Leveling the Playing Field:
A Community Discussion on Quality Education in Washington DC

A Public Agenda Choicework Guide for Community Conversations, Classrooms, Study Groups and Individuals

PUBLIC AGENDA
A Note on Public Agenda’s Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, as well as individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to fit your situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways—they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people will mix and match different perspectives, or add to them with related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation. For instance, for a guide on an education topic, a few well-chosen facts about local schools might be a useful adjunct to the guide if you are using it in a group setting.

Using the guide in small group dialogues

The discussion guide that follows is given to each participant and moderator in a small group dialogue. The group reads through the full Choicework together and then participants are asked to indicate, through a show of hands, which of the approaches he or she believes will make the greatest impact on the issue at hand – in this case, hunger in north and east King County, Washington.

Note that the “show of hands” is only meant as a starting point for conversation. People are not committing to a single solution but simply indicating which approach appears at first glance to show the most promise. The dialogue begins by asking people why they lean the way they do, after which people are free to start combining ideas, adding new ones, etc. Participants are led through a moderated discussion about their choices and the values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs embedded in each approach.

After discussing the choices on the following pages, the moderator and participants may wish to consider and talk through the questions outlined below for the purposes of (1) summarizing the conversation and (2) bridging from dialogue into action.
(1) Summarizing a Choicework Conversation
These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework dialogue prior to considering more action-oriented questions:

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement or concern—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about in order to address this issue effectively?

(2) Bridging from Dialogue to Action
These questions can help you move from deliberation and dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue:

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today? [This question can be tailored to your planning team’s goals]

   Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today’s conversation?

3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today’s conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?
Leveling the Playing Field

While our personal priorities and top community concerns may vary, most people would agree that all growing children, from early childhood through twelfth grade, should have access to a quality education. As our nation’s capital Washington DC should be a leader in education, but unfortunately there are too many children in our neighborhoods who are not getting the education that will prepare them for success in life. The highest performing schools in DC are concentrated in only a few neighborhoods and are in great demand. They have become overcrowded, have long waitlists and are difficult for families from other neighborhoods to travel to. Many of the highest-performing high schools are competitive admissions schools, which limits the number of students who can access these programs. In other words, not all of our young people have access to a quality education.

Many of the schools that are located right here in our neighborhoods are struggling, and in the end our children bear the costs. A “quality education” can mean different things to different people. While people may disagree on the precise formula it takes to create quality schools and educational opportunities, most of us can agree that it involves a safe environment, high quality teachers, a strong curriculum, at least a minimal amount of parent involvement, among a few other essentials. The question becomes how to create more high quality educational opportunities for all our children, no matter what neighborhood they live in. The purpose of today’s discussion is to begin finding those ways as parents, students, families, neighbors, educators, policymakers and communities.

To help you and your neighbors think together about what each and all of us can do to improve the opportunities for students in our community, this guide will describe several different approaches as a starting point. As you will see, there are many strategies that we could pursue. But we have to choose wisely – it’s better to do a few things well than to do many things poorly. After reviewing the three approaches, we'll ask which ideas you think make the most sense, which ideas are missing, and how we can do a better job of working together to give all students the opportunities they need.

Keep in mind that these approaches are not the only approaches, nor do they exhaust the ideas and strategies that we might adopt. Rather, this is simply a starting point for our conversation and all ideas are welcome as we tackle this challenge together.
Approach A

Focus on ensuring basic education and stable learning environments

A basic education is the most important building block for success. Simple things like up-to-date textbooks, caring teachers, orderly classrooms, and safe ways to get to and from school can go a long way to helping students succeed. Without adequate safety or enough emotional, behavioral and social support students will not be able to focus on mastering skills like reading, writing, math and science, which they need to finish their lessons, advance from one grade to the next, graduate and eventually go to college or get a job. Too many children are struggling with core competencies, and we need to focus on providing students a solid foundation, regardless of the neighborhood they live in.

Therefore, to improve educational opportunities in DC:

- School principals should hire certified and highly qualified math, science and English teachers who have a commitment to education and the community.
- Schools, community programs, recreation centers and student peer groups should provide strong tutoring services, mentoring programs and social opportunities for healthy minds and bodies.
- Leaders must invest in safe and clean school facilities so that students can concentrate on learning and families can take pride in their school.
- Professional guidance counselors as well as community volunteers must be available to help students work through life challenges and help them focus on their academics.
- Schools, community programs and neighbors should provide social and educational supports to parents who need help caring for children with learning disabilities, behavioral issues and disruptive life experiences so that children can be ready for and focused on learning.

Those who like this approach say:

“Our schools are not meeting our children’s basic needs. How can we expect students to learn and succeed in life if their classrooms are chaotic and they are struggling to gain essential skills?”

But others say:

“It is not enough to focus on providing basics in some schools, while students in others have enriched opportunities. The main job of a school should be to create disciplined learners who excel, not just ‘get by.’"
Approach B
Push to raise academic standards and expect excellence from all

Ensuring basic skills is essential, but it’s not reaching high enough. If we don’t believe in excellence for our children, neither will they. The expectations of teachers, parents, and other important adults can have a major impact on how well students do in school and how well the school does for the community. Students must be encouraged to excel, to think critically about the world around them and have their sights set on a two- or four-year college degree in order to succeed in today’s economy. Schools must be held to higher standards, too, if our children are to receive high quality educational opportunities.

Therefore, to improve educational opportunities in DC:

- Educators, parents and neighbors must encourage and inspire students by setting high expectations that reinforce the importance of staying in school and aiming high.

- Teachers should have access to professional development opportunities so they can apply the most promising teaching practices in the classroom.

- School leaders must support and educators must develop curricula, class materials, assignments, and field trips that encourage creativity and critical thinking skills.

- Educators, local businesses and community members should connect students with enriching volunteer and internship opportunities beyond the school.

- School administrators, teachers and parents should enforce tighter disciplinary policies and practices that reinforce learning.

- Policy leaders and education experts should improve standardized tests so they more accurately measure whether students are learning, and if not, exactly where they are falling short. Better tests will help teachers improve their teaching and give parents and community members more solid information on how well schools are doing.

Those who like this approach say:

“If you demand more, students will rise to the challenge.”

But others say:

“You can’t just raise the bar and expect everyone to follow – those who are already doing well will continue to succeed, but those who are struggling will just fall even further behind.”
Approach C

Prioritize and support parent/guardian and community involvement in schools

Research shows that schools that have a lot of parent and community involvement are often more successful than those that don't. Low family and community involvement can be caused by many things including poor communication between schools and families, lack of awareness about the importance or how-to's of getting involved, feeling overwhelmed by personal problems, or having an intimidating school environment. Whatever the reason, there are many people in the community – whether or not they are parents – who could be more involved in children's education if provided with more information, opportunities and supports; schools and their students stand to benefit as a result.

Therefore, to improve educational opportunities in DC:

- The district should hire principals who believe in strong family and community relations,
- Principals and teachers need to establish good communication with families throughout the school year and in ways that inspire or require parents/guardians to be more involved.
- Principals and teachers must form deep relationships with the communities and neighborhoods their schools serve.
- City officials, schools and community based organizations should translate school information into the languages that families speak at home.
- Teachers, school counselors and fellow parents should make special efforts to reach uninvolved parents or guardians through home visits, scheduling meetings at flexible hours, or facilitating parent-to-parent support groups.
- Neighbors, faith leaders and community organizations should provide adult education opportunities to help parents/guardians learn skills that will assist them in helping their children, such as computer skills, adult literacy and homework help tutorials.

People who like this approach might say:

“Many families in our community are disconnected from the schools, and we need to do more to make them feel welcome and get them involved in improving education for their own children and for the benefit of the whole school.”

Others might say:

“Schools should focus their time and resources on their primary mission of teaching at school rather than trying to get parents to do things they ought to be doing anyway.”
The Approaches in Brief

Approach A  Focus on ensuring basic education and stable learning environments

- School principals should hire certified and highly qualified math, science and English teachers.
- Schools, community programs, recreation centers and student peer groups should provide strong tutoring services, mentoring programs and social opportunities.
- Leaders must invest in safe and clean school facilities.
- Professional guidance counselors as well as community volunteers must be available to help students work through life challenges.
- Schools, community programs and neighbors should provide social and educational supports to parents.

Approach B  Push to raise academic standards and expect excellence from all

- Educators, parents and neighbors must encourage and inspire students by setting high expectations.
- Teachers should have access to professional development opportunities.
- School leaders must support and educators must develop curricula, class materials, assignments, and field trips that encourage creativity and critical thinking skills.
- Educators, local businesses and community members should connect students with enriching volunteer and internship opportunities.
- School administrators, teachers and parents should enforce tighter disciplinary policies.
- Policy leaders and education experts should improve standardized tests so they more accurately measure whether students are learning.

Approach C  Prioritize and support parent/guardian and community involvement in schools

- The district should hire principals who believe in strong family and community relations.
- Principals and teachers need to establish good communication with families.
- Principals and teachers must form deep relationships with their schools’ communities.
- City officials, schools and community based organizations should translate school information into the languages that families speak at home.
- Teachers, school counselors and fellow parents should make special efforts to reach uninvolved parents or guardians.
- Neighbors, faith leaders and community organizations should provide adult education opportunities to help parents/guardians learn skills that will assist them in helping their children.
A Note on the Discussion Guide – “Leveling the Playing Field” Choicework

Choicework Discussion Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. Guides like “Leveling the Playing Field” have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, as well as individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

“Leveling the Playing Field” is organized around three alternative ways of thinking about the issue of quality education in DC. Each approach has its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn from what the public thinks about an issue, based on focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Between May and July 2012, Public Agenda conducted four focus groups with residents of Wards 1, 4, 5, 7 and 8 to discuss their top concerns and priorities as they relate to their neighborhoods, schools and opportunities for quality education in their Wards. One group was recruited through a market-research facility; the other three groups were recruited through networks of local community organizations and citizens. These focus groups helped us understand how parents, families and other concerned community members are thinking about and talking about issues around education quality in DC. Based on the perspectives we heard, we developed the three approaches that you see in the guide. These represent the “buckets” of how several residents think about improving opportunities for quality education for all DC children no matter which Ward they live in.

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways—they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people will mix and match different perspectives, or add to them with related ideas.

We hope that you will find the guide to be a useful tool for getting your conversation going and for allowing a range of voices to participate in the dialogue – loud ones and quiet ones alike.

If you have any feedback, questions or would like more information about Public Agenda’s work and our Choicework Guides please contact Jyoti Gupta, jgupta@publicagenda.org.

Thank you for joining the conversation!