Field Report:

“METS” Education in Kansas City

Today’s students live in a world of rapid technological change, where good jobs and promising careers increasingly require a solid background in math, engineering, technology and science (known as METS in the Kansas City area and STEM in many other parts of the country).

Unfortunately, recent studies suggest that too few students are proficient in these subjects. There is growing consensus among the nation’s business, government and higher education leaders that unless schools do more to train and nurture a whole new generation of young Americans with strong METS skills, U.S. leadership in the world economy is at risk.

In and around Kansas City, business, government and education leaders are particularly concerned about improving METS achievement to ensure that area students get the skills they’ll need to succeed in the 21st century economy and to help build a workforce that is capable of supporting the region’s METS-heavy growth industries such as life sciences, engineering and advanced manufacturing.

In 2006, Public Agenda conducted research in the Kansas City region on the attitudes of parents, students, educators and business leaders about the importance of METS education. Our findings, published in the report “Important, but Not for Me,” suggest that parents and students in Kansas City do not share the concerns of the region’s leaders and experts about the importance of improving METS achievement.

While this gap in understanding poses a serious challenge for those who wish to communicate the importance of improving METS education, our research also revealed that this “urgency gap” can be bridged by speaking the language of “opportunity” and by articulating the opportunities created through strong METS education.

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About Public Engagement @ Public Agenda

Since its beginnings in 1975, Public Agenda has been a pioneer in the practice of public engagement, with hands-on experience in hundreds of communities and on dozens of tough issues.

Our work revolves around three fundamental and interrelated practices:

FIRST, we Frame issues for Public deliberation so everyone can enter the public dialogue and participate effectively.

THEN, we work with communities to Engage citizens and leaders for Democratic problem solving and change.

FINALLY, we Strengthen local civic capacity for the long term, beyond the life span of any project.*
New Publications on Public Engagement

When it comes to terms like “conservation,” “energy security” and “energy costs,” citizens and experts define these terms and think about them very differently. CAPE’s report “Putting the Pieces Together: How Do Citizens and Experts See the Energy Issue?” unearths the profound mismatch in how leaders and the public define the problem and think about solutions to advance the national dialogue on energy issues.

“Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power” first appeared in the Journal of Public Deliberation (Vol. 3, Issue 1) and explores several arguments against deliberative democracy, while offering offers a response to critics who raise questions about the impact of structural inequities on the quality and outcome of deliberation processes.

“Fifteen Things Every Journalist Should Know about Public Engagement”
Journalists often express skepticism about how public engagement activities advance community participation in the decision-making process. With that in mind, Public Agenda has authored “Fifteen Things Every Journalist Should Know about Public Engagement,” recently featured in the summer edition of the National Civic Review. This helpful guide breaks down the core principles of effective public engagement, debunks some popular misconceptions about the practice and discusses the role of journalists in facilitating understanding of the field.

Let’s continue the conversation online!
You can download these and other reports for free at www.PublicAgenda.org/PublicEngagement

COVER STORY:
Field Report: METS Education in Kansas City

To help close the “urgency gap” and to communicate to parents and students the opportunities that are generated by improving METS education, Public Agenda is leading a three-year public engagement initiative in the Kansas City region.

This initiative, which is funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation as part of the its ten-year agenda to improve math, engineering, technology and science education in the Kansas City region, aims to involve a significant number of citizens communities and leaders in dialogue about what priority METS should have in the region and how resources should be directed to create a prosperous future.

Over the next three years, Public Agenda will work with ten communities across the region to host Community Conversations on improving METS achievement. The Regional METS Leadership Coalition, a group dedicated to improving METS achievement in the Kansas City region, has been formed to provide strategic guidance to the initiative.

Most recently, a Wyandotte County Community Conversation was held at Kansas City Kansas Community College on improving science and math achievement. More than 100 parents, students, educators, employers and community members participated in the dialogue about how to work together to improve opportunities for young people and to support economic growth in the region, spurring a variety of new activities and partnerships to boost student success.
Theory in Motion

A very productive first year for CAPE

Public Agenda launched the Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) in mid-2007, which has since produced several thought pieces and created many new citizen deliberation tools to advance the practice of public engagement. Through its applied research, hands-on engagement projects and dissemination efforts, CAPE has made significant contributions to the burgeoning field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics.

But this is only the beginning, according to CAPE Director Will Friedman. “We feel we are on the verge of several exciting and significant contributions to the theory and practice of public engagement. These new R&D efforts are certainly making our own work in support of citizen engagement and community problem-solving more effective. We hope the larger field finds them useful as well,” Friedman explained.

For example, CAPE is pursuing a research agenda to study the effects of “issue framing” on citizen capacity and willingness to engage in productive deliberation. CAPE has also released several new publications in the past year, which are detailed in this newsletter.

With support from its partners, CAPE will add several new publications and products in 2009. The CAPE team is especially excited about its forthcoming book that reflects and builds on Daniel Yankelovich's seminal work “Coming to Public Judgment.” The new book will include contributions from practitioners whose work has been influenced by Yankelovich’s insights, as well as a major new statement by Yankelovich himself on what he calls the public’s “learning curve.”

During this past year, CAPE has forged new relationships with researchers and practitioners from the robust field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics. It has been an active participant in several organizations promoting civic engagement, including the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, Journal of Public Deliberation and the Kellogg Foundation “learning cluster” on deliberative democracy and community organizing.

What is CAPE?

CAPE’s mission is to be a vibrant source of research and development for the field of public engagement and the discipline of deliberative democracy. It conducts and disseminates new research into the practice and impact of public engagement, creates new tools and strategies, seeks to connect academics and practitioners in new ways, and ultimately seeks to foster a more meaningful, inclusive and participatory American democratic process.

In its first year, CAPE has moved forward on all three of its major areas of work – research, theory building and experiments in digital engagement. This newsletter details several products emerging from CAPE to date.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund have provided major start-up support for the Center. CAPE is also doing collaborative research with the Kettering Foundation.

For more information and updates about CAPE work, go to: www.PublicAgenda.org/CAPE

CAPE Works

Another Look at “Coming to Public Judgment”
Has what we know about how the public comes to judgment changed over the last two decades?

Public Agenda co-founder Daniel Yankelovich first published his seminal book “Coming to Public Judgment” nearly twenty years ago. The book changed the way theorists and practitioners thought about public opinion and offered solutions to transform the role of the general public in decision making. CAPE is revisiting and updating this critical body of work through fresh responses from the public engagement field, and with a major new statement by Mr. Yankelovich. While contributors will focus primarily on the ways in which Yankelovich’s ideas have influenced their practices, the book will also trace the evolution of public engagement over the past twenty years and document some of the political and practical challenges that remain around efforts to help transform knee-jerk public opinion into well-formed public judgment.

The new “Public Engagement Primer” from CAPE is a valuable resource for those trying to better understand what public engagement is all about, and for those trying to explain it. In a few short pages, the Primer explains how public engagement helps create civic capacity for public problem solving, offers 10 core principles of effective public engagement and provides examples of key practices and strategies. The Primer also describes the power of “Citizen Choicework,” a critical element in many deliberative processes.
How do we meet the challenges of climate change? Where do we start? There are conflicting opinions on how to even have a productive conversation on this issue. “Facing the Challenges of Climate Change: A Guide for Citizen Thought and Action” cuts through the noise and presents three contrasting approaches to the problem of climate change, each with its own set of trade-offs to consider. The guide also has a section of action items for ordinary citizens to make a difference.

Public Agenda has partnered with several science cafes, such as the Café Scientifique in Denver and the Secret Science Club in New York, to host climate change dialogues. To engage communities to learn more about the issue, these informal dialogues were designed as a possible model to get ordinary citizens involved in these issues in informal, non-threatening settings.

With the Gulf Area Quality Afterschool Initiative, a project of the National Education Association and the National League of Cities, Public Agenda has developed a Choicework Discussion Starter titled “After the Bell: What Do We Want Our Afterschool Programs to Do?” It provides a framework for evaluating different approaches to afterschool programming. While created for the Gulf Area Afterschool Initiative, the Choicework Discussion Starter can also be used by communities anywhere in the nation.

Even with a high school diploma, too many students these days arrive at college lacking the right kind of preparation, knowledge and attitude to succeed. What can communities do to improve college readiness and help students achieve their goals? “Everybody Ready for College” is a new Choicework Discussion Starter designed to help facilitate Community Conversations on the issue of college readiness. Public Agenda developed this Choicework Discussion Starter in coordination with Jefferson Community College, Trinity Health Systems, and the Jefferson County Educational Service Center in Steubenville, OH.

“Reframing ‘Framing’” takes a critical look at how political operatives use framing to spin issues versus how civic engagement practitioners use framing to help clarify complex issues. The piece assesses the democratic implications of those differences for the media, political and civic leadership and civic engagement. This essay examines the shortcomings of the limited context in which framing is usually understood.

“Transforming Public Life is an extremely helpful document — it not only highlighted our accomplishments using public engagement strategies over the years in Bridgeport, but helped us to better understand the different factors behind our success and to reflect on our practices.”

- MARGARET HILLER, Executive Director, Bridgeport Education Fund

“Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport” outlines how public engagement has become an integral part of Bridgeport, Connecticut’s civic life, a city beset by social ills common to post-industrial cities. But this community is witnessing real civic renewal because of a decade of hard work by organizations, citizens and local leaders. The report illustrates how public engagement on education issues started a larger process that is changing the community.
FROM THE FIELD

Community College Outcomes
For three years, Public Agenda has been a central player in Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a multi-year national initiative initiated by the Lumina Foundation for Education. The project aims to help more community college students succeed – especially those who traditionally face the greatest challenges, such as students of color and low-income students.

Working in partnership with MDC, a non-profit that helps organizations and communities close the gaps that separate people from opportunity, Public Agenda launched a pilot project designed to augment community dialogue and engagement work with the creation of campus/community leadership teams.

Public Agenda and MDC have implemented pilot programs with the University of New Mexico-Gallup and South Texas Community College to improve student achievement. Both colleges and their community partners have convened numerous Community Conversations – or “Community Talking Circles,” as the Gallup sessions are called.

Located in the high desert region, UNM-G has special challenges serving a state well known for its large Native American population. Social and economic disparities are prevalent and success rates for college students are low.

Recently more than 150 parents, students, local officials, business leaders and other stakeholders participated in a Talking Circle organized in Gallup to collaborate on the creation of more culturally sensitive and effective educational pathways for achievement for both prospective and current students.

After School Programs in the Gulf Area
Public Agenda is working with the National Education Association and the National League of Cities on the Gulf Area Quality Afterschool Initiative – a project to help communities develop better afterschool programs. The initiative aims to increase municipal capacity for engaging citizens at the same time it builds public support for improving afterschool programs.

Public Agenda is also providing technical assistance to two Gulf Area communities – Biloxi, Mississippi and Bogalusa, Louisiana. A Choicework Discussion Starter on afterschool programming options, developed by Public Agenda (see page 4) is being used to support public engagement efforts in both communities.

Moss Point: A Renewed Vision for a Renewed City
Like most of Mississippi’s Gulf communities devastated by Hurricane Katrina, Moss Point is faced with the daunting task of rebuilding its infrastructure. In an effort to engage the community in the recovery and renewal process, Moss Point’s city leaders have enlisted the help of Public Agenda.

Public Agenda is working to build capacity among city leaders to effectively engage the community in the planning process on several critical fronts, including housing and downtown redevelopment. To that end, Public Agenda is providing Moss Point leaders with training and technical assistance to involve communities in the decision-making process.*

ABOVE BACKGROUND PHOTO: Parents and community leaders participate in a “Community Talking Circle” in Gallup, New Mexico.

COMING UP
Brighter Futures: Public Deliberation about the Science of Early Childhood Development
The Science Museum of Minnesota, Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota and Public Agenda are partnering on an innovative project to build widespread support for early childhood development and education. Through public engagement programs designed around a highly interactive exhibition, the project aims to help its audiences understand child development, how environment and experiences impact development, and what we as a society can do to support our youngest citizens. The three-year project is funded by National Science Foundation and will begin in 2009.

Improving Interfaith Understanding through Dialogue
Public Agenda is collaborating with 20,000 Dialogues, a national interfaith dialogue project of Unity Productions Foundation, to create a dialogue toolkit to spur greater cross-cultural understanding. The dialogue toolkit is designed to be used in conjunction with the documentary film, Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain. Dialogue events using the film and corresponding Choicework Discussion Starter will help citizens across the country engage in meaningful dialogue about the past, present and future of interfaith relations.

If you’d like to host a film screening and dialogue, or if you’d like more information about this initiative, contact McKenna Morrigan, Public Engagement Associate at mmorrigan@publicagenda.org.

* Local officials, business leaders and other stakeholders participated in a Talking Circle organized in Gallup to collaborate on the creation of more culturally sensitive and effective educational pathways for achievement for both prospective and current students.
“Public Agenda has been our active and valued partner for many years in Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count. In that initiative – where it’s so critical to foster true engagement among faculty members, campus leaders and community stakeholders – the expertise and commitment of Public Agenda’s staff have been absolutely vital.”

- SAM CARGILE, Vice President, Grantmaking, Lumina Foundation for Education

Read more on page 5

Interested in learning more about public engagement?

Find out more about Public Agenda’s work engaging communities and how your organization can use public engagement techniques at:

www.PublicAgenda.org/PublicEngagement