? What challenges do they present to the people involved?
- What skills do you think a professional needs in order to navigate this situation and identify a potential path forward?
- What do you think the most important outcome is in this situation? Why?

FACILITATION GUIDELINES:

At least two people will serve as Dialogue Facilitators. Their goal is to understand the perspectives and priorities of each stakeholder group in this situation and identify at least two possible solutions to the situation presented.

A handful of people will serve as Observers. Their goal is to codify and synthesize the approach that the facilitators take to guiding the conversation and to summarize what is learned from the situation. What skills do they employ? What are the most salient themes, questions, and identified challenges that emerge from the conversation? Where do you see the most possibility?

Several individuals will represent the perspectives of Stakeholders in this situation: PSU youth organizers, the mayor, the RIPTA planning director, the superintendent, and teachers. They will absorb the contexts that shape the stakeholders' perspectives and potential choices, and represent these perspectives and navigate these choices during the dialogue. Others with the same interests but somewhat differing perspectives can join each stakeholder group if helpful for assigning roles to each student.

STAKEHOLDER ROLES:

- **Facilitators.** You've been sent by the local nonprofit to facilitate a stakeholder dialogue, with the goal of bringing a resolution to the issue of providing more bus passes to Providence high school students. Using your best active listening and facilitation skills, engage each of the following stakeholders in a conversation about the school bus policy. *Two to three facilitators will participate.*
- **PSU youth organizer.** You are a student who lives 2.5 miles from your high school. You sometimes get a ride to school, but on most days, you have to walk. You are passionate about this issue, an experienced organizer who has worked on other campaigns with PSU, and determined to make sure the mayor keeps his promise. *Additional PSU youth organizers can join this group.*
- **City mayor.** You were just elected to your first term with no prior governing experience. During the campaign, you participated in the "Walk in Our Shoes" event and promised to meet students' demands. Since coming into office, however, you have learned that the city's budget deficit is much larger than had been previously announced. You are facing pressure not to raise taxes and need to find places in the budget to cut. Any new expenses, including bus fares for students, need to be met with cuts elsewhere. *Members of the mayor's staff can join this group.*
- **RIPTA Director of Planning.** You are a graduate of the Public Service Program at the local university and went on to get your Master's in Urban Planning, working your way up to director of planning at RIPTA. You care deeply about citizen participation, but also are under severe budget constraints as RIPTA is getting attacked for raising fares on seniors and people with disabilities. *Members of the RIPTA board can join this group.*
- **School superintendent.** You are new to this position and want to make an impact on education in the city. Your top priorities are creating new community schools and extending the school year for the city's elementary schools—both of which require additional money. You are also in tense negotiations with the teacher's union about their next contract, asking them to contribute more to rising health care costs. You appreciate the organizing of the students, but have other priorities that seem more pressing. *Members of the school board can join this group.*

• **Teacher's union representative.** You are a committed high school teacher who loves her students. You know some of the high school student leaders and are proud of their advocacy. At the same time, you've been through many rounds of reform during your 25 years in the district and are cynical about the district's proposed new initiatives. You also are representing teachers who don't want to give any ground in negotiations with the city, so while you're not opposed to changing start times for schools, your union wants something in return. *Additional teachers can join this group.*

