

PUBLIC AGENDA

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Creating a Formula for Success in Low-Performing Schools

A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

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

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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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Creating a Formula for Success in Low-Performing Schools

Introduction

Everyone wants schools to succeed, but that can be easier said than done. While schools are places where most students learn and grow, there are also too many schools where students are just getting by, or worse, are failing to learn much at all. These are schools where the challenges have been greater than our ability to overcome them.

This conversation is an effort to begin to turn around those situations, one school and one community at a time. Our goal today is to talk about the best way to boost student achievement in a school whose students are not succeeding academically.

To help us talk through the issues, we're going to look at hypothetical school communities that take four different approaches to boosting student achievement. You may also have another idea you'd like to add, and that's fine. And you may want to combine elements of all four into a bigger approach, but remember, school communities like yours have limited time, energy and resources and cannot do everything.

Also, be aware that almost all of these ideas have drawbacks, so it's important to focus on which approach would have the greatest impact on student achievement over the next two or three years.



Choicework***School Community A: Set High Expectations and Hold Schools Accountable***

This school community is raising expectations for student achievement and holding teachers, students and parents accountable for meeting those expectations.

This approach could involve:

- Setting high academic standards and helping everyone meet them
- Testing students regularly to measure progress and pinpoint where improvements are needed, even if it might mean some students won't graduate if they fail to meet the standards
- Rewarding schools with bonuses when student achievement improves, and sanctioning schools that don't improve with consequences like state takeovers or reorganization.

Those who like this approach often say:

"If you demand more, people will rise to the challenge."

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the pros and cons of this approach?*
- *Would this approach lead to better student achievement within a year or two? Why or why not?*
- *A lot of places are already doing a lot of this – setting higher standards, putting in tests, etc. Is it working? If not, why not?*
- *How can educators, students and parents be held to higher standards? How do you encourage and pressure people to perform?*
- *Do teachers, students and parents really need a lot of outside pressure to do a good job? Isn't the issue really that they need resources, not goals and motivation?*
- *If we set high standards, we have to be willing to impose consequences on those who don't meet the standards. How far are we willing to go?*



School Community B: Increase Resources for Classroom Essentials

This school community needs resources for smaller classes, training and retaining teachers, keeping textbooks and technology current, and supporting struggling students with extra help after school and in the summer.

To do this could involve:

- Pressuring officials to spend more on education, even if it means raising taxes or cutting other services, such as transportation or parks
- Raising money through donations, foundation grants and partnerships with local businesses
- Reviewing the current budget to make sure there is minimal waste and that existing resources are being spent on the right things

Those who like this approach often say:

“Schools can only succeed if they have the resources to get the job done.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the pros and cons of this approach?*
- *Would this approach lead to better student achievement within a year or two? Why or why not?*
- *If there were more money and resources, how should they be spent? What should be the priorities?*
- *Haven't there been places where money has been added but it hasn't led to student improvement? What's to say that wouldn't happen here?*



School Community C: Increase Parent and Community Involvement

This school community is requiring parents and the whole community to get more involved in making sure students succeed.

This approach could involve:

- Communicating with parents on a daily or weekly basis and making it easier to do so, with classroom phones, Web sites and e-mail
- Getting parents and community members involved in making decisions at the school and district levels about how money is spent, curriculum developed and discipline enforced.
- Requiring parents to sign an agreement promising to check homework nightly, attend school meetings and get training so they can help their children learn, even if it may be a heavy burden to overstressed parents.

Those who like this approach often say:

“The schools can’t do it alone. Parents and community members must give more time and effort if students are to succeed.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the pros and cons of this approach?*
- *Would this approach lead to better student achievement within a year or two? Why or why not?*
- *Sure parental involvement is great, but some parents just don’t want to or can’t, for various reasons, get involved. Can schools really pin their hopes on something outside their control?*
- *Is this practical? It’s really hard to do, so can’t it be an excuse for doing nothing? Or are schools passing the buck?*
- *Can’t too much parent involvement lead to confusion about who’s in charge and who’s taking over?*



School Community D: Ensure Effective Leadership

This community is focusing on strong, effective and qualified leadership. It is therefore giving school leaders the freedom and authority they need to make changes in the school and motivate the students and staff.

This approach could involve:

- Giving school leaders more authority over their budget, curriculum and staff assignments, and making sure they're not hindered by bureaucratic obstacles
- Recruiting and retaining qualified leaders and staff
- Building trust among school staff and communicating a vision of teaching and learning, but recognizing the danger that reform may not outlast the leader

Those who like this approach often say, "Change requires strong leaders who serve as role models and have the flexibility and authority to make their vision a reality."

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the pros and cons of this approach?*
- *Sure strong leadership is important, but isn't it more important for leaders to work effectively with teachers than having the power to dismiss them?*
- *Isn't strong leadership as much about developing good partnerships with parents and school board members as being freed up from outside controls?*
- *What are the bureaucratic obstacles?*



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?

