



All Accounted For:

What Do We Want Out of Our
Afterschool & Summer Programs?

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, and by 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 mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional 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.

Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides as discussion starters for community conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda's approach to community conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, "beyond the usual suspects"
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda's approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our **Choicework Guides** (including print, Spanish and video versions), please visit the Public Engagement section of our web site at www.publicagenda.org.

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Introduction

Afterschool and summer programs can serve many purposes. Today's conversation is about what we, as a community, think are the most important purposes and priorities that these programs should offer for kids.

One of the things to keep in mind is that young people today are living in a rapidly changing world in which more and more good jobs will require a solid background in math/science and strong "21st Century Skills" such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking. Whether they plan to enter the workforce, get job training or attend college, students will need these skills in order to succeed in life. Unfortunately, too many students are falling through the cracks and recent reports suggest that we are not doing a good enough job of educating and preparing our kids for the world they will face after high school:

- 40 to 45% of recent high school graduates report they don't have the skills they need to succeed, both in college or the workplace.
- Employers rate high school graduate skills "deficient" in writing (72%), mathematics (53.5%), professionalism/work ethic (70.3%) and problem-solving/critical thinking (69.6%).
- An estimated 60% of all new jobs in the 21st century will require the kinds of math/science skills that are possessed by only 20% of the current workforce.

It's really important to find ways to make sure that our young people have the education and skills they need for success in the workplace. Of course, it's also important for our kids to grow up strong and healthy as well. So what kind of afterschool and summer opportunities do we want our kids to have? What's right for our kids in our community?

To help you and your neighbors talk about this, we present three different approaches to out of school and afterschool programming. Among these choices there are probably some ideas you'll like and some you won't. The main point is that we can't do everything at once. We need to make choices and start somewhere. Which ideas make the most sense to you—and why?

Approach A:

Focus programs on helping kids succeed in school

Our schools and teachers are overworked, and too many kids are falling through the cracks. Our schools can't do it alone, and most parents simply don't have the time or knowledge to help kids with homework in difficult subjects like math and science. Since math and science are so important for success in today's careers, afterschool and summer programs should concentrate on these kinds of subjects, building on what kids are learning in school, to make sure students are keeping up and staying on track for success.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Supervised homework time afterschool and one-on-one math and science tutoring
- Summer learning opportunities for middle and high school students struggling with math and science to help them catch up and to connect their learning to the real world through hands-on projects
- Focused test preparation services provided year round for students who have a hard time with tests or for students who want to sharpen their test-taking skills in math and science subjects

Those who like this approach might say,

- "I'm worried that our kids are falling behind in school, and most of us parents can't help them with hard subjects like math and science, so afterschool and summer programs should focus on making sure they're getting the academic help they need to catch up."

Those who don't like this approach might say,

- "Our kids already spend a lot of time in school, and are already tested too much. What they don't have is a safe place to have fun, relax and just be kids. Afterschool and summer programs should focus on keeping kids off the street by giving them fun, safe places to be."

Approach B: Focus programs on building essential skills for life and the workplace

Math and science are important, but too many young people today leave high school without the most important skills for success in life. What our kids really need are programs that help them learn how to work as part of a team, communicate clearly, make good use of their time and develop leadership skills. Programs focused on giving kids these essential life and job skills through community service projects are most likely to give kids the kinds of experiences they need to become productive members of our community.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Measure student progress regularly through a variety of well-crafted tests and assessments.
- Create incentives that reward or penalize school leaders based on student performance.
- Allow students to graduate from middle and high school only if they demonstrate that they've learned the coursework in core science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) subjects.
- Encourage families to expect high student achievement in STEM subjects.

People who like this approach say,

- “High expectations coupled with a smart system of assessment and accountability will motivate students to perform at high levels.”

But others say,

- “How do we know that tougher STEM graduation requirements won't just create more drop-outs rather than better-motivated student?”

Approach C:

Focus programs on helping kids build habits for a healthy life

Far too many of our kids are overweight, have poor eating habits, and get little if any physical exercise. Kids used to play more sports, but now they just sit in front of televisions and computers eating junk food. And with all of the testing happening in the schools there's less time for recess and gym class, which means they spend most of their time sitting still and less and less time getting exercise. This is why so many kids are overweight and unhealthy. Instead of focusing on academics, afterschool and summer programs should focus on giving kids exercise and education about healthy lifestyle choices.

Therefore, programs should provide:

- Organized sports like soccer and basketball that get kids running around and experiencing the fun of being part of a team
- Opportunities to try out different kinds of physical exercise, like dance or karate or yoga, to help different kids find a kind of exercise that they like to do.
- Nutrition education that helps kids understand why it's so important to eat properly and make other healthy lifestyle choices

People who like this approach might say,

- “Kids who are overweight and unhealthy have lower self-esteem than healthy kids, and kids with low self-esteem are more likely to make all kinds of bad choices like smoking or drinking alcohol. If kids are learning how to eat well and are getting regular exercise in afterschool and summer programs, they'll be more likely to do well in school and stay out of trouble.”

People who don't like this approach might say,

- “Kids already get plenty of time to run around and have fun. What they don't get is extra help to make sure they're not falling behind in school. If we really want to make sure our kids are getting what they need for success in life, our programs should focus on helping give kids more educational experiences and support.”

Using this Guide in a Community Conversation, Discussion Group or Classroom Setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

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—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

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?
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?

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization. We work to ensure that the public has the best possible conditions and opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life and that decision-making by leaders is well-informed by people's values, ideas, and aspirations. Our programs aim to inform public policy, strengthen communities, and empower citizens.

Want to Learn More?

Want to find out more about Public Agenda's distinct approach to improving public life? Interested in connecting with other citizens to address critical issues? If so, you can check out our online community and sign up to find out about activities that bring people together to strengthen their communities. Email us at publicengagement@publicagenda.org. You can also keep in touch by becoming a fan on Facebook or by following us on Twitter @PublicAgenda.

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