

What's Your Opinion?



Exercise in Policy Decision-Making

Facilitator's Guide

Purpose

- To help participants identify their own opinions about some current state policy issues.
- To demonstrate that there are an array of possible opinions on any particular issue, and that most issues are more complex than originally supposed.
- To provide an opportunity for participants to articulate their views on a controversial issue.

Learning/Life Skills

- Responsible citizenship
- Critical thinking
- Communication

Time

Allow at least 45 minutes if all issues are used and if adequate time is allowed for discussion. The time could be shortened if fewer issues are used.

Process

- Make 5 signs and post in different locations in the room: *strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree*.
- Read each statement, then allow participants to move to the sign that best describes their own opinion on that particular issue. Do not make any remarks about who is where or about the issues. It may be helpful to write down where the majority stand on each item, then move on to the next issue.
- After completing the issues, have participants return to seats, then ask them to share their impressions and observations. The questions below can begin the conversation.
- The attached handout *Background on Policy Issues* can be used to provide information for the discussion.
- At the end of the discussion, talk about ways to obtain more information on a specific issue. Suggest that participants can contact their legislators, and also that the state legislature's Web site can be very helpful (www.michiganlegislature.org).

Talking it over

- What did you think about as you tried to decide where to move? (Note that most of these issues are more complex than simply a yes/no choice)
- Did you feel a need to explain your response, especially if you were in the minority?
- Did you notice that you might be with the same people on one issue and with entirely different people on the next issue?

**WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?
Current Public Policy Issues in Michigan**

Select the choice that most clearly matches your view on each of the issues below OR move around the room to the sign that reflects your view:

Strongly Agree Agree No Opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree

1. The state should pass a law that would require a certain number of hours of community service as part of the requirements for graduation. Should community service be a requirement for a MEAP scholarship?
2. Public schools and charter schools should have the ability to post the Ten Commandments on school property.
3. A law should be passed that denies a driver's license to a student who misses more than the normal number of school days.
4. The state should pass a law banning vending machines with pop in public schools.
5. The state should pass a law that requires school districts to develop an anti-bullying policy.
6. A law went into effect in 2000 making the failure to use seatbelts a primary offense (the motorist can be stopped for this offense) rather than a secondary offense as it had been for many years. Do you agree?
7. A law should be passed that would require Michigan citizens to vote by mail.
8. There should be a state law that requires bicyclists under age 16 to wear a helmet.
9. In 1994, the legislature approved a bill that calls for the permanent expulsion of any student found carrying a weapon on school grounds or at a school function. What's your opinion?
10. The legislature should pass a law that requires counseling before a couple can be married and it also limits the circumstances under which a divorce can be granted.
11. A law should be passed that would encourage local school districts to adopt a mandatory uniform policy.
12. The state should pass a law placing a 10-cent deposit on water and juice bottles and cans.
13. The state should continue to provide \$2500 Merit Scholarships to all graduating seniors who score at a certain level on the MEAP test, regardless of family income.
14. The state should pass a law limiting the number of passengers in a car driven by a teenager.
15. The state should declare a holiday for presidential and gubernatorial elections.

**WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?
Current Public Policy Issues in Michigan
Background Information**

There is a brief summary below of the issues that are part of this exercise. The selection of issues reflects the variety of issues that come before a legislative body. Ideas for bills come from a wide variety of sources: constituents, lobbyists, federal legislation, executive agencies etc. In every two-year legislative session about 5000 bills are introduced but only about 15% actually become law.

1. **Community service**— This has been proposed at both the state and federal levels of government, but has not been passed into law in Michigan. Some local school districts require it. In the February, 2003, State of the State address, Governor Granholm called for a law making community service a requirement for graduation. In 2004 she proposed that all recipients of the MEAP scholarship must first complete 40 hours of community service. How do you think adults usually vote on this one? What are the benefits and the limitations of it being mandatory?
2. **Ten Commandments**—A state legislator introduced a bill that would allow schools to post the Ten Commandments on school property. The sponsor sees it as a way to respond to school violence. It raises constitutional questions about the separation of church and state. The bill has been debated in committee but has seen no further action.
3. **Denying driver's licenses to truant students**—In the 2003 State of the State message, Governor Granholm called for a new law that would link the failure to attend school regularly with the denial of a driver's license. This is an idea that was also discussed a few years ago but saw no action at that time.
4. **Pop machine in schools**—This proposal has been introduced but not acted on. It continues to be a topic of discussion. School programs benefit financially from these sales but the health concerns are also emphasized. Pop machines have been removed from schools in some areas.
5. **Anti-bullying policies**—Legislation has been introduced in 2002, and again, in 2003, that would encourage local school districts to adopt clear standards prohibiting bullying. Hearings were held in 2002, but the bill did not see further action.
6. **Seatbelts**—Failure to use a seatbelt became a *primary offense* when the new law took effect on March 10, 2000. The measure had been under discussion in the legislature for several years and proponents had not been able to gain sufficient support until 1999. Prior to this new law, police could enforce the state's *secondary* seat belt law only after stopping the motorist for some other reason.
7. **Voting by mail**—This idea is being discussed more broadly since the 2000 presidential election. Proponents see it as a way to increase voter participation in elections. The state of Oregon has instituted a vote by mail system for all elections and 85% of the electorate voted in the 2000 presidential election and 67% cast votes in a special statewide election to raise taxes to support schools.

8. **Bike helmets**—Several states require that children under a certain age must wear a helmet when biking. There has been some discussion about this in Michigan. What are the pluses and minuses? Should it only apply to children? What about enforcement?
9. **Weapons at school**—There continues to be discussion about what the actual implementation of this law means to local school districts. There are also questions about what happens to the students who are expelled.
10. **Marriage counseling**—There have been several attempts in recent years to pass legislation that would make it more difficult for couple to gain a divorce. What about costs and implementation of the counseling provisions?
11. **School uniforms**—This has been under discussion at times during the past few years. The legislature would be hesitant to make it a mandatory policy because then the state would have to assume the cost. So, there have been bills introduced that would encourage local school districts to adopt a mandatory uniform policy. Do you think that is likely to be effective?
12. **Bottle deposits**—Michigan voters approved an initiated law in 1976 (put on the ballot by citizen signatures) to place a 10-cent deposit on bottles and cans containing beer, wine and soft drinks. In recent years there has been discussion about extending that deposit to bottled water, juice and iced tea. Proponents talk about the reduction in litter; opponents talk about the problems for grocers in handling the returns.
13. **Merit scholarships**—Policymakers in Michigan made the decision to spend 75% of the state's share of the National Tobacco Settlement on the Michigan Merit Award Program. It provides \$2500 scholarships each year to graduating seniors who have done well on the MEAP test. Governor Granholm's budget plan proposes cutting that amount to \$500. Some of the discussion has centered on whether or not such a program, if it exists, should be based on financial need.
14. **Teen drivers**—Following some tragic accidents, legislation has been introduced that would limit the number of passengers (one person, or family members) in a car driven by a teenager.
15. **Election holiday**—Since the election in 2000, there has been more discussion about declaring a state holiday for presidential and gubernatorial elections. What are the trade-offs? Who is likely to support and oppose this?