

PUBLIC AGENDA

*Independent, Thought-Provoking,
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EVERYBODY READY FOR SCHOOL: HOW CAN WE ENSURE HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS?

***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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Everybody Ready for School: How Can we Ensure High Quality Early Childhood Programs?

Introduction

Many families choose to place their children in some form of preschool program. Perhaps they need childcare while they work. Or, they believe that children have social and learning experiences in preschool that are important to their development. Finally, many educators, parents and researchers agree that high quality “school readiness” programs can help youngsters be more successful later on in school and in life.

But preschool programs vary widely in quality. How can we make sure that *all* preschool programs provide safe and enriching environments that do a good job preparing children for school? In other words, how can we make sure all preschool programs are of the highest possible quality?

To help get our conversation started, we’ve created a framework describing several approaches to ensuring quality for all preschool programs. Which makes the most sense to you, and why?



Approach A. Fund programs more adequately and equitably

While some preschool programs have all the resources they need—especially in wealthy neighborhoods—many others do not. If we want to have high quality programs for all preschoolers, we'll need to invest enough resources to make sure *all* of our communities have safe, affordable, well-equipped and well-staffed programs.

Therefore we should do things like:

- Devote adequate resources so that programs in *all* neighborhoods can have excellent facilities, materials and child-care professionals.
- Direct more funding to programs in low-income communities, where the need for resources is greatest.

Those who like this approach say:

If we really want all communities to have high quality preschool programs, we need to put our money where our mouths are.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- What are the pros and cons of this approach?
- Some people might say that you don't solve public policy problems by throwing money at them. Are we sure more money will make a difference?
- If we had a good system of standards and accountability, would we still need to worry about funding?
- If we did increase funding, how can we make sure that the money is well spent?
- What about the argument in Approach 3 about giving the money to parents instead of to programs—why not go with that approach?



Approach B. Create standards and accountability

With so many kinds of preschool programs, the best way to ensure quality is to hold all providers accountable to the same standards of excellence. This is not to say that all programs should be identical, but simply that there are certain things that all preschoolers should be learning and experiencing so that they will be ready for school.

Therefore we should do things like:

- Decide as a state what the standards ought to be—for example, what all preschoolers should learn and be able to do before they begin school.
- Evaluate programs to make sure they are meeting the standards, and only refer parents to programs that do.

Those who like this approach say:

How can we expect all preschool programs to be high in quality without clear expectations and a system of accountability?

Questions to consider about this approach:

- What are the pros and cons of this approach?
- Is having standards really going to help a preschool that doesn't have the funding to pay for good teachers and supplies? Don't we need to address fundamental resource questions first?
- Can we keep standards and accountability from becoming a cookie-cutter approach that forces all programs into the same mold?
- Does anyone worry that bringing standards and accountability to preschool education will result in high-stakes testing of toddlers, or is this a false concern?



Approach C. Give parents more choice

The best way to ensure high quality preschool programs is to give parents good information and the ability to find a good provider for their child. When parents are able to shop around it forces programs to improve in order to compete for business.

Therefore we should do things like:

- Give parents information about what to look for in a high-quality program, and which ones are doing the best job preparing kids to be successful in school.
- Provide lower-income parents with stipends (sometimes called “scholarships” or “vouchers”) if they cannot afford the program of their choice, so that they, too, can shop around.

Those who like this approach often say:

If parents have the information and means to make good choices, programs will have to maintain a high level of excellence in order to stay in business.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- What are the pros and cons of this approach?
- Couldn't this model lead to families sending their kids out of their neighborhoods to find a good program? Isn't it better for kids to have good quality programs in their neighborhood?
- If significant travel were required to reach a good program, couldn't that prevent low-income parents from using it because of the cost?
- What about middle class parents, who may not be eligible for a scholarship but who cannot afford an expensive, private program?
- Isn't it the case that not all parents are as responsible as we would want them to be? Won't some kids be hurt if we leave it to their parents to find the best program?



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?

