

PUBLIC AGENDA

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Neighborhood Schools and Student Diversity

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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Neighborhood Schools and Student Diversity

Introduction

Most families would like to send their children to good, safe schools close to home. When schools are nearby, it's easier for kids to get to school, easier for parents to be involved, and kids can make friends from their neighborhood.

Many people also think it's important for children of different backgrounds to go to school together so they can expand their horizons by learning about each other's cultures. Going to a school with a diverse population also prepares students for the workforce, where diversity and teamwork are increasingly important.

In other words, people tend to value both neighborhood schools *and* student diversity. But it can be hard to maintain both because many communities are – or are becoming – mostly segregated. And if kids in segregated neighborhoods go to local schools they will experience very little student diversity.

How do we balance these competing values? Are there better ways to integrate schools than those we've tried in the past? Or should we put aside the goal of integrated schools altogether and just concentrate on improving academic performance, whatever the composition of the student body? Or does diversity need to be addressed at the community level?

This discussion presents three communities, each one taking a different approach. Which do you think makes the most sense for your own community and its students, and why?



Choicework

Community A: Focus on Academics and Not Diversity

This community believes its schools should concentrate on academics, and views focusing on diversity as a distraction it cannot afford. It believes kids can learn just as well whether they are in a diverse class or in class with others from their neighborhood that share their background. And it believes any school can succeed, including those whose students are largely lower income or minority, and it's wrong to use the lack of diversity and integration as an excuse for poor student performance. The community is therefore focusing on creating smaller classes, hiring better teachers and raising academic expectations. But it is not focusing on integration and student diversity.

Those who like this approach often say:

“Schools should focus on their main mission, educating kids, and let society address diversity issues in other ways.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Are there any downsides to this approach?*
- *If kids aren't exposed to diversity in school as they're growing up, isn't there a danger they'll never be exposed to it?*
- *Some people say that schools with mostly poor and minority students are more likely to be poorly funded and low performing compared to integrated schools? Isn't this an argument for integration?*
- *Would students who are successful academically in segregated schools be successful in today's workplace?*



Community B: Pursue Diversity Through School Policies

This community feels integration and diversity are too important to ignore, and its schools are pursuing policies to maintain diversity where it currently exists and to increase diversity where it does not. Because its neighborhood schools have very little diversity, the community is creating integrated magnet and charter schools, linking students from different schools through the Internet, field trips and class projects, and recruiting teachers from diverse backgrounds. It may also spread students around the district to make sure schools have children of different backgrounds. Through school policies like these, this community is pursuing both academically successful and socially diverse schools.

Those who like this approach often say:

“Exposing kids to diversity is too important to their growth for schools to put aside or put off.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Are there any downsides to this approach?*
- *Doesn't this approach destroy the neighborhood schools concept, and the emotional and physical security parents would have with a school close to home?*
- *What about the argument that exposing kids to diversity is too important to set aside?*
- *Some people also argue that if people don't learn to appreciate and get along with those who are different at a young age they'll never really learn it. Isn't it crucial to society that we make this a part of our educational goals?*



Community C: Pursue Integration and Diversity in the Community, Not Through the Schools

This community views segregated schools as a societal problem not a school issue. If neighborhoods become more integrated, they say, then neighborhood schools will also become more integrated. This community is therefore working with religious and civic organizations to bring together different groups (adults, not just students) to ease the fears and misunderstandings that can cause segregated neighborhoods in the first place. And it is creating housing policies that encourage integrated neighborhoods, such as developing poorer sections of town to attract middle-class homeowners and offering incentives to create low-cost housing in middle-class neighborhoods.

Those who like this approach often say:

“Segregation begins with adults, not with children. Encouraging diversity in the broader community addresses the problem at its roots, and leaves schools free to focus on academics.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Are there any downsides to this approach?*
- *Why wait for communities to change if there are faster, more direct ways to achieve diversity through school policies?*
- *Some might argue that it's too late to try to change the attitudes of adults and the only hope is to begin with young people. So a school-based approach really makes the most sense. What do you think?*
- *What are the short- and long-term incentives for citizens to undertake such an approach?*
- *Isn't this another form of social engineering?*



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?

