

Trends

Social Studies

WALTER C. PARKER

Participation in Government

Public life, which could be a force for unity, and a stimulating dimension of individual experience, lies fallow—untapped potential in a society which concentrates its resources on cultivating private experience.

—Parker Palmer (1981)

A persistent disparity in social studies has been the one between the ideal of education for democracy and the reality of schooling. The ideal requires that children be prepared to become participating public citizens; the reality too often is student passivity and a social studies curriculum that rarely invites deliberation on public policy questions.

New York is trying to bridge the gap with its promising new "Participation in Government" course, mandated for all 12th graders by the state department of education. Not the traditional how-a-bill-becomes-a-law course, "Participation in Government" is dedicated to deliberation on public policy issues. Various curriculum developers—university faculty, commercial publishers, school district planning teams, and foundations—have responded to course guidelines issued by the New

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York state department by designing a variety of approaches to the course.

One of the most interesting programs was developed by the National Issues Forum (NIF) in conjunction with Instructional Design Associates, a curriculum development house in Boulder, Colorado. Nine issue units were developed. Each unit centers on a NIF issue booklet, familiar to the many adults who participate in NIF "town meetings." These booklets,

abridged for high school students, provide background knowledge on the following issues:

- The Public Debt: Breaking the Habit of Deficit Spending
- Health Care for the Elderly: Moral Dilemmas, Mortal Choices
- Coping with AIDS: The Public Response to the Epidemic
- The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security
- The Trade Gap: Regaining the Competitive Edge
- Freedom of Speech: Where to Draw the Line
- Crime: What We Fear, What Can be Done
- Immigration: What We Promised, Where to Draw the Line
- The Farm Crisis: Who's in Trouble, How to Respond.

The 15-week NIF course begins with a unit called "Preparing to Participate," where students learn to define, research, and discuss public policy issues. Then the teacher and/or students select(s) four of the nine issues for in-depth study, including discussions, interviews, and field trips. The final unit, "Developing an Issue," takes students through the steps of identifying and defining a local issue and generating public policy options for it.

For further information on the NIF program, contact Jon Kinghorn, NIF in the Classroom, 100 Commons Rd., Dayton, OH 45459. For further information on the New York course, write to the State Department of Education, Bureau of Curriculum Development, Albany, NY 12234. □

Reference

Palmer, P. (1981). *The Company of Strangers*. New York: Crossroads.

Walter C. Parker is Associate Professor of Social Studies Education, College of Education, University of Washington, 122 Miller Hall (DQ-12), Seattle, WA 98195.

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