

# Public Policy Education Principles and Guidelines for MSU Extension



**“I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.”**

**- Thomas Jefferson, 1820**



Jefferson’s observation, along with the words of members of Congress who supported the 1914 Smith-Lever Act that created the Cooperative Extension Service, provide the historical base for Michigan State University (MSU) Extension’s work in public policy education. Programming has focused on topics such as taxation, public finance, local government administration, agricultural policy, water quality, land use, natural resource management, food safety and human nutrition, family and youth issues, and statewide ballot proposals. MSU Extension seeks to assist public policymakers and enable each individual to participate fully in the life of our democracy.

**Purpose** – Public policy issues are matters of widespread public concern that grow out of accumulated daily events, marked by a feeling that there is a gap between what is and what ought to be. Public policy issues may involve disagreement and controversy that result from different roles, values, interests and ideas. Public policy education is a multidisciplinary activity in which all MSU Extension staff may be involved. The principal objective is to educate Michigan residents so they are able to influence and make better informed policy choices. Public policy education assists learners as they evaluate information, examine values, explore alternatives and consequences, and make choices. The purpose is to promote an increased understanding of public issues, the public policymaking process and strategies for effective participation.

**Roles and approaches** – The MSU Extension staff member’s role in public policy education is analysis, assistance and facilitation. It is not the making of policy decisions or the promotion of particular outcomes. Public policy education focuses on both content and process. Content emphasizes an awareness of public issues and promotes an exploration of the alternatives and consequences of various policy choices. Process, including leadership development and public participation skills, enables audiences to take effective action in pursuit of their policy choices.

MSU Extension staff members should make a deliberate effort to identify the array of perspectives on an issue and to ensure equitable attention to each perspective, always recognizing that additional points of view may need to be considered. This process can be



complicated because many issues may be nested within any one public policy debate. It may also be appropriate for MSU Extension policy staff members to provide special assistance to groups whose views are not likely to be reflected in the policymaking process. The goal of such assistance is to help these groups develop the skills they need to participate most effectively. This includes giving voice to issues and communities that have often lacked visibility in the decision-making and policy development processes.

**Roles of MSU Extension staff members** – Appropriate roles for MSU Extension staff members to play in public policy education include:

- **Information provider** – Sharing evidence-based information and other relevant information while connecting the public to the knowledge and expertise available at MSU to increase their knowledge about issues.
- **Convener** – Encouraging interaction among representatives of various interests in problem-solving ventures.
- **Facilitator** – Helping to format meetings, set ground rules, focus attention on the decision-making process and use consensus-seeking techniques.
- **Program developer** – Helping to develop a long-range plan for the educational program and establish action steps to achieve the plan.
- **Analyst** – Gathering and interpreting relevant information and participating actively in identifying the possible alternatives and consequences related to an issue.
- **Forecaster** – Analyzing emerging issues to help groups begin to address issues as early as possible.
- **Networker** – Identifying and linking people and resources to increase people's knowledge of public issues and their ability to participate in public decision-making.
- **Diplomat** – Moving tactfully between stakeholders to encourage them to work together through an educational process.
- **Trainer** – Using formal instruction and other learning experiences to help residents acquire the knowledge and skills they need to understand public issues and to work effectively with others to resolve them.



MSU Extension staff members may play different roles at different times, depending on the issue and the phase of the discussion or decision-making process related to it. MSU Extension staff members can help move an issue through a process that includes:



- Identifying an initial concern.
- Clarifying goals and points of conflict.
- Considering alternatives and consequences.
- Implementing and evaluating the resulting decisions.

### **A note on partisan politics**

The role of MSU Extension staff members in providing public policy education does not include involvement in partisan political activities. Such involvement is clearly an individual and personal choice. It is important always to be aware of and clear about the differences between the role of the individual and that of the public educator. When staff members are uncertain about the appropriateness of specific activities, they may find it helpful to discuss the options with colleagues.

### **Guiding principles for public policy education**

In situations where viewpoints can become polarized and public issues have the potential to divide, MSU Extension can engage communities to help them move forward. MSU Extension staff members involved in these situations need a set of guiding principles, including:

- Scientific information cannot substitute for value choices and cannot identify the most appropriate set of values. However, scientific information can more fully inform the value choices people make.
- Public policy researchers and educators do not and should not decide what is best for the public.
- A democratic system of government places a high priority on the right of individuals or groups to choose for themselves among alternative solutions to public issues.
- The capacity of the public to make decisions about public issues is increased by education about both the issues and the decision-making process.

### **Guidelines on education and advocacy**

As MSU Extension staff members, we strive to be neutral and objective, but we acknowledge certain biases, which include support for:

- The analysis and use of scientific information in public policymaking.
- Widespread participation in public policymaking and serious efforts to understand and take into account all sides of the issues.
- Serious attention to the issues we choose to address in our educational programs.



When a public issue arises or a community turns to MSU Extension for help working through a complex problem, it is important that the organization be prepared. Public policy education focuses as much on process as it does on content. There is no single correct way to engage in public policy education. The principles and guidelines in this document serve as a foundation for MSU Extension's engagement in this work. It is important that MSU Extension professionals be prepared to respond to complex public issues and be equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to help residents make informed decisions.



For additional information, visit [extension.msu.edu](https://extension.msu.edu).

To contact an expert in your area, visit [extension.msu.edu/experts](https://extension.msu.edu/experts) or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464).

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## Policy Statement of MSU Extension on Public Policy Education

Public policy education assists learners as they evaluate information, examine values, explore alternatives and consequences, and make choices. The purpose is to promote an increased understanding of public issues, the public policymaking process and strategies for effective participation. Public policy education is based on the premise that individuals are the most appropriate judges of their interests. It also recognizes the legitimate role of education in enabling individuals and groups to make better informed decisions. MSU Extension has a distinguished record of conducting public policy education programs in Michigan on topics such as ballot proposals, taxation and public finance, agricultural policy, water quality, land use, natural resource management, health, business development, food safety and human nutrition, and family and youth issues.

The mission of MSU Extension is to help people improve their lives through an educational process that applies knowledge to critical issues, needs and opportunities. MSU Extension believes that public policy education is consistent with the organization's mission and supports this activity for its staff members. The organization also recognizes that public policy education may place MSU Extension staff members in controversial positions. Our administration will fully support public policy education programs that are developed and executed according to the guiding principles set forth in this document.

MSU Extension's commitment to public policy education may be seen in its support for appropriate in-service training and study leave opportunities for staff members, in the development of educational materials, in the development and fostering of partnerships and information sharing with other agencies and groups, in the acquisition and allocation of additional resources where possible, and in the recognition and rewarding of those individuals who conduct public policy education programs.

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