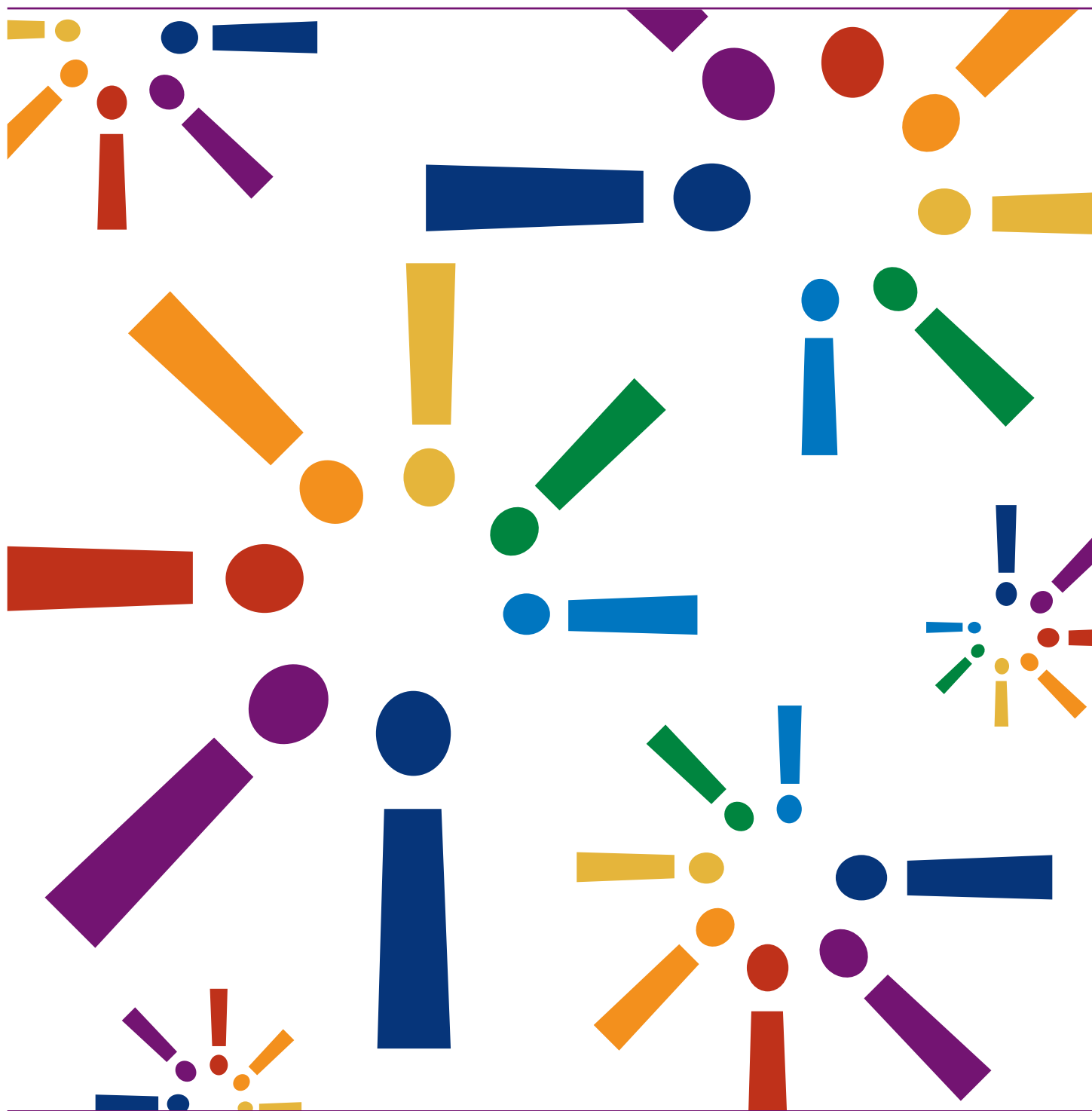


social action projects

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



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This resource was originally developed in English and translated into French. The English and French versions of this document may offer alternate resources and links.

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social action projects

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

WELCOMING A NEWCOMER

When a new student from Afghanistan arrived in Ms Schuster's grade 1 class, students brainstormed twenty common words and phrases that they then posted around the classroom so that she would start to become familiar with them.

HELPING TAKE CARE OF A PET

A grade 3 class adopted a pet through the local animal shelter. One day per month, a volunteer from the shelter would bring a different animal, and the class would look after it for a day, including feeding it, grooming it and playing with it.

CLEANING UP THE PARK

Students noticed that the park next to the school was full of litter. They decided to organize their classmates and, with their teacher, met one day a month after school to clean up the park.

VISITING THE ELDERLY

Elementary students visited a senior citizen's home once a month to read and visit with elderly patients.

This handbook is for teachers who want to involve their students in social action projects. The first two sections, *Understanding social action* and *Planning social action projects*, provide the background knowledge necessary for teachers to effectively implement social action projects. The third section, *Implementing social action projects*, provides a case study of a social action project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This handbook is jointly developed by the CTF (Canadian Teachers' Federation) and *TC²* (The Critical Thinking Consortium). For more detailed information about social action projects refer to *Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects* available from www.tc2.ca.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) gratefully acknowledges the J. W. McConnell Family foundation for its financial contribution to this project.

This resource is adapted from two *TC²* publications:

Case, Roland, Flak, Cliff, Smith, Neil, & Werner, Walt (2004). *Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects*. The Critical Thinking Consortium. ISBN 978-086491-260-9.

Ford, Carole, Ashlee, Julie, McDiarmid, Tami, Frew, Nicki, Fultz, Dorothy, Manzo, Rita, & Musselle, Trish (2002). *I Can Make a Difference*. The Critical Thinking Consortium. ISBN 978-086491-262-6

The original, more extensive publications are available through *TC²*'s website www.tc2.ca, by calling 604-822-9297 or contacting the order desk at administrator@tc2.ca.

section 1

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL ACTION

DEFINING SOCIAL ACTION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Historically, citizenship education has been understood in two ways: as promoting *responsible* citizens through reflective inquiry, and as *active* citizenship learned through social action.

The responsible citizen approach proposes that schools can prepare students for their civic role by developing their ability to form thoughtful opinions on matters of public policy.

Advocates of active citizenship agree that reflective thinking about public matters is important but suggest that students should learn to act on their beliefs. Active citizenship challenges students to identify, plan and carry out responsible community actions.

Participation in responsible social action is necessary if students are to become participatory citizens. By putting reflective inquiry “to work”, active citizenship provides students with opportunities to test their ideas and learn about personal efficacy through social action.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT?

Projects that engage students in acting on their beliefs take many forms. *Service projects* involve students in volunteer activities, generally for established community groups, and on an individual basis. For example students may volunteer their time for a community service organization such as an animal shelter, or food bank.

In *social action* projects, students typically work cooperatively with other class members on initiatives they help to identify, plan and direct. A social action project prepares students to identify, plan and carry out solutions to problems within their school, community and beyond. The goal is active citizenship through thoughtful, cooperative, critically engaging, and responsible action.

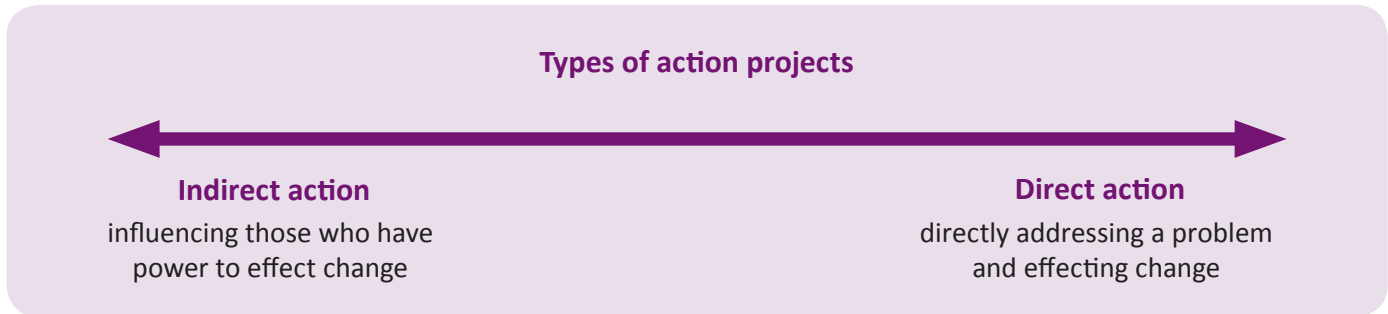
WHY ENGAGE STUDENTS IN SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS?

TC² suggest that there are four central reasons to engage students in social action projects. Through social actions students will:

- **Acquire important abilities and dispositions.** Since social action projects involve students directly in identifying, planning and implementing the action, students develop important skills, including problem solving, conflict resolution and empathy.
- **Increase their understanding of curriculum content.** Action projects provide a means of integrating text-based and experience-based learning where students’ understanding is deepened as they learn the contextual realities of what they previously considered in theory.
- **Enhance their sense of personal and collective efficacy.** Involvement teaches students that there are responsible ways to address issues, and that everyone can play a role in social change.
- **Contribute to the betterment of society.** Students learn that their actions have a broader impact on society.

TYPES OF SOCIAL ACTION

As indicated in the chart below, the focus of student social action projects ranges from school-based to local community to global. Types of student action will range from action designed to influence decision makers to action designed for direct impact.



Consider the examples below and decide where they would fit on the continuum.

School-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lobbying the school authorities for funding for after school programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cleaning the playground
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • requesting the allocation of school ground space for a garden plot 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • launching a campaign to reduce litter
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sponsoring a school wide information session about healthy eating
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • influencing a fast food chain to abandon polystyrene containers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • filling a backpack with supplies for a person who is homeless
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lobbying city council for the inclusion of a skate board park in a new recreation centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organizing a food bank drive
Global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raising funds to support an agency assisting hurricane victims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fundraising to build a well in a village overseas
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sponsoring a foster child in another country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing school supplies to students in a developing country

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Curricula across North America encourage students to analyze social problems, formulate thoughtful strategies, question assumptions, and act responsibly on their beliefs as part of active citizenship. Social action projects are an integral part of the exploration of curriculum rather than an “add on”. The social action project becomes the vehicle through which students uncover the curriculum and develop understanding.

section 2

PLANNING SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Pre-planning

Teacher considerations before formally undertaking a project include selecting a suitable focus for the project and securing support from key parties. While it is important to include students in originating social action the extent of student involvement at this stage will depend on the scope of the project, the students' experience, curricular outcomes and time constraints.

Select a project

When selecting a suitable project focus consider the following questions:

- *Is it relevant for my students?*

Consider whether the project is likely to interest students; is it timely and topical? Will it foster a positive outlook?

- *Is it doable and worth the effort?*

Consider the availability of human, physical, financial, and emotional resources needed to complete the project. Anticipate the likely benefits for students and assess these against the expenditures (including time) to determine the feasibility of the project.

- *Is it appropriate for my school and community?*

Assess the project's suitability in light of the various cultural, religious, political and economic characteristics of the school and community.

- *Does it grow out of and support the curriculum?*

Topics studied in class can effectively serve as the impetus for social action projects. Be sure the project enriches curricular goals and builds on students' knowledge.

Secure support

Projects that have strong support from key stakeholders are more likely to succeed. Seek the advice, approval and support of relevant individuals prior to committing to a project. Consider school administrators and other staff that may be impacted; parents; relevant external agencies such as government agencies, businesses, charities and international organizations.

Introducing ideas to students

Once you decide to proceed and pre-planning is complete, introduce students to the possibilities and expectations of a project. The following considerations emphasize the importance of ensuring student interest and establishing clear expectations from the outset of the project.

Generate student interest and explore project possibilities

The need to promote student interest may depend on whether the project is assigned or has come from the students. Following an initial class discussion one or more of the following activities may serve as catalysts for building student interest and helping students begin to explore project possibilities:

- *Invite a guest speaker to present on an issue.*
Consider inviting NGO's, elders, politicians or individuals associated with a cause to personalize the events and issues.
- *Use newspaper articles, news clips or films.*
Possible sources include CBC News in Review, The National Film Board (www.nfb.ca/store) and local newspaper. For example, ask students to bring in a newspaper article that directly relates to a personal experience they have had.
- *Present positive models that youth their age have undertaken.*
Invite students to share examples of action projects in which they have participated through school, clubs, community groups, churches, NGO's or share stories of successful action projects undertaken by your former students.
- *Provide choice whenever possible.*
The more control students have in selecting and defining a project, the more committed they are likely to be. Remember to support students in setting criteria in choosing which project is best suited to their interests and skills.

Identify student responsibilities

Once students have expressed interest in taking on a project discuss what is required of them.

Steps in undertaking a social action project

Briefly outline the framework for guiding students through an action project. Detailed information about each step follows in the next section of this handbook.



Explain that these four tasks, although presented in a linear form, are not a lock-step progression and it may be necessary to return to tasks previously completed. Emphasize that each task requires *thoughtful action* and the application of critical thinking to problems and issues. Invite students to describe what each task might look like if undertaken thoughtfully and thoughtlessly.

You may want to model *consensual decision making* as you establish operating principles. Three ground rules may be important to establish at the outset:

- ensure emotional and physical safety
- work for consensus
- protect the right to withdraw

Clarify assessment procedures

Explain to students that their efforts throughout the project will not be assessed only on the final outcome of the project (whether the intended result was achieved) but also on the extent to which students thoughtfully plan and implement each task along the way. On-going feedback from peers and teachers will support students in their learning. Emphasize that the purpose is to learn how to carefully and responsibly make decisions. Introduce the tools for implementing the tasks in the action project and explain that these tools will form the foundation of evaluation. A full list of assessment criteria for each tool appears in the chart *Assessing social action* later in this handbook.

Project assessment

Tools	Reflective questions
Background knowledge (Information needed to address each task in an informed manner)	Did we acquire and use enough background knowledge for each task?
Criteria for Judgment (Criteria for judging the soundest option for each task)	Did we base our decisions on the relevant criteria for selecting sound options at each step of the way?
Thinking vocabulary (concepts) (Thinking concepts and vocabulary that help students understand the key ideas underlying each task)	Did we learn and appropriately apply key thinking concepts to help us understand and carry out each task?
Thinking strategies (Strategies that might assist students in thinking through each task)	Did we develop and use strategies to assist us in thinking through each task?
Habits of mind (Attitudes of a careful thinker that will help students in completing each task)	Did we demonstrate the attitudes and values of a careful thinker?

GUIDING STUDENTS THROUGH THE PROJECT

Four tasks comprise the problem-solving model suggested in this resource. The focus for each task is assisting students in making thoughtful and realistic decisions at each step of the process:



Rather than linear or discrete “steps” to be carried out in a sequence, these tasks often overlap and are recursive, depending on the nature of the problem.

As introduced in the previous section of this handbook (*Clarify assessment procedures*), developing student capacity for thoughtful social action involves teaching specific critical thinking tools. “Tools”¹ is a term that describes the intellectual resources needed to carry out a task thoughtfully.

A summary of specific tools for each task can be found in the chart “Tools for social action projects” at the end of this section. The aim of teaching students to develop and use the tools is to increase their capacity to reach beyond obvious and simplistic solutions, consider a broad range of possibilities and commit to meaningful action.

Identify the issue

An initial task in a social action project is to help students gather information, recognize the complexity of the problem and articulate a clear statement of the issue they are addressing.

Gather information

Students cannot think critically about a problem—an obstacle, difficulty or deficiency—when they know little about it. Gathering adequate, relevant background information is necessary for clarifying the problem. Students may need help in identifying what information is needed, and where and how it may be located.

To begin, help students determine what they know about the issue and identify what they need to find out.

If the needed information is not readily available, review with students alternate sources for locating information such as sharing opinions; relating personal anecdotes; collecting newspaper clippings or magazine images; searching the Internet; and conducting surveys or interviews.

Decide on a sound solution

After defining the problem, help students decide on the most appropriate solution. This involves guiding students in generating a range of possible solutions, assessing the relative merits of alternative solutions and reaching consensus on the best option.

¹ “Teaching the tools” is a central feature of the approach to critical thinking adopted by The Critical Thinking Consortium (see www.tc2.ca).

Generate possible solutions

To help students thoughtfully identify a plausible resolution for the problem, invite students to generate as many solutions as they can, recording all answers without judgment. Encourage students to “think outside the box” by asking them to revisit the factors or conditions contributing to the problem and to research solutions that have actually been tried by others.

Short-list options

To help students scrutinize the most promising options, invite them to create a short-list of plausible resolutions based on a few criteria (e.g., *effectiveness*—are any of the suggested options obviously unlikely to improve the situation?; *feasibility*—are any of the suggested options obviously unfeasible given the available resources like time, materials and expertise?).

Continue to short-list the options using the criteria until the students have eliminated all but a couple of the options. Then involve the students in examining the merits of each short-listed option considering the pros (benefits, advantages) and cons (costs, disadvantages) or explore the anticipated consequences of each proposed solution (short- and long-term, intended and unintended) and consider whether they will be negative (-), positive (+) or mixed (?). You may wish to have students short-list the options from the perspective of the various stakeholders.

Reach consensus

Once the options are assessed, ask students to consider which option is the most reasonable one to pursue. Help students agree upon criteria for selecting the most defensible solution from the short-listed set of options, such as:

- *effective*:
Which option offers the best results for the greatest number of people?
- *sustainable*:
Which option promises the most *lasting effects* (e.g., availability of helpful resources over time; commitment and involvement of all stakeholders; limited unintended impacts on the social or physical environment)?
- *feasible*:
Which option is the most *realistic* given the available resources?
- *respectful*:
Which option best respects the feelings and legitimate interests of stakeholders?

Plan an effective course of action

After reaching consensus on a solution, students consider how the proposed solution will be put into effect. This involves guiding students in considering specific challenges, resources and strategies in developing an action plan and appraising the plan.

Develop an action plan

An action plan guides implementation activities. The quality of the plan will be influenced by the thoroughness of students’ deliberations. Invite students to list specific actions that must happen if the proposed solution is to be carried out. A data chart may be a useful thinking strategy to support students in analyzing the following steps:

- specific actions to be taken;
- available resources—both intellectual and material—required to complete each step;
- people or person responsible for carrying out each step and when each task will be completed.

Once the planning is completed, encourage students to anticipate challenges (and possible solutions) they are likely to encounter. Finally, ask students to think about the order in which each action should be implemented and re-arrange the sequence of steps as needed.

Implement and evaluate the action

At this stage, students initiate and carry out the plan. As they do so, they will reflect on and assess the extent to which the planned action is working. This involves assisting students in managing the progress of the project, evaluating the results and debriefing the experience.

Manage the project

Learning to implement a social action plan and keep it running smoothly may be challenging for some groups. Students will likely need to learn new skills or acquire additional information in order to successfully carry out the plan. They may need support in the following areas:

- acquiring expertise
- anticipating emerging resource needs
- being flexible and willingly adjusting the plan as circumstances warrant;
- tracking the progress of each activity and revising actions in light of the ongoing monitoring of results

Evaluate results

Evaluation focuses on the project's implementation as well as its effectiveness. Discuss with students whether it is possible to determine if the planned action had the intended effect. Evaluation of the success of the project involves two activities:

- discussing the specific criteria to assess whether the project has had (or is having) desired results, and whether there could be any unintended outcomes;
- collecting appropriate evidence to assess the degree to which each of the project's tasks is satisfied; considering how the evidence will be gathered, from whom, when and how the findings will be compiled.

Draw closure

Invite students to consider how they might publicly share what they have accomplished and learned by selecting an interested audience and determining an appropriate means of sharing the project and its results.

Encourage students to formally thank the various individuals and groups whose assistance contributed to the project's success.

When the project is completed, debrief the experience so students can reflect on the effectiveness of group and individual contributions and about conducting social action.

Tools for social action projects

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	CRITERIA FOR JUDGMENT	CRITICAL THINKING VOCABULARY	THINKING STRATEGIES	HABITS OF MIND
<i>What do students need to know in order to...</i>	<i>By what criteria should students judge...</i>	<i>What concepts will help students...</i>	<i>What strategies might help students...</i>	<i>What attitudes or values will help students...</i>
Identify the issue				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the problem to be solved? • Who are the principal stakeholders? • Where is the problem located? • When does it arise? • Why is the situation problematic? • How did the problem come about? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear • specific • inclusive • complex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problem • stakeholder • interests • symptom vs. cause 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information needs • 5W's +H • graphic organizers • causal links • role-play • interests inventory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tolerance for ambiguity • inquiring attitude
Decide on a solution				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been tried? • What could be tried? • What might happen? • What interests will be affected? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diversity of proposals • effective • sustainable • feasible • respectful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • short vs. long term consequences • intended and unintended consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • short-list • pro/con chart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • persistence • thinking outside the box • open-minded
Plan an effective course of action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies might be used to implement the agreed-upon solution? • What resources are available to support each strategy? • What obstacles are we likely to face? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effective • respectful • realistic • comprehensive 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • task analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thoroughness
Put the plan into action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we need to learn? • Has each step in the plan been carried out? • What are the effects of the action? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • successful implementation • successful resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intended vs. unintended effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implementation checklist • check-backs • periodic reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perseverance • flexibility

For more complete information about the tools see Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects available at www.tc2.ca.

Assessing social action projects

Below are possible criteria for assessing students' understanding and use of the tools for each task. Select the most appropriate criteria and assess for learning using peer, self, and teacher feedback throughout the project.

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	CRITERIA FOR JUDGMENT	CRITICAL THINKING VOCABULARY	THINKING STRATEGIES	HABITS OF MIND
Assessing the clarity of the problem				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows who the principal stakeholders are and why it is a problem Knows where and when the problem occurs Knows how the problem came about 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectively articulates the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands concepts such as problem, stakeholder, interests, cause and effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses of charts and role play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tolerance for ambiguity Inquiring attitude
Assessing the soundness of the solution				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows options that have or might have been tried Knows what might happen and how interests might be affected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a diversity of proposals Judges the most effective, sustainable, feasible and respectful option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands short- and long-term and intended and unintended options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of lists and charts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent Imaginative Open-minded
Plan an effective course of action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows the strategies and needed resources to implement the solution Knows the likely obstacles to expect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a plan of action that is effective, respectful, realistic and comprehensive 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of task analysis and other planning tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thorough
Implement and evaluate the action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the expertise needed to implement the plan Knows the extent to which the plan has been implemented Knows the effects the plan has had 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judges the success in implementing the plan Judges the success in solving the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands intended and unintended effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of checklist, review and other monitoring and evaluation tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perseverance Flexible

For detailed rubrics and more complete assessment information see *Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects* available at www.tc2.ca.

section 3

IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

WELCOMING A NEWCOMER

Being a newcomer at school can be a challenging experience, particularly for non-English speakers. A school-based social action project that addresses this reality helps young children develop empathy for others, contributes to the quality of the school community and moves them beyond “being nice” as they identify specific actions that address particular problems. A grade one class undertook this project.

Pre-planning

Prior to suggesting this project the teacher researched the number of non-English speaking students who had arrived at the school in the preceding months. She also spoke with older students about their initial experiences as new students. Since the project could potentially move beyond the classroom to the school level, the teacher discussed it with the school administrator.

Introduce the topic

The project emerged from a need in the classroom to support students who were new to the school. Previous class discussions resulted in students agreeing to be a friend to newcomers and “being nice” but these goals did not translate into concrete helpful behaviours.

The teacher selected the book *From Far Away* by Robert Munsch to introduce the problems newcomers often face in coming to school. After reading the book students brainstormed the feelings Saoussan experienced in the story. Students also talked about their own “first day” experiences and feelings.

Clarify the problem

Introduce problem and solution

To ensure that students understood the concepts of *problem* and *solution* the teacher used a concept attainment activity. Students first sorted sentence cards into two groups that made sense. Next, the class discussed what they noticed about each group and the teacher drew out and summarized the attributes of problems and solutions.

Using *Matching problems and solutions* students then labeled statements as either problems (P) or solutions (S). Finally they cut out the statement cards and matched the problems with the appropriate solution.

Gather information

Once it was clear students understood problem and solution, they listened to the story again and as a class, created a list of all the problems Saoussan experienced in the story. Students also recalled their own first day experiences and “walked through” a school day, imagining what it would be like for a person who does not understand English. They added new problems to the list.

An older student, who first came to school not speaking English, talked to the class about the problems he encountered. Finally students discussed who else was affected by Saoussan's experience (e.g., teacher, other students, parents).

State the problem

With the teacher's guidance, the students stated the problem in their own words. *"School can be really scary when you are new and don't know what is going on. Everyone in our classroom should feel safe and welcome."*

Generate possible solutions

At this stage, the teacher revisited the story and students looked for solutions that were tried by Saoussan's classmates and others in the school. The class talked about what made a good solution and decided on the following criteria: solves the problem, can be done, respects feelings. The solutions tried in the story were recorded beside the corresponding problem. Students talked about solutions that had helped them feel comfortable in new situations and these were added to the list.

Students then brainstormed who might help them solve the problem of welcoming a newcomer (e.g., principal, parent advisory committee, secretary, older students). The principal talked to the students about what happens in the office when new students arrive at the school.

Finally, students generated additional solutions to all the issues facing newcomers.

Plan an effective course of action

In small groups students reviewed the suggested solutions and decided which solution would be the most effective.

Each group reported their solution to the class. Discussion revealed connections among some of the solutions and students realized that one solution might address more than one problem.

Based on the selected solutions students decided on the following actions:

- Make a class welcome pamphlet with everyone's picture and name.
- Create a set of simple pictures to explain daily routines.
- Practice communication with hand signals.
- Examine the signs in the class/school and see if pictures would make them more easily understood.
- Designate a new 'helper' each week for a new student.
- Raise money to create small gift bags for newcomers.
- Find out what languages are spoken by students and teachers in the school and create a resource list of speakers.

Implement and evaluate

Students worked in small groups to implement the plan over several weeks. Of course, the true evaluation of the project's success could not occur until a new student joined the class. However, preparing for implementation led to discussions about helping any visitor feel welcome in the school. Students suggested posting welcome signs in many languages in the school entrance, practicing greeting people appropriately, having school buttons or stickers to give visitors. Clearly this project raised awareness of the importance of making people new to the school feel safe and welcome.