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Developing Policy Education Programs on Controversial Diet-Health Issues

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History of Extension Public Policy Education

Public policy education in the Cooperative Extension Service began in the early 30s and was conducted by farm management specialists interested in the price and income problems of farmers. Early programs were developed around farm bills and such topics as price supports, land retirement, production controls, etc. and were discussed among extension's traditional clientele, primarily farmers, farm organizations, cooperatives, and those who had a direct interest in the economic well-being of farmers. A methodology was developed by the pioneers in extension public policy education which has endured the test of time. It's known as the alternatives-consequences approach. Using this approach, the farm problem was defined and placed in a problem solving, decision making framework. The extension educator remained a neutral technician and strived for objectivity.

Over the decades, public policy education began to evolve into other disciplines and subject areas. In the late 60s and early 70s, extension home economics professionals became interested in public affairs. As the home economics profession began to debate their place in public policy education, a distinction was drawn between public affairs and public policy. Many of the early extension home economists that were interested in this area viewed public affairs education from an advocacy viewpoint. Their purpose was to organize women to get more involved in public affairs and campaign for women's issues. A prominent example was the Equal Rights Amendment. They quickly learned, however, that crusaders for the adoption of specific public policies had difficulty in playing the role of an educator, and so a distinction began to be drawn between public affairs and public policy education.

A nationwide effort in public policy education entitled *Who Will Control U.S. Agriculture?* was extremely well received and succeeded

in cementing a permanent role in the public policy arena for the Cooperative Extension Service. At the time the project was developed, the future of the family farm — that is, the structure of agriculture — was a prominent, controversial public issue. Extension public policy educators succeeded in putting this issue in a decision-making framework and contributed significantly to the educational input into the debate. The debate is ongoing and the original project is still having an impact. It eventually evolved into the *Your Food* program, which became a cooperative effort between agricultural economists and home economists. This project has the distinction of involving the whole family in public policy issues — not just the farmer, but also the spouse. In addition, the clientele of public policy education programs was broadened to include consumer groups, urban study groups, business, labor, local government officials, the League of Women Voters, and a multitude of nonfarm special interest groups.

A public policy education project in the western states served as a catalyst to broaden the base of extension public policy education. An example of this project was the “Women in Transition Program - A Case Study of Yakima County, Washington.” Inservice training courses in public policy education were held over the years at various Extension Summer and Winter Schools. At the beginning of the 80s, a course was designed especially for home economists entitled “Public Policy Education in Home Economics.” It is a part of the Minnesota Extension Summer School, and to date it has trained approximately 75 county extension home economists and state specialists in public policy education.

Model Used

There is no doubt in the authors’ minds why extension public policy education has succeeded in broadening the knowledge base of clientele so that they are more equipped to pass informed judgment on policy issues. That reason is the model used. The steps employed include:

- 1) Clearly define the problem objectively.
- 2) Outline all possible alternative solutions.
- 3) Analyze objectively the probable consequences of each solution.
- 4) Have the clientele engage in a group discussion of the alternatives in a decision making environment where conflict can be managed.
- 5) Reach a cross section of the community affected by the problem involved.

Using this model, the extension educator becomes a disseminator of objective information and a catalyst for rational discussion and solutions to public policy issues.

The question is, given the history of public policy education and the model used, will it work in the diet-health area? Diet-health issues

are highly controversial and emotional. They involve serious conflict with extension's traditional clientele. For example, these issues threaten the livelihood of red meat, poultry, and dairy product producers. They involve serious question of traditional values. During the highly controversial and emotional debate over dietary goals, the common refrain went something like, "It's none of the government's business what I eat." Many of the diet-health issues become, in the final analysis, a question of the role of government. That is, dissemination of information versus regulation, private enterprise versus government intervention. The scientific community has produced inconclusive evidence surrounding much of the controversy, and so diet-health issues are even more difficult to handle in a public policy education program. This underlines the need for the educator to use the traditional model, remain as objective as is humanly possible, and refrain from touting a best alternative solution.

Effective Policy Education on Diet-Health Issues

Using the traditional model, public policy education programs were conducted in a sparsely populated, rural Wisconsin county. The results provided evidence that the model works and can be effective in educating a broad base of extension's clientele on issues as highly controversial and emotional as the diet-health set of problems. Examples include: the special supplemental food program for women, infants, and children (WIC) program, school breakfast, and the school milk program.

OUTLINE OF SCHOOL BREAKFAST POLICY EDUCATION PROGRAM

Problem: Forty-five percent of all county children under the age of 13 go to school without breakfast.

Alternatives:

A. Provide parent education classes in nutrition education.

- Consequences:**
1. Parents in greatest need may not be reached.
 2. Parents may increase nutrition knowledge and thusly provide better meals for their families.
 3. "Education" concept may appeal to parent group and develop into network.
 4. Parents may become more conscious of need and feed their children breakfast.

B. Provide a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) subsidized school breakfast program.

- Consequences:**
1. All children will have the opportunity to eat breakfast at school.

2. Taxes may rise.
 3. School system may have to adjust bus schedules and cooking and maintenance staff to accommodate such a program.
- C. Locally subsidize low income families so they can financially afford to serve breakfast to their children.
 Consequences: 1. Some needy families may not accept the stipend due to "pride."
 2. Some families may now be able to purchase food for breakfast.
 3. Local tax base may rise.
 4. Subsidies may not encourage parents to feed their children if the reason is more than economic.
- D. Delay bus schedules and school day starting time.
 Consequences: 1. Children will have more time in the morning to eat breakfast if they desire.
 2. Parents will have more opportunity to interact and encourage breakfast.
 3. School day will end later in the afternoon and conflict with extracurricular activities.
- E. Children/home provide a "sack breakfast" to eat upon arrival at school or midmorning break.
 Consequences: 1. "Sack breakfast" may not be provided if food is not available to child.
 2. "Sack breakfast" may not be provided if parent and/or child lack skills to prepare meal.
 3. Will provide breakfast to children who prefer not to eat immediately upon rising.
 4. Before school or midmorning breaks would have to be arranged.
- F. Do nothing about the problem.
 Consequences: 1. Some children (45%) will continue to come to school hungry.
 2. Some children may have learning deficiencies due to lack of breakfast (Iowa breakfast studies).
 3. Problem will not be brought to the attention of those who make public policy.
 4. Conflict will be avoided.
- G. Send children who wish to eat breakfast to a local restaurant.
 Consequences: 1. Children with money can afford to eat out.
 2. Local restaurants may compete for business.

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