Public Problems, Values, and Choices

Phillip Boyle

Problems involve finding solutions or making decisions. You face problems every day. What is the best way to save for your children's college education? Should you avoid people who have hurt your feelings or seek them out and talk to them? Problems are important to think about because the better you understand a problem, the better you can solve it. In fact, a solution is a problem that everybody understands.

Suppose you decide to sell your car. You check the blue book value and the classified ads, and you set the price at $10,000. You place an ad in the local newspaper and wait for buyers to call. After several weeks of showing your car, you receive an offer of $9,000. What should you do?

You seek advice from friends. One tells you that $9,000 is close so you should take the offer. Another says that you should hold out for the $10,000. Still another suggests that you do what you feel is best.

You try to use facts to resolve this problem. The blue book value for your car ranged from $9,000 to $11,000, depending on such factors as mileage, driving history, and maintenance. You settled on $10,000 after assessing all these factors.

For you the $10,000 price represents a good solution to this problem. Your interests are that you want to sell your car and be compensated for its value. Your values are that you want to be treated equitably and fairly. That is, you want to think that you have received approximately equal value for your car.

In 2001 the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation requiring local boards of education to adopt a dress code for students.

The author is an Institute of Government faculty member who specializes in board governance and public decision making. Contact him at boyle@iogmail.iog.unc.edu.

For the buyer the $9,000 offer represents a good solution to this problem. Her interests are to buy a car and not to pay more than the car's value. Her values are that she wants to be treated equitably and fairly. That is, she wants to receive approximately equal value for a certain price.

The facts tell you that both the selling price and the buyer's offer are reasonable, but they cannot help you decide whether or not to accept the $9,000 offer. For you to accept the offer, you need to feel that it is fair. The key to solving this problem is to understand not only the facts but also your values.

This article describes the nature of public problems and their link to four public values. It also addresses the choices that people must make among the four public values to resolve public problems.

What Are Public Problems?

Public problems have three important features. First, like the problem just discussed, they involve facts and values. People may know many facts about public problems, but they solve public problems on the basis of their values. When they argue about how best to solve a public problem, they are likely to select the facts that support their values. For example, proponents of gun control are likely to argue that guns in the home result in more accidental shootings. Opponents are likely to argue that guns contribute to relatively few accidental shootings. Both sides cite facts to support their arguments.[1]

Second, public problems affect people as public citizens rather than as private individuals. Deciding whether to sell your car is a private problem because it affects you as a private individual. Deciding what the speed limit should be on a street or a highway is a public problem because how fast a person drives can affect the safety of other citizens.

Third, public problems occur in public settings, such as communities, rather than in private settings, such as homes. Allowing your dog to roam in your house is a private matter, but allowing your dog to roam in your neighborhood is a public matter.

The following public problem exhibits all these features.

Public Problem 1—Graduated Licensing in North Carolina

The Facts: Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for American teenagers.[2] Sixty-five percent of teenage-passenger deaths occur when another teenager is driving. Nearly half of the fatal crashes involving sixteen-year-old drivers are single-vehicle crashes. Forty-one percent of fatal crashes involving teenagers occur between 9:00 P.M. and 6:00 A.M.

In 1997, North Carolina became only the second state (after Michigan) to require graduated licensing for younger drivers. "Graduated licensing" means that younger drivers cannot drive alone or late at night. As teenagers build up a safe driving record, they are gradually allowed to drive without an adult. In 1999, car accidents involving sixteen-year-olds dropped by 26 percent from 1997, and late-night accidents by 47 percent.[3] Since 1997 thirty other states have adopted some form of graduated licensing.

The Values: Some people object to graduated licensing as being unfair. They point out that new older drivers do not have to comply with these restrictions. The rules make it harder for teenagers to schedule school and social activities. They also make it more difficult for teenagers to hold jobs and for employers to hire teenagers for jobs that require driving. Further, the rules create scheduling problems for parents because young drivers are generally prohibited from driving alone after 9:00 P.M.

Other people support driving restrictions for younger drivers. They argue that teenage drivers are less experienced and therefore in greater danger of being hurt or killed in an accident. The new rules do restrict the driving freedom of teenagers, but more young people are alive today because of the rules. The rules make driving safer not only for teenagers but for everyone.

If people could resolve public problems using facts alone, they probably would agree that graduated licensing is good public policy. However, public problems also involve values. For example, treating people as a group rather than as individuals raises questions of fairness. Is it fair to treat all new teenage drivers differently from other drivers?

How people respond to these questions depends on the value they place on the freedom of teenagers relative to the value they place on public safety. People value both freedom and safety but value them differently. That is why people are likely to disagree about whether or not graduated licensing is a good solution to the public problem of motor vehicle crashes involving younger drivers. Understanding public values is the key to understanding and solving public problems.

What Are Public Values?

Public problems involve four principal values: liberty, equality, community, and prosperity.[4] These values are present in many documents, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitutions of the United States and North Carolina, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Americans believe strongly in these values, but they often disagree about which value is more important and how to best achieve that value.

Liberty encompasses freedom, choice, and individuality. It means having personal freedom, expressing yourself as an individual, and making your own choices and decisions free from coercion or constraint.

Equality includes equity, fairness, and justice. It means feeling that you are treated fairly, that you have equal rights and opportunities, that your vote counts as much as everyone else's.

Community encompasses safety, security, and social order. It means feeling connected to and sharing a sense of belonging with people where you live and work. It means feeling safe and secure, and having a decent quality of life.

Prosperity includes efficiency, economy, and productivity. It means being able to support yourself and your family, having resources available to meet your physical needs, and using resources productively and efficiently.

When people argue about public problems, they are really arguing about whether they want more liberty, more equality, more community, or more prosperity. Americans would like to have as much liberty, equality, community, and prosperity as possible. But because having more of one value means having less of another, public problems involve a

News & Observer / Keith Greene

Under graduated licensing, younger drivers must be accompanied by an adult during the day and may not drive at night.

tension between two or more of these values. Consider the following example.

Public Problem 2—A Federal Express Hub in Greensboro

The Facts: Like other cities in North Carolina, Greensboro wants to maintain a healthy local economy. It has lost businesses in recent years, particularly in the textile industry. Average wages have declined, and local employers are having trouble finding enough educated and qualified workers. These conditions have made it difficult for the city to attract new enterprises. North Carolina was recently outbid by other states trying to recruit businesses, including BMW, which chose South Carolina, and Mercedes-Benz, which chose Alabama. In 2000, Greensboro announced that Federal Express had agreed to build an air cargo hub at Piedmont Triad International Airport. Federal Express chose Piedmont Triad because of the opportunities for economic growth and because of a $142.3 million incentive package offered by Greensboro. Federal Express will invest $300 million in this project. The annual economic impact is projected to be $160 million.

The Values: Some people are happy that Federal Express will build a hub at the airport.[5] They point out that the hub represents a large investment in the local economy, expected eventually to create 1,500 jobs. Federal Express offers college tuition benefits to its employees, and its part-time and flexible-shift positions will provide jobs for students at UNC–Greensboro and Winston-Salem State University. Further, other companies will build facilities near the airport to be close to the Federal Express shipping service, which is projected to bring $2.4 billion into the regional economy in the first ten years of operation. The airport is currently handling an average of 72 flights per day, well below its daily capacity of 165 flights. Federal Express is expected to add only 20 flights per day.

Other people take a different view.[6] They point out that the $142.3 million incentive package equals a $100,000 tax break for each employee Federal Express will hire. Further, most of the Federal Express jobs are part-time and pay modest wages—$7 to $10 an hour—that are not likely to have a significant effect on the standard of living in the Greensboro area. Also, the increased plane traffic in and out of the airport, most of which will take place between midnight and 4:00 A.M., will generate more noise for the approximately 10,000 residents who live near the airport. Moreover, truck traffic will increase on the roads leading to and from the airport, resulting in more pollution, higher costs to maintain local roads, and more traffic accidents.

If you were a resident of Greensboro, would you support or oppose building the hub? What if you were a local business owner? What if you were unemployed? What if you lived near the airport?

When Do Public Choices Arise?

Public problems present people with choices, which are based not just on facts but also on values. A value represents something that people think is important and worth having. Public problems arise when people pursue different values. Public choices arise when people must decide which value they want more of, and how to avoid giving up one value in order to get more of another. The following example illustrates this dilemma.

Public Problem 3—Dress Codes in North Carolina Public Schools

The Facts: In the past few years, public schools in several North Carolina counties have adopted student dress codes.[7] One county, for example, prohibits T-shirts and clothing with nonschool logos and lettering. Further, it limits clothing mostly to neutral, solid colors, such as khaki and navy blue. Students are subject to disciplinary action if they violate the dress code.

The Values: Supporters of dress codes think that students are too concerned with name-brand clothing. They think that dress codes will decrease the violence and the theft that occur over such clothing and will prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia at school. They argue that too much attention to fashion leads some students to judge other students solely by how they look rather than who they are. Supporters point out that students who cannot afford "cool" clothing often feel inferior to students who are able to buy the latest fashions. These feelings can lead students to feel excluded and less equal, and sometimes they can lead to fights. Supporters believe that dress codes will help parents and students resist peer pressure, emphasize commonalities rather than differences, and help students concentrate more on school work.[8]

One parent said this about her county's dress code: "Kids make fun of other kids if they don't wear cool, name-brand clothes, and it can be very hurtful and damaging to their self-esteem. If this puts

an end to all that, then I'm all for it." A fourth-grade student remarked, "Wearing uniform clothes doesn't start fights, and no one picks on you, because you're all wearing the same thing. The clothes aren't really cool, but they're OK."[9]

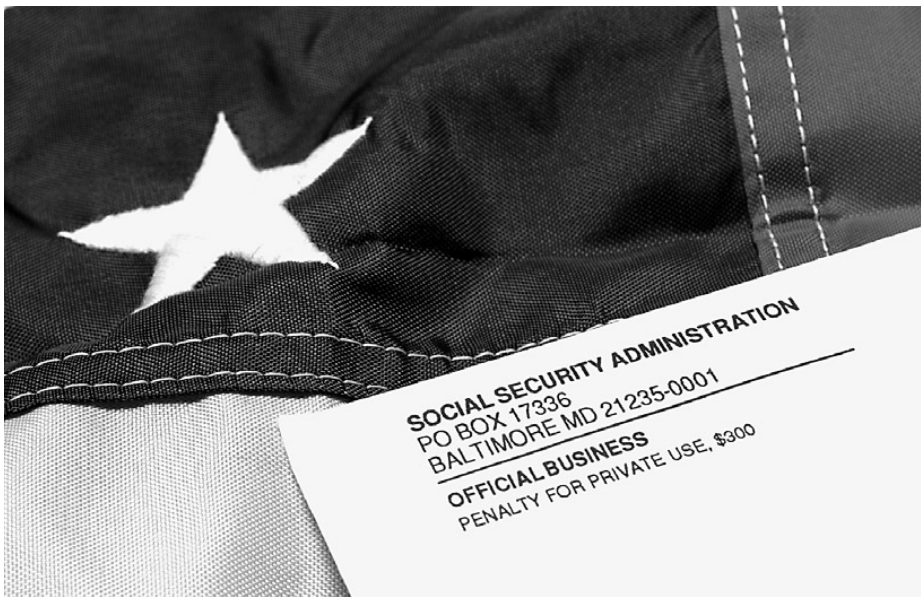
Opponents of dress codes argue that students are people too and deserve to be treated as individuals. They believe that clothing is an important way for students to express themselves and that dress codes stifle growth as an individual. Opponents point out that requiring students to wear the same type of clothing is unfair because it restricts students' freedom to be children; also because there is no similar dress code for teachers and other school employees. They argue that dress codes may conflict with religious and cultural beliefs. They argue further that schools are seeking a quick fix for deeper behavioral problems among some students.[10]

A parent sees the issue this way: "This policy is against the rights of the kids and prohibits their ability to be kids. With this code, the school board has taken away their individuality and cloned them."[11]

Most of the time, deciding what to wear is a private matter. How does deciding what to wear to school become a public problem? Think about the three key features of public problems: they involve values, they affect people as public citizens, and they occur in public settings.

Public problems arise when people disagree about which values are more important in creating the kind of school, community, or nation they want to live in. One purpose of public schools is to teach the values of liberty, equality, community, and prosperity to young Americans. With the problem of dress codes, people must decide whether their children are better off having more freedom to choose or being more equal. The public question is this: Will adopting a school dress code help create a better school environment for all students?

Public problems also arise when an issue or an event affects people as public citizens. When students make decisions about what clothes to buy and wear, they act as private consumers. One purpose of public schools is to help students learn how to become responsible consumers. But another purpose is to provide educational opportunities for all students. Clothes that offend some students or distract them from learning may make it more difficult to achieve equal opportunity. In that sense, when students make decisions about what clothes to wear to public school, they are acting as public citizens. To resolve the problem of dress codes, people must decide how to balance the rights of students as consumers with their responsibilities as citizens.



Public problems arise too when an issue or an event occurs in a public setting. Public schools are how society invests in its young people so that they will be able both to lead a life and earn a living. With the problem of dress codes, people must decide how to balance the self-interests of students as individuals against the public interest of all students.

What Is the Role of Government?

People agree that government should play a role in solving public problems, but they often disagree about the nature of this role. As the following example illustrates, deciding on the proper role of government is itself a public problem.

Public Problem 4—Paying in to Social Security

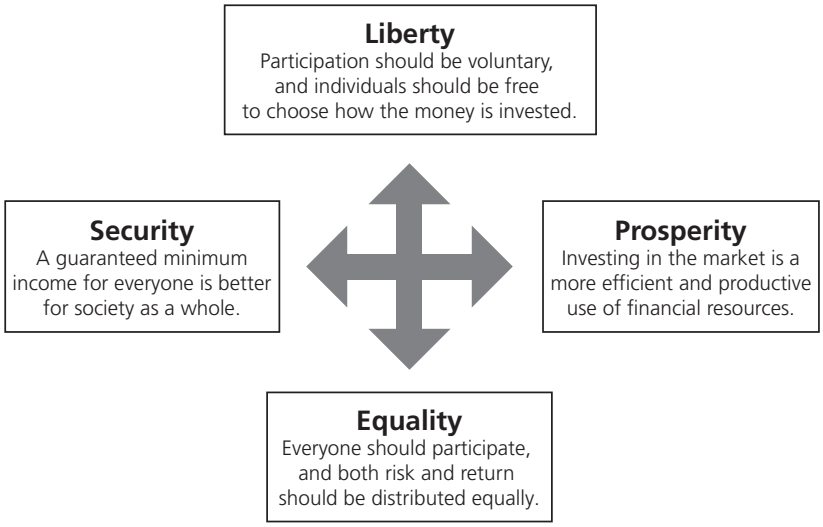
The Facts: As late as 1870, more than half of adult American workers were farmers. In the years that followed, the national economy became more urban and industrialized. The result was a nation of fewer farmers and self-employed workers and more employees working for wages. Many workers found themselves dependent on their jobs to provide for their families. Losing their income could mean poverty. The economic depression of the 1930s demonstrated how many American workers depended on factors beyond their control for their economic security.

In 1935 the U.S. Congress passed the Social Security Act, which created a system of federal old-age benefits. This was the country's first major federal government program to deal directly with the economic security of its citizens. Before then, such matters were handled by the states and private sources. Government action became necessary because neither the states nor private charities had the financial resources to cope with the growing number of retired older Americans.

Social Security has made a substantial contribution to raising people's income above the poverty level. The federal government estimates that if there was no Social Security, there would be almost four times as many aged poor people as there are today.[12]

Issue 1: *Should Americans be required to participate in Social Security, or should it be a voluntary program?*[13] Requiring people to participate in Social Security restricts their freedom to choose how to use their money. Under a voluntary system, some workers might be able to provide as well or better for themselves and their families through private investments. On the other hand, some workers who chose not to participate

Figure 1. **Public Arguments about Social Security**



might become disabled, reach old age, or die without enough money to support themselves or their families.

Having the freedom to choose whether or not to participate in Social Security would mean that some workers might have a large retirement fund while other workers might have a small fund or none at all. A voluntary program would mean that government would be able to help some but not all workers achieve economic security. For this reason, Congress decided to require most workers to participate in the Social Security program. *Sometimes people want to be free more than they want to be equal. Other times they want to be equal more than they want to be free.*

Issue 2: *Should the money you and your employer pay in to Social Security be managed by the government or by you?*[14] The economic prosperity of the 1990s led Congress to ask whether government should manage the Social Security Trust Fund or whether workers should be allowed to choose how to invest all or part of their retirement money. In good economic times, workers could earn more on their investment than they would through Social Security.

Private investments are far more risky than government investments, however. The federal government guarantees that workers will receive benefits from Social Security. Private investment firms might be able to help workers achieve greater earnings, but no private firm can guarantee that it will not lose some or all of workers' investments. For this reason, Congress does not yet allow workers to invest their money in a private fund, although it seems likely that Congress will offer workers some private investment choices in the near future.[15] *Sometimes people want to be secure more than they want to be prosperous. Other times they want to be prosperous more than they want to be secure.*

When people want to be free more than they want to be equal, or to be prosperous more than they want to be secure, they often want government to do less. When people want to be equal more than they want to be free, or to be secure more than they want to be prosperous, they often want government to do more. Because public problems require people to choose among competing values, the very values that people choose often determine the role government plays in solving public problems (see Figure 1).

How can government help solve public problems when the public wants such different things at different times? Government can help by carrying out three basic roles: education, participation, and representation. For government to be "of the people," it must help citizens recognize the values present in a public problem by educating them about problems and choices beyond their immediate self-interests. For government to be "by the people," it must help citizens understand the choices between these values by promoting opportunities for citizens to participate in public problem-solving and decision making. For government to be "for the people," it must help citizens decide how best to balance these competing values by representing all public values in framing public problems. Businesses and nonprofit organizations often are in conflict with each other because they favor different values. Government is the only institution charged with representing all four public values.

How Do People Solve Public Problems?

Public problems are really questions. People can find better solutions to public problems if they learn how to "listen" to the questions these problems represent. For example, the public problems described in this article raise these questions:

- Should younger new drivers be prohibited from driving alone or late at night if it means that fewer teenagers will be injured or killed in car accidents?
- Should residents of Greensboro who live near the airport be willing to accept more noise, traffic, and pollution in exchange for more jobs and a stronger local economy?
- Should students be required to give up wearing name-brand clothes to school if doing so would help other students feel more equal?
- Should workers be permitted to assume greater risk by investing some portion of their Social Security taxes in private investment funds in exchange for greater potential earnings?

Like a photographer who uses the lens of a camera to "see" a landscape, people use the lens of their values to see public problems. Because different values give people different views of a problem, people also tend to see different solutions. Before they can decide how to solve a public problem, they first must be able to see it in terms of liberty, equality, community, and prosperity.

To solve public problems, people must decide on solutions that achieve the best balance among the values

involved. To do this, they must keep in mind these five basic rules or principles:

1. There are no "single-value" public problems. They always involve a tension between at least two public values.

2. No one value is always better than the others. Every time people solve a public problem, their decision favors some values over others but not the same values every time.

3. Solutions that satisfy only one value are unjust. Since every public problem involves at least two values, people cannot solve a public problem by using only one value.

4. People are more likely to find a "good" solution to a public problem if they understand that decisions are less about how to do a good thing rather than a bad thing, and more about how to do a good thing without jeopardizing another good thing.

5. Trading more of one value for less of another (say, more prosperity for less community) will result in a different solution than trading less of the one for more of the other, but neither solution is necessarily better.

Conclusion

Liberty, equality, community, and prosperity: these are the values of public problems and public choices. They serve as goals or ideals for the nation. They are the glue that bonds Americans as a people in ways that different languages, cultures, and religions cannot.

Like the nation itself, these goals are works in progress. Each generation faces a new set of public problems, yet the problems involve the same set of values. Each generation must decide how to solve public problems in order to achieve enough liberty, equality, community, and prosperity for everyone.

Notes

1. For example, *see* GARY KLECK, TARGETING GUNS: FIREARMS AND THEIR CONTROL (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997); *Is a Gun an Effective Means of Self-Defense?* GUNCITE, May 13, 2001, available at http://www.guncite.com; and *Guns in the Home,* Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, July 20, 2001, available at http://www.bradycampaign.org/facts/issuebriefs/gunhome.asp.

2. *Saving Teenage Lives: The Case for Graduated Driver Licensing* (U.S. Nat'l Highway Traffic Safety Admin., July 23, 2001), available at http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/newdriver/SaveTeens/Index.html.

3. Robert D. Foss, *Preliminary Evaluation of the North Carolina Graduated Driver Licensing System: Effects on Young Driver Crashes* (Chapel Hill: Highway Safety Research Center, The Univ. of N.C. at Chapel Hill, 2000), available at http://www.hsrc.unc.edu/pdf/2000/gdlpdf.pdf.

4. A number of works address the role that values play in thinking about public problems and public policies. Among the best are ARTHUR M. OKUN, EQUALITY AND EFFICIENCY: THE BIG TRADEOFF (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Inst., 1975); JAMES O'TOOLE, THE EXECUTIVE'S COMPASS: BUSINESS AND THE GOOD SOCIETY (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); MARTIN REIN, SOCIAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC POLICY (Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1976); and DEBORAH STONE, POLICY PARADOX: THE ART OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKING (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

5. For example, *see* Meredith Barkley, *Triad Leaders Hope FedEx Will Address Job Needs*, GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, Mar. 9, 2001, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/ftworth09.htm; Stephen Martin, *Greensboro Chamber Rallies Behind FedEx*, GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, Jan. 24, 2001, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/chamber24.htm; Jack Scism, *Greensboro Needs the Jobs FedEx Can Bring*, GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, Aug. 31, 2000, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/scism31.htm; Taft Wireback, *Dueling Hub Studies? Three Reports, Three Bottom Lines,* GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, May 21, 2000, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/fedx21.htm.

6. For example, *see* Mark Binker, *New Hub May Add to Drive to Airport,* GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, Apr. 17, 2001, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/hpfedex17.htm; Daniel M. Nonte, *FedEx Rally Turns Heated*, GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, Mar. 9, 2001, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/fedex091.htm; Alex Wayne, *FedEx Opponents Oust Incumbent Commissioner,* GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, Nov. 9, 2000, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/guilcoco09rk.htm; Taft Wireback, *Airport Neighbors Make Themselves Heard about Noise Concerns*, GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, May 6, 2001, available at http://www.news-record.com/news/indepth/fedex/noise06.htm.

7. For example, *see* Bill Cresenzo, *New Dress Codes,* TIMES-NEWS, July 23, 2001, available at http://www.thetimesnews.com/2000/00-08/00-08-26/news-1.html; Phil Dickerson, *Mama, Not Schools, Set Dress Codes,* NEWS & OBSERVER, Sept. 15, 2000, available at http://www.newsobserver.com/standing/collections/dickerson/500000011705.html; *Uniform Dress Codes in Cumberland County Schools,* Governed Choice Programs —Cumberland County Schools, July 23, 2001, available at http://www.communications.ccs.k12.nc.us/choice/Main%20Pages/Dress%20Codes.htm.

8. Even legislators are jumping on the dress code bandwagon. For example, *see* General Assembly of North Carolina, An Act to Require Local Boards of Education to Adopt Dress Code and Appearance Policies for Public School Students and Employees, H.R. 645, Sess. 2001–2002 (Mar. 15, 2001), available at http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/html2001/bills/CurrentVersion/house/hbil0645.full.html.

9. Rebecca E. Eden, *Parents Split on Dress Code in Granville County,* DURHAM HERALD SUN, Oct. 11, 1999, at B1.

10. For example, *see* Claudia Assis, *Schools' Dress Code Blasted: Person County Crowd Argues Plan Would Cost Freedom of Expression and Would Be Difficult to Follow*, PERSON HERALD-SUN, Feb. 9, 2001, available at http://www.herald-sun.com/archives/URNDetail.cfm?URN=0345768386; Seth Batchelor, *Students Criticize New Dress Code*, CLAYTON NEWS-STAR, June 20, 2000, available at http://www.4042.com/claytonnews-star/20000620133603.html; Jeremy Leaming, *Public School Dress Code Challenged on Religious-Liberty Grounds*, First Amendment Center, Feb. 1, 1999, available at http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=8553.

11. Eden, *Parents*.

12. KATHRYN H. PORTER ET AL., SOCIAL SECURITY AND POVERTY AMONG THE ELDERLY: A NATIONAL AND STATE PERSPECTIVE (Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Apr. 1999).

13. For example, *see* ALICIA H. MUNNELL ET AL., THE IMPACT OF MANDATORY SOCIAL SECURITY COVERAGE OF STATE AND LOCAL WORKERS: A MULTI-STATE REVIEW (Washington, D.C.: Public Policy Inst., Amer. Ass'n of Retired Persons, Aug. 2000); TEXAS ASS'N OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEE RETIREMENT SYS., THE IMPACT OF MANDATORY SOCIAL SECURITY ON TEXAS (Houston: TEXPERS, Oct. 1998).

14. For contrasting views, *see* GARY BURTLESS & BARRY BOSWORTH, PRIVATIZING SOCIAL SECURITY: THE TROUBLING TRADE-OFFS, Policy Brief No. 14 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Inst., Mar. 1997), and MICHAEL TANNER, PRIVATIZING SOCIAL SECURITY: A BIG BOOST FOR THE POOR, Social Security Privatization Policy Brief No. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Cato Inst., July 26, 1996).

15. Social Security Admin., *President Bush Establishes New Social Security Commission* (May 2, 2001), available at http://www.ssa.gov/ssacommission.htm.