



POWER CIVICS©

NO-BLAME PROBLEM SOLVING GUIDE

[With Special Directives for use in High Schools (HS)]

STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR ISSUE FOCUS

DRILL DOWN TO A SPECIFIC PROBLEM YOU CARE ABOUT

- Engage in bottom-up conversations with your fellow citizens to identify consensus passions about specific issues.
- Prioritize identified issues. Considerations may include: internal support (within your group), expected external support (from the community and/or local officials), timing, difficulty of the problem, scope of problem, etc.
- Drill down the issue(s) to a specific problem in the chosen issue area that you believe you can tackle with a doable solution.

STEP 2: SUBMIT A PUBLIC RECORDS ACT REQUEST

FIND OUT HOW THE CURRENT POLICY WORKS

- First, investigate what your city/county/school district is currently doing to address your priority issue by exploring the city/county/school district website, media coverage, or making phone calls to the appropriate office.
- Dig deeper by preparing a Public Records Act (PRA) request of documents creating the current policy for submission either to the city government, county government, or the school district. Remember that you are requesting *copies of existing records* (e.g. resolutions, ordinances, written policies and procedures), so be as specific as possible.
- Find, complete and submit the PRA request form/letter to the appropriate party. Sample request letters for your state can be downloaded at <https://www.nfoic.org/organizations/state-sample-foia-request-letters>. (Please note: Request forms or instructions are often available on the city, town, school district, or county government's website.)

[(HS) If you do not receive a response, you can assume there is no current policy in place, or you might explore other options such as contacting organizations with knowledge about how public records acts/requests work in your state. For example, in New Jersey, the Foundation for Open Government may be a source of information.]

STEP 3: CONDUCT EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH

FIND PROVEN SUCCESSFUL POLICIES

- An internet search is the best place to start! Look up your priority issue to find policies with evidence of success in communities similar to your own. Look for news articles, policy papers, or websites on the topic.
- Dig deeper. Look into academic institutions, including university departments and centers that specialize in the issue area.
- Call or check websites of associations whose focus is local government or who deal with your issue area. (e.g., here are a few selected examples from around the nation: Michigan Municipal League, Colorado Association of School Boards, Georgia Economic Developers Association, The New Jersey Association of Environmental Commissions. Your state should have similar organizations.)
- You can also go to The Citizens Campaign's website and look at the Solutions Sharing Platform. The Platform contains evidence-based solutions previously developed by citizens and the experts from The Campaign's Law & Policy Task Force.

[\[\(HS\) Go directly to Step 6\]](#)

STEP 4: SHAPE YOUR SOLUTION

TAILOR YOUR SOLUTION TO FIT LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND BUILD UPON THE CURRENT POLICY

- Dig deeper to determine what it took to implement your researched solution, for example, you can look for news accounts about your solutions or contact officials involved with its adoption. How long did it take to put into effect? Were staff reassigned to implement it? Was any staff training required? Was the budget amended to reallocate funds for the new policy?
- Review the current policy that you seek to modify or replace and determine if there are any parts of it worth keeping as is or with slight modification.
- Consider any feedback or concerns expressed by elected officials or government staff about your proposed policy.
- Now shape your solution to address the information you've collected in the reviews referenced above. The more your solution fits with and positively builds on the current policy, and the more it takes into consideration the feedback of government officials and the hurdles of implementation, the better chance of it being adopted and successfully implemented.

STEP 5: MAKE SURE IT IS COST-EFFECTIVE

A PRACTICAL SOLUTION IS BUDGET NEUTRAL – OR BETTER

- From evidence you gathered in your research, determine whether there will be costs involved in implementing your solution such as administrative costs, staff time, etc., or whether it will be cost-neutral (or better yet – cost saving).
- If there are costs involved, look at your city, county, or school district’s budget to determine whether your solution would be covered by a particular line item, and if not, whether there are any other areas from which savings could be sufficient to offset the costs of your solution.
- If the solution is not covered by the city/county/school district’s budget and you cannot find any offsetting budget cuts, come up with alternative funding sources. Look for grants, consider crowd funding, etc. This is especially important if there are start-up costs that will disappear or be offset by savings in future budgets.

STEP 6: DO THE DOABLE

THE ART OF PHASING AND PILOTING

- It’s often better to start smaller and gain traction in order to build support and find funds for the overall solution. Similar to the “drilling down” you did to identify your issue/problem, you should drill down to determine the basic components/requirements of your solution.
- “Phasing” is a good tactic (implementing the solution in steps or phases), especially when full funding is not available.
- “Pilot” projects (e.g., similar to a trial run) are also useful when there is skepticism about your solution or when you need to show that start-up costs will be offset by savings in future budgets.

[\[\(HS\) Go directly to Step 9\]](#)

STEP 7: GET SUPPORT FROM EXPERTS

SUCCESSFUL PRACTITIONERS CAN PROVIDE LEGAL AND STRATEGIC ADVICE

- Draft a brief (1 to 2 page) report that includes information about: (1) the response to your PRA request; (2) your proposed solution, evidence of its success, and how you think it can fit in your community; and (3) your cost analysis.

- After completing the report, seek further advice from experts or professionals in local/county/school district government, or professors and experts at law schools and universities, or experts at specialized associations or organizations who could review the report and provide additional helpful information to assist with your analysis and the development of your proposal, including the preferred legal action for adoption. Options include ordinances, resolutions, executive orders, and administrative policies or procedures.
- Incorporate changes suggested by the expert(s) or conduct any suggested additional research.

STEP 8: PRESENT A READY-TO-ADOPT SOLUTION

PRESENTING A DRAFT LAW CALLS FOR A VOTE

- Get a copy of the legal document that created your chosen successful solution. This document may be available at the city/county/school district office or online on the government website. (You may already have gotten this information in the response to your PRA request). It is a good starting point for implementing the solution in your city/county/school district.
- Work with a volunteer lawyer or your town or county's attorney, if supportive, to incorporate your chosen solution into the preferred legal format. Options include ordinances, resolutions, executive orders, and administrative policies or procedures.
- Make sure to include language recognizing the positive aspects of your city/town/county/school district's existing policy and any recent, related initiatives in the draft of the law (or legal format chosen) to enact your solution.

Presentation of a solution to the government body in a ready-to-adopt format expedites the decision-making process and keeps it focused; rather than just discussion, it also encourages specific action or steps be taken.

[\[\(HS\) Students can role-play and do a mock presentation in the classroom\]](#)

STEP 9: MAKE A RESPECTFUL PRESENTATION

IF YOU GIVE RESPECT, YOU CAN COMMAND RESPECT

- Dress respectfully and address officials respectfully.
- Review your city/county/school district's current policy and find what parts you agree with. Then come in complimenting the officials on that part(s) of the current policy and offer to positively build upon it with your proposed solution.

- In any event, when presenting to a public body (or any audience), compliment them on the progress they've made so far in your issue area.
- When speaking to the media, *do not criticize public officials* who disagree with your proposal. Be understanding of their positions and concerns and *express confidence that you can work things out.*

- Always rely on the No-Blame approach/strategy in preparing and making your presentation!

STEP 10: RESPECTFUL PURSUIT

HOW TO DIPLOMATICALLY PUSH FOR ADOPTION

- If your solution is deferred for further discussion or review by government committees or experts, say, "*Please, may I ask to whom is this proposal being referred and when can we expect a response from this public body?*"
- When meeting with an official who makes a commitment to do something to advance your solution, **always** ask what time frame they feel comfortable with for fulfilling the commitment.
- After meeting with an elected official, follow up with a written thank you note mentioning the commitments made by the official and the time frame they indicated they were comfortable with for fulfilling the commitment. If it's an elected official who indicates that a department head or other staff person will act on the commitment, copy that person on the thank you note.
- Seek the advice of experts/professionals/lawyers you contacted or know and find out if there might be a way to implement the solution without governmental approval.
- Keep your solution in the picture by using social media and conventional media and keep it "No-Blame."
- Ask for help from a person of influence in your community.
- Seek a resolution or other support recommending your solution from an appropriate board or commission.
- If there aren't enough votes needed for adoption of an ordinance, seek expert advice about implementing the solution via an Executive Order or other legal means.
- Seek support from a government employees' union.

- Wait until election time and seek sponsorship from an incumbent who is a candidate (presidential and gubernatorial election times are preferable).
- If you meet with continuing opposition from the decision-maker, offer a compromise, if possible, such as a pilot or phased-in approach.
- Use Initiative and Referendum if that is an option available in your city, county or school district. However, Initiative and Referendum should only be used as a last resort.

