The Future of Public Engagement

In Spring 2004, Will Friedman was appointed Senior Vice President and Director of Public Engagement at Public Agenda. After six months of working intensely on several new projects, Dr. Friedman took a 15 minute break to breathe and talk a bit about where public engagement at Public Agenda is headed. The complete conversation is available on Public Agenda’s web site: www.publicagenda.org

Editor: This is a busy time for the public engagement team at Public Agenda, isn’t it?

Will Friedman: Right now we’re working with a police-community dialogue project in three cities (New Haven, San Antonio and New York City), a statewide education project in Nebraska, and a nationwide initiative to improve community college results for underserved students. There are also a number of important projects in the pipeline.

The work in Nebraska is an interesting example. Public Agenda began working with the Department of Education in Nebraska eight or nine years ago when we helped them organize statewide conversations on academic standards. And now the state has come back and asked us to help them engage citizens on a related theme: What are the educational opportunities that should be available to every student in every school no matter where they live in the state? What should be considered an essential education? What’s really interesting about the project is where it will go next year, because the question that follows directly behind is really the more contentious one. Nebraska will need to explore how it will go about ensuring that all students actually have those essential educational opportunities, and that’s going to bring them into trickier questions.

E: You have a new title, but you’ve been involved in public engagement at Public Agenda for a long time.

WF: When I first came to Public Agenda in 1994, I was in the research department. Around that time we began to develop more projects that combined research with initiatives to help citizens talk through the divergent perspectives and priorities raised in the research. This organization’s history of citizen engagement, which is what led Cy Vance and Dan Yankelovich to found Public Agenda in the first place, is one of the reasons I came to Public Agenda. As more and more public engagement projects arose, it made sense to make an ongoing organizational commitment to this kind of work. So, we created a new department to develop and manage these kinds of community-based public engagement projects. After a number of years I left Public Agenda for a time to try my hand at some other work, but even then I was consulting for Public Agenda on public engagement projects, so I never entirely left.

School Discipline: Persistent Problem Gets Overdue Attention, New Insights

Discipline and behavior problems in America’s public schools are seriously compromising student learning. They are also driving a substantial number of teachers out of the profession according to a study from Public Agenda released in May titled Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today’s Public Schools Foster the Common Good?

The report was prepared for Common Good, a bipartisan legal reform coalition dedicated to restoring common sense to American law. It was the second project Public Agenda has worked on with Common Good to look at how litigation and education policy intersect.

Teaching Interrupted dramatically illustrates the impact of discipline problems in schools, reporting that more than 1 in 3 teachers said colleagues in their school had left because student discipline was such a challenge, and the same number personally considered leaving. Many complained about
For over a quarter century, Public Agenda has worked to bridge the gap between America’s policy leaders and the public through its in-depth, nonpartisan research and public engagement projects. Now, we are working to create more ways to bring leaders and the public together in direct interactions with a series of speaking engagements that open new dialogue and bring new choices to light on some of the most difficult issues facing our nation.

In July, The Rockefeller Brothers Fund sponsored a presentation by Daniel Yankelovich, Co-founder and Chairman of Public Agenda, titled “Cutting the Lifeline of Terror: What’s Next After Iraq?” Richard N. Haass, President of The Council on Foreign Relations, put forth a challenging set of ideas as responder, and Stephen Heintz, President of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, was the moderator for the session.

“Cutting the Lifeline of Terror” looked at Al Qaeda as part of a social/political movement and examined public attitudes in the Muslim world, Europe and the United States. Washington Post columnist William Raspberry discussed the presentation and used Mr. Yankelovich’s thesis as the focus of a piece titled “Change the Iraq Conversation.”

Mr. Yankelovich also wrote an opinion piece titled “To Defeat Al Qaeda, US Must Build Trust of Moderate Muslims” that was published by the Christian Science Monitor. The full transcript of the event, including a lively Q&A session is available for free download at www.publicagenda.org in the “Articles & Speeches” section of the site.

Public Agenda also co-hosted a panel discussion developed by the Japan Society in September titled “Bush v. Kerry: Economic & Foreign Policy Implications of Election 2004,” with panelists Lee Feinstein, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, Bruce Stokes, columnist for The National Journal, Robert Y. Shapiro, Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, and David Frum, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute. In April 2004, Public Agenda and the Japan Society co-presented a talk by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., then Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University on “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.”

Public Agenda is planning new speaking events in 2004, 2005 and beyond. Check the “Articles & Speeches” section of our website for updates and upcoming events.

Just the FACTS

65% of travel consumers said “people are often crowded or in long lines so they lose their cool” is a “major cause” of rude and disrespectful behavior in travel. 66% of travel workers agreed. Source: Push Comes to Shove 2003
Praise for First Choice 2004 Voters Guides

Public Agenda was out of the gate early when it released its First Choice 2004: Know What You Want Before You Choose Who You Want voter guides in March. Since then, we’ve been hearing a great deal of feedback from newspaper reports, citizen groups, meet-up organizers, high school teachers, and university professors about how effective the guides are in educating potential voters on the complexity of issues so they can make decisions about who they want to support in the elections.

Public Agenda’s partners in the First Choice 2004 project are MTV’s Choose or Loose and The New York Times Learning Project. First Choice 2004 is being supported by The Carnegie Corporation of New York.

“Public Agenda has done what I once hoped to do myself: they have created a website with detailed background information on important public issues and self-diagnostic exercises that can help you to decide what policies you prefer,” said Peter Levine, Deputy Director of The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). “If there were any way to get lots of people to use resources like this, our democracy would work much better.”

The guides have been used by Meetup.com organizers in their gatherings to organize discussion and actions on complex issues such as gay rights. MTV’s Choose or Loose reports that the First Choice 2004 guides have been one of the most popular features on their web site.

“More and more young people are going to the Web for news and information, including campaign news,” said Leonard M. Apcar, editor in chief of NYTimes.com. “[these resources] provide students with the tools to stay up-to-date and informed about the issues at the forefront of the 2004 presidential election.”

The New York Public Library lists First Choice 2004 at the very top of its voter information links on its web site. The CNN Student News information service recommended that teachers direct their students to the Public Agenda Web site “to access the three different perspectives on their assigned issues [and] have groups determine where these perspectives fall on a liberal-conservative continuum.” A number of newspapers across the country have published portions of First Choice 2004 to help their readers make more informed decisions. According to Wisconsin State Journal Editor Tim Kelley, “your material, as a supplement to local reporting and commentary, [provides] excellent background for potential voters.”

If there were any way to get lots of people to use resources like this, our democracy would work much better.

Have You Been Using First Choice 2004? Tell us how. Send an email with your story to: mremaley@publicagenda.org

68% 11%

of superintendents say that, when it comes to their budget, lack of funding is "a problem, but progress can be made given what we have." 27% said it was such a critical problem that only minimal progress could be made. Source: Rolling Up Their Sleeves 2003

of teachers were "very confident" that they could turn around their hardest-to-reach students by the end of the year. 50% said they were "somewhat confident," 28% said "not too confident," 11% said "not confident at all" and 1% said "not sure." Source: Stand by Me 2003

Coming Soon


With support from THE WALLACE FOUNDATION, Public Agenda is exploring what parents and students want in the out-of-school hours and where the gaps are. This is a debate that has not yet heard from the families who use these activities, so it will be an important launching pad for a campaign to generate a substantial national discussion on what we are doing as a nation to nurture our children when school lets out.

Life After High School: Opportunities and Success in Higher Education and the Workplace Slated for Release: December 2004

This study of young adults between the ages of 18 to 25 aims to better understand how they choose their path after high school. Why did some follow their high school education with post-secondary education and others enter the workforce directly? Who influenced them? Who inspired them? The study will probe what young people say happened to them at critical moments in their high school years and will compare the views of African American, Hispanic, Asian, and white respondents. The research will be based on extensive interviews with experts, focus groups and a nationwide survey of young adults. This comprehensive project is being supported by THE COLLEGE BOARD, GE FOUNDATION, THE GEORGE GUND FOUNDATION, W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION, and KNOWLEDGEWORKS FOUNDATION.
ISSUES IN POLLING

None of the Above: 
What Polls Really Tell Us About Vouchers

By Scott Bittle, Executive Editor, Public Agenda Online

Periodically, the education world erupts into a debate over what citizens think about public schools. Too often, all it proves is that people in education don’t have the slightest idea what the public thinks about their profession.

A good example is the recent fight over school vouchers or school choice, depending on what side you’re on. The annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa survey on education came out in August with a finding that 42% of the public approved of vouchers. A Wirthlin Worldwide survey, funded by the pro-school choice Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, concluded the Gallup survey is biased against vouchers. The Wirthlin survey, with the question phrased differently, found 63% in favor.

The conflicting findings are really beside the point. When Public Agenda first studied vouchers in 1999, there was an enormous desire by advocates on both sides to cherry pick the survey findings and ignore the overall conclusions. It’s understandable. Proponents believe they have the most exciting opportunity to improve education and help poor children in decades. Opponents believe they’re defending public schools against a cure that’s worse than the disease. The temptation to use poll findings as debating points is overwhelming.

But a clear, intellectually honest reading of the data shows neither side really has a claim on public support.

The taxpayers, parents and schoolchildren of America deserve no less. The challenge for both sides in the school choice debate is whether they will stop arguing over who has the public’s support and instead put in the hard work necessary to bring the public into the discussion to learn, voice concerns and come to consensus.

This is an issue that calls out for public engagement and the kind of Citizen Choicework that explores challenges in-depth and helps communities come to informed decisions. Anything less is just the “right answer” to the wrong question.

In medicine, there is a term that is relevant here: informed consent. When doctors set about treating a patient – and there is consensus that public education needs some kind of treatment – the patient is supposed to know what the doctors are doing and agree with it, with all the benefits and risks.

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Will Friedman
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Now I want to commit even further to this kind of work and make it a major pillar of what Public Agenda is doing. I would like Public Agenda to continue and grow as a leader in the field, and contribute to a body of literature on public engagement.

E: How has the public engagement field evolved over the years and what is Public Agenda’s role?

WF: There has been a lot more activity under the rubric of “public engagement,” related strands of work that go by different names: stakeholder dialogue, civil society, civic engagement, etc. Because of our unique expertise, I think Public Agenda is well-positioned to make significant contributions. And the way we’re going to do that, first, is just to continue to do good work and try to develop and refine our own practice. And second, we’re going to communicate to other practitioners and try to get more dialogue going in the field.

E: What is “Choicework” and how is it different from other forms of public engagement that are out there?

WF: Choicework is our main approach to civic dialogue. It is a term coined by Dan Yankelovich and it is a process that we’ve found to be an extremely productive strategy. At its heart, it is about helping people deliberate more effectively by presenting them with choices, alternative paths for addressing a public problem, each with its own set of values, risks, opportunities, and practical tradeoffs.

So, rather than ask people broad questions like “what do you think about problem X?” or saying, “here’s our approach to problem X,” we present them with alternatives and choices to ponder. We say, “Here are several approaches to problem X,” and each of them represents real possibilities, each tends to make some valid point, and to be immediately attractive to different sorts of people. It really seems to help people think—individually and together—if they can weigh different ideas and talk through
The Rockford Files:  
A Case for Public Engagement

As the result of a federal school desegregation order, for nearly three decades, the courts exercised direct supervision and control over any public school decision-making in Rockford, Illinois. The lack of local control left the community feeling disconnected from their own schools.

The end of the court order in 2003 meant that for the first time in years, local policymakers, elected officials, and community members were free to make their own decisions again. A coalition lead by the city’s mayor, the school superintendent and Rockford College decided in this new era, citizen involvement was crucially important, and they really didn’t know what the public’s views were in terms of the priorities they had for the school and the direction they thought schools should go.

The coalition asked Public Agenda to come to Rockford and help them in the process to “take stock” – to explore with the community the basic purpose of education and what they seek to accomplish in public schools. Public Agenda helped organize a preliminary series of forums that used our Choicework materials on “Purposes of Education.”

In a series of articles and editorials discussing the success of this first set of conversations, a Rockford Register Star editorial said:

“Be honest. When Rockford Mayor Doug Scott said there would be another task force on the public schools, you said: Oh goodie. This community has a history of chewing up and spitting out citizens who try to get to the bottom of the school system’s problems… What’s different about this project is that Public Agenda, a New York-based nonpartisan, nonprofit group, has been brought in. Its mission is to help the public explore and understand critical issues and to help leaders understand the public’s point of view… The forums discover common ground, discuss disagreements civilly, come up with questions or concerns, and ideas for action.

The leaders respond with answers and their own plans.

Everyone makes sure the conversation continues. It’s such a simple process, it’s surprising communities get it so wrong.”

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Following the first forum in June, Rockford College announced it was establishing an “Office for Public Engagement” at the College, which will serve as an institutional “home base” for future public engagement. Two additional forums on “Purposes of Education” were planned for October, and organizers are considering future topics as well. As a direct response to suggestions from participants, the Mayor’s office has taken on the task of setting up a Communications Committee to improve the flow of information between parents and the schools.

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Of Americans said that, in reality, citizens who are rich or powerful have more of the rights and freedoms offered in the Constitution. 34% said All citizens actually have the same rights and freedoms and 2% said “don’t know.”

Source: Knowing it by Heart 2002
Public Engagement Updates

ACTION ON TAXES

In New Jersey, where debate on how to fix a tax system that relies heavily on property taxes stalemated for years, progress is now being made. In September 2003, Public Agenda worked with the New Jersey Coalition for Public Good to conduct the Citizens Tax Assembly. In February 2004, the Coalition delivered the report of the Assembly’s findings to the Governor and released it to the public at a major news conference at the State House in Trenton. In June, after months of debate over raising the taxes of the state’s wealthiest residents, both houses of the New Jersey Legislature easily approved a measure that raises income tax for income over $500,000 a year and provides property tax relief for households earning less than $200,000 a year. Jon Shure, who is President of New Jersey Policy Perspective and one of the organizers of the Citizens Tax Assembly, was quoted in The New York Times, “What we’ve needed in New Jersey for a long time is a grown-up discussion about taxes.”

ASSESSING THE SUCCESS OF STATEWIDE EDUCATION DISCUSSIONS

Public Agenda is now disseminating a report on ten years of public engagement on public education in Connecticut titled “Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut.” Supported by the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, the report serves as a thorough and comprehensive case study of how public engagement can work in communities across America and discusses the specific accomplishments in this complicated state. It adds important learning to the assessment of these types of efforts. The report is available for free download on the Public Agenda web site.

POLICE AND COMMUNITIES

With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the New York Community Trust, Public Agenda has conducted a series of focus groups and expert interviews to explore the nuances of community/police interactions and begun a series of pilot public engagement processes on this issue. In San Antonio, New Haven and New York City, Public Agenda is helping communities talk about their safety concerns, what it would take to make relations with police better, and what their priorities are for addressing difficult issues. Individual reports on the proceedings in each community will be available to each community, police departments and the public by the end of 2004.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Public Agenda is helping the Lumina Foundation for Education plan and execute its comprehensive “Achieving the Dream” initiative, which aims to improve graduation rates from America’s community colleges. The public engagement team is providing strategic advice and assistance on the project, which includes quantitative and qualitative research, a national media outreach campaign and direct outreach to community college leaders. Public Agenda will be assisting in the production of a Public Engagement Action Kit, broad communications messages and a stakeholder manual.

School Discipline

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being more in the “crowd control” business than in teaching.

Students pay a heavy price academically when schools tolerate the chronic bad behavior of the few. Most teachers (77%) admitted that their teaching would be “a lot more effective” if they didn’t have to spend so much time dealing with disruptive students. Similarly, many parents (43%) believe their child would accomplish more in school if teachers weren’t distracted by discipline issues.

In one of many editorials and commentaries on Teaching Interrupted, The Washington Post’s Jay Mathews said, “I was eager to read a major report on discipline in our schools...[by] Public Agenda, one of the most interesting and useful chroniclers of opinion inside American classrooms. It is both an intriguing and disturbing document. The vast majority of teachers surveyed say they are often treading water in a sea of adolescent misbehavior and parental mistrust.”

The editors of The Los Angeles Times...
(60%) and principals in large schools (70%) are even more likely to cite problems with the press.

Public Agenda’s Jean Johnson, one of the lead authors of the report, said, “School leaders’ complaints about local press coverage will sound familiar to anyone who is frequently in the news – small incidents blown out of proportion, a focus on the bad with little coverage of the good and more than a few outright mistakes.”

Jane Elizabeth, Education Editor for The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, reacted to the findings saying, “Years ago, schools and education received very little coverage by any media. Those days are long gone…No one likes to be scrutinized, but it’s part of having a public, taxpayer-supported job. I have a feeling that the pressure of being in the public eye has more to do with their negative response than any failings of the media."

noted, “Teachers feel isolated and at risk because overcrowded classrooms, permissive parents and cowardly administrators are allowing rebellious kids to turn classrooms into battle zones. More than three-quarters of teachers say students are quick to threaten ‘my parents will sue!’ when teachers try to rein them in.” The editors pointed to the fact that 55% of teachers complain that school districts back down when teachers’ decisions are challenged by angry parents, many wielding the implicit threat of litigation.

In a major opinion piece published in The Christian Science Monitor, Public Agenda President Ruth A. Wooden challenged policy makers to pay more attention to this issue: “Education policy leaders worry about the challenges of implementing higher standards and often bemoan the rate at which teachers leave the profession. Yet very few focus on order and student behavior - areas that time and again teachers identify as serious impediments.”


The new spotlight on school discipline has lead to calls for change and legislation to address the situation. “The present legal environment undermines order in schools by enabling students and parents to threaten a lawsuit over virtually anything,” said Philip K. Howard, Chair of Common Good.

Getting It Right?
In your district/school, has uninformed or sensationalist coverage of education in the local press gotten worse, better, or stayed about the same in recent years?

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Board Member News

Peterson Book a Best Seller

“With precision and punch, Mr. Peterson’s Running on Empty lays out why we are in a lousy position to dig ourselves out of this hole.” - Christopher Caldwell, The New York Times book reviewer

“His writing is compact, unusually clear and accessible, logically consistent and highly convincing. The procession of statistics sometimes seems mind-numbing and impossible to digest, but unlike many books, this one seems no longer than necessary.” - Howard Marks, chairman of Oaktree Capital Management in The Los Angeles Times Book Review

“In your district/school, has uninformed or sensationalist coverage of education in the local press gotten worse, better, or stayed about the same in recent years?"

In Memorium
Maurice Lazarus, a member emeritus of the Public Agenda board, died in May 2004 at the age of 88. Mr. Lazarus was a leader in business and philanthropy. He enjoyed two successful careers, one in his family’s department store business (Federated Department Stores) and another as a founder of one of the nation’s first health maintenance organizations, an innovation that sought to focus on prevention and give employees better health choices. Deborah Wadsworth, Senior Advisor and former President of Public Agenda said, “As a member of Public Agenda’s original board of directors, and chairman of its executive committee for nearly 20 years, Mogie inspired our work and guided our growth with unending gifts of time and attention. We miss him dearly.”
Reflections from the President
A Vision Beyond ‘Red’ and ‘Blue’

By Ruth A. Wooden

This Reflections piece is adapted from Ms. Wooden’s October 14, 2004 commentary in The Chronicle of Philanthropy.

Early in the election season, it became conventional wisdom that the United States is a polarized, deeply divided nation, with the red states and the blue states on either side of a growing chasm.

Nonprofit, government, and foundation leaders ought to know intuitively, if not factually, that the red state versus blue state image is overstated. It is impossible to work in the messy, complicated, ever-evolving realm of public service and not notice that in every corner of the nation the public thinks in ways that confound and challenge political boundaries.

Politicians, nonprofit leaders, the news media, and others who endorse the polarization model contribute to the legitimization of a winner-take-all political combat that rejects consensus building. Seeing the nation only in “red” and “blue” blinds leaders to compromise and makes it seem all right to push an ideological agenda without seeking wider public support. Strident advocacy has replaced attempts to build understanding, consensus, and compromise.

It is especially disturbing that too many of those charged with the responsibility of promoting the common good are doing the exact opposite: relentlessly advancing points of view held by the extremes of public opinion. Even more troubling, many nonprofit advocates are falsely invoking the public’s voice in so doing. Really listening to the public and seeking out people’s nuanced understanding of issues seem to have become lost arts, disappearing along with respectful dialogue.

This is just another symptom of what Public Agenda founder and chairman Daniel Yankelovich calls “expertism” – when solutions to problems are discussed solely among “experts” and the public is largely excluded. For the most part, policy leaders talk among themselves or with business leaders, educators, lawyers, economists, or lobbyists. “It is against the American credo to stratify people by social class, but one of the most rigid barriers in today’s America is the barrier that separates the men and women who ‘serve’ the public from the public itself,” he says.

While sharp-edged political partisanship prevails among elected officials, the public hungers for more consensus building. Charity and foundation leaders cannot in good conscience continue to perpetuate the red state versus blue state thinking that deepens divisions and prevents our nation from making progress in dealing with the tough challenges we face. It’s time for leaders who have the vision to see beyond the red and blue divide to step up and put their resources into efforts that promote dialogue, exploration, sound judgment, and finding practical solutions.