

# **PUBLIC AGENDA**

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



## **THE QUESTION OF School Choice**

### ***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](http://www.publicagenda.org) and click on “Public Engagement.”

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# The Question of School Choice

## Introduction

Some people think that parents and students ought to be offered educational alternatives to the traditional public school system through voucher or charter school programs.

*Vouchers* allow families to use money that would have gone to the public school system to help them cover the cost of sending their children to private school instead.

*Charter schools* are typically independently operated public schools, created by teachers, parents or others.

While some favor school choice through charters or vouchers, others think they would create more problems than they would solve, and that the best route to a sound educational future is through *reform of the traditional public school system*.

The following scenarios describe three communities, each taking one of these educational paths. Which of these three paths -- vouchers, charters or traditional public school reform -- would be most beneficial to the students and families in your own community, and why?



## Choicework

**Community A** is creating educational alternatives through **private school vouchers**. This community has chosen to give families private school alternatives to the public schools through a voucher system. Vouchers allow families to use money that would have gone to the public school system to help them send their children to private schools if they want to. Vouchers can be used for religious or non-religious private schools.

*Those who like this approach often say:*

- The public schools have been talking about reform forever with too few results -- students should not have to stay in public schools that are failing. Furthermore, the need to compete with private schools is the only thing likely to spur real public school reform.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- *What are the down sides?*
- *Aren't many public schools making positive changes? Shouldn't we give these efforts a chance to take hold rather than undermining them with a voucher system?*
- *Even with vouchers, most poor families would still be unable to afford private or parochial school. Wouldn't vouchers then only benefit middle class children?*
- *Isn't public education part of the glue holding together society? Won't this system weaken us?*
- *How will this impact education?*



**Community B** is creating educational alternatives through **public charter schools**. This community has chosen to concentrate on creating public school choice by establishing public charter schools. A charter is an authorization granted by the district or the state that allows parents, teachers, or others to set up and run a public school.

Space permitting, they must accept any student in the district who wishes to attend. They are free of many state and district regulations, can hire their own teachers, and sometimes express a distinctive educational approach such as innovative teaching methods, a back to basics philosophy, or a special emphasis on the arts or technology. They cannot be religious schools, and they can be closed down if they do not perform up to standards.

*Those who like this approach often say:*

- Charter schools give families more options, which is important because no school system operating under a central administration and a single set of policies can offer what is best for all students.
- They will encourage *all* public schools to improve, because less successful schools will have to perform better in order to keep students from switching to a charter school.

***Questions to Consider:***

- *What are the down sides?*
- *How do we ensure some standard, consistent level of education? Is it even possible?*
- *How will this impact education?*
- *Some people say this is an easy way for middle class parents to support the notion of public school yet avoid mixing their children with poor and minority students. Shouldn't we support quality public education for all children?*



**Community C** is making the traditional public school system work through **public school reform**.

This community believes that the problems of the public schools can and should be fixed. They feel that with smart policies, strong leadership, adequate resources, and community involvement, school reform can succeed.

*Those who like this approach often say:*

- In a country as diverse as America, it is crucial that different kinds of children go to school together.
- Rather than creating healthy competition, charters and vouchers will only drain away needed funds, as well as the best students, from the main public school system.

**Questions to Consider:**

- *What about schools and districts still failing kids? Don't we need to try something radical to help those children who aren't currently getting an education?*
- *Aren't schools too slow, not too fast, to change? For example, the school calendar was created to match the agricultural season, and although our economy today is far from dependent on an agricultural calendar, schools haven't changed.*
- *Why shouldn't the public schools face a little competition? Competition is something the business world has to face every day, and it usually causes companies to improve.*
- *What's really so special about public education anyway? Does it matter where kids get an education so long as they get one?*



## **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?

