

PUBLIC AGENDA

*Independent, Thought-Provoking,
Always in the Public Interest*



Helping All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society

A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

***FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS,
CLASSROOMS, STUDY GROUPS AND
INDIVIDUALS***

Public Agenda

6 East 39th Street
New York, NY 10016
212.686.6610 (phone)
212.889.3461 (fax)

www.publicagenda.org

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 necessarily 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. 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.

Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides (and, when available, their video counterparts) 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 and video versions), please visit our website www.publicagenda.org and click on "Public Engagement."

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Helping All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society

Introduction

Everyone wants to see students succeed, but too often too many are doing more poorly than they should. In some cases, students throughout an entire district or an entire school are struggling with failing grades and low test scores. Sometimes particular groups of students across a district are achieving at low levels. And even in schools doing better than average, many students say they aren't challenged and do as little as possible to get a passing grade.

How can we do better than failure or just getting by? How can we help all students learn and grow to the best of their abilities?

Our aim today is to have a community dialogue about how, in a society as diverse as ours, we can best help *all* children succeed. In this way we hope to learn from one another, come to understand the issues more fully, and begin to build more common ground on how schools, families and the wider community can work together to help all students succeed.

To help you get your discussion started, we're going to present three approaches and ask you which you think is most important, and why? The first focuses on *raising academic standards and expectations*; the second on *increasing parental and community involvement*; and the third on *ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment*.



Choicework

Approach A: School A is focusing on raising expectations, demanding excellence of all students, and having higher standards for student achievement

This school is putting in place new academic standards that all students will need to meet if they are to move ahead.

It looks to hire teachers with high academic expectations for all students and trains them in the new standards.

Finally, all students are tested regularly to determine how well they are doing, and to determine how well the teachers and the school are doing.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the downsides to this approach?*
- *Are expectations where they need to be for students in this school district? If not, why is that the case?*
- *Are they consistent in different across schools and different classrooms, or very different? If they are different, why is that?*



Approach B: School B is focusing on increasing parental and community involvement and helping students with social problems that distract them from learning

This school concentrates on making sure all parents have the information they need about their child's education.

It also works to make the school more welcoming and convenient for all kinds of parents and guardians, as well as other community members.

Finally, it provides counseling, social services and mentoring for students in need.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the downsides to this approach?*
- *What kinds of social problems are students dealing with?*
- *Are there social problems between students? Do students get along or are there group conflicts?*



Approach C: School C is focusing on ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment

It has a zero-tolerance policy that removes violent kids or those caught with weapons or drugs.

It is investing in programs to teach kids to resolve their conflicts peacefully.

And, it is promoting tolerance, understanding and respect across racial and ethnic lines.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the downsides to this approach?*
- *Would removing a few disruptive students really make a large difference to the success of most students? If so, why?*
- *Who are the students being labeled disruptive or dangerous? What do we know about them?*



Using the 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?

