

# **PUBLIC AGENDA**

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



## **Making Standards Work for All Students**

### ***A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE***

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

#### **Public Agenda**

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

**[www.publicagenda.org](http://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](http://www.publicagenda.org) and click on "Public Engagement."

Public Agenda Choicework Guides are provided free of charge. We encourage you to make and distribute as many copies as you like as long as it is for noncommercial or educational use only, and so long as the material is not altered and the Public Agenda copyright notice is maintained.



## Making Standards Work for All Students

### Introduction

Most states are establishing some form of academic standards—goals for student learning that define what students should know and be able to do at different stages of their school careers.

Most people agree that academic standards are important because:

- If we set high expectations for learning, students will rise to the challenge.
- Establishing clear standards makes it easier to track progress so kids don't fall through the cracks.
- And, with so many families moving from one place to another, some degree of common standards across schools makes sense.

However, while many people agree with standards in *principle*, they often have very different ideas about how to make them work in *practice*. In fact, a host of difficult challenges arise as academic standards are put in place, challenges that must be met if standards are to fulfill their promise of helping *all* students succeed.

To help you and your neighbors think and talk about how to make sure standards work for all students, we will present a discussion framework that offers three contrasting approaches. Which one makes the most sense to you, and why?



## Choicework

### Approach 1: Improve Accountability

According to this approach, we need not only to establish standards, we need to develop appropriate assessments so we know if students are learning. *And* we need to report the results and design effective incentives to hold both schools and students accountable for results.

Strong assessments, such as well-designed standardized tests or portfolios of student work, keep students who are not learning from falling through the cracks and being ignored. They also allow successful schools to receive the recognition they deserve and to act as models for change. Finally, schools that fall short can be helped—and when necessary, pressured—to improve.

In this view, accountability is the key to making sure schools and students alike make learning their first priority. This may mean investing in new, high quality tests and assessments, setting up web sites with information on student performance for every school district, and creating incentives that drive school systems toward excellence.

People who support this approach often say that accountability:

- Helps parents, communities and educators know how well their schools and students are doing.
- Provides under-performing schools with the incentive to change.



## Approach 2: Provide Needed Resources and Support

Approach-2 supporters say it's critical there be enough resources and support for all schools and students to succeed. According to this view, schools are low-performing not because educators are lazy or don't care, but because they lack the resources and training to help students meet the standards.

Unfortunately, standards reform too often focuses on high-stakes tests that shame and blame schools and students—without giving them the resources they need to succeed.

True standards reform thus requires committing the resources to make sure all children can learn, including those who, through no fault of their own, come to school with disadvantages like not knowing English. This may mean funding preschool programs, creating smaller classes, or providing after-school programs with one-on-one tutoring.

People who support this approach often say:

- Students cannot be expected to learn at high levels with out-of-date textbooks, in overcrowded classrooms, or in broken-down buildings.
- Some students come to school with disadvantages, and it takes resources to level the playing field and give all kids an equal opportunity.



### Approach 3: Maximize Flexibility and Local Control

Approach-3 supporters say that while standards are important, it's crucial to make sure standard-setting at the state and national levels does not interfere with each community's local control of their schools. In this view, we should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to education, because all kids, parents, and communities are different.

This is not to say we shouldn't have some standards to guide instruction, and some consistency across schools. But schools succeed only when *local* educators, parents and community members develop a sense of ownership for their own schools. Standards reform should therefore leave plenty of room for schools to reflect local values and needs.

This may mean limiting state and national standards to only a few core academic subjects, and making sure every district has as much freedom as possible to develop its own curriculum, tests and teaching methods.

People who support this approach often say:

- If communities have more control of their schools, there's likely to be more local support and participation, which is critical to school success.
- While academics subjects are important, there should also be room for communities to emphasize other subjects, activities and values that are important to 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?

