

PUBLIC AGENDA

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



School Safety

A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

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

Public Agenda

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

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 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.



What Should Our Schools and Our Community Do About School Safety?

Introduction

Different approaches to school safety will have different benefits and different costs and challenges. To help you and your neighbors decide what is most important to you, we've created a scenario of three school communities, each of which has approached the issue of school safety in a different way. Which would you want for your own community and schools, and why? Are there other approaches that none of these communities are trying that we also ought to consider?

Choicework

Community A is teaching students to resolve conflicts peacefully and providing social services to those in need

Television and movies too often teach kids that violence is the answer to conflict with others, and children need to be taught that it's possible to resolve conflict without resorting to violence. And for those children who are troubled and need extra help, the schools should be providing first-rate guidance and psychological services to detect and counsel such children and their families.

Parents can help by limiting the amount of violent television and movies children see and the community can help by seeing to it that social services for troubled families are adequate.

Those who like this approach often say:

- Kids don't learn to resolve their conflicts by magic; they have to be taught.
- An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Those who do not like this approach often say:

- School need to focus on academics, not things like conflict resolution or social services.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Aren't schools already overburdened and struggling to teach the basics, let alone play "social worker?"*
- *How much can and should schools control what kids do in their out of school time*
- *How will this approach make our schools safer?*



Community B is setting behavioral standards with clear consequences and holding student and their parents accountable

Understanding the origin of the problem is less important than changing the behavior of violent students by imposing clear consequences. A zero-tolerance policy should be employed that removes violent kids or those caught with weapons or drugs. Parents and the community can help by supporting the school's policy and helping the schools ensure that all children and their families understand it clearly.

In addition, parents should be held accountable for the behavior of their children. For example, parents of disruptive kids could be required to be in school with their child to help keep him or her under control.

Those who like this approach often say:

- If the rules are clear and enforced, kids will learn to live by them.
- There can be no second chances when violence and weapons are involved.

Those who don't like this approach often say:

- Zero tolerance can be too rigid, and remove kids from school when they should be in class learning.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Will this approach make our schools safer? How?*
- *How realistic is it to expect parents to get more involved and be held accountable? Isn't it the lack of responsible parenting that has led to violence and discipline problems in our schools?*
- *Can we enforce zero tolerance without bias?*



Community C is enhancing school security, and reinforcing this in the community

Having both a zero-tolerance policy and teaching conflict resolution and offering social services distract educators from their central mission. Educators should focus on teaching, not policing. Violent students are committing crimes that the police or private security forces are equipped and trained to handle. Metal detectors and a security presence will best deter and control school safety and permit educators to focus on their jobs.

Parents and the community can help by supporting the school's policy and making sure there are adequate funds to install metal detectors and maintain an adequate security presence.

Those who like this approach often say:

- Violence is a crime and should be treated like one.
- A secure environment is where kids can focus on learning and teachers on teaching.

Those who do not like this approach often say:

- Schools are not prisons and should not look or feel like one.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the advantages/disadvantages about this approach?*
- *How would this approach make our schools safer?*



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?

