

# **PUBLIC AGENDA**

*Independent, Thought-Provoking,  
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## **Ensuring Teacher Quality**

***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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# Ensuring Teacher Quality: A Community Conversation

## Introduction

Most people would agree that you can't have good schools without good teachers, and that it's crucial to ensure there is a quality teacher in every classroom.

This conversation is an effort to generate ideas about how to do that.

Think of the teachers from whom you or your children have learned the most. What were they like? What were the qualities, skills, knowledge and behaviors that set them apart? How can we make sure all students have quality teachers in every classroom?

*To help us talk through the issues, we're going to look at three different approaches to ensuring teacher quality. The three approaches are:*

- *Require more thorough preparation for those who want to be teachers*
- *Improve the working environment for teachers in the classroom*
- *Invest in recruiting top-notch people to the field through better pay and smarter incentives*

Each of these ideas has its pros and cons. You may also have another idea you'd like to add, and that's fine. Or you may want to combine elements, and that's fine too. But keep in mind that school communities like yours have limited resources, time, and energy, and cannot do everything. Also be aware that almost all of these ideas have drawbacks, so it's important to focus on which approach would have the greatest impact on teacher quality. Before we begin our conversation, let's look at each of these ideas a little more closely.



## Choicework

### **Approach #1: Require more thorough preparation for those who want to be teachers**

The best way to ensure teacher quality is to focus on what happens before a teacher ever sets foot in a classroom. Teaching, like medicine or law, is a profession that should require high entry standards and a thorough preparation to be ready for the classroom.

This could involve:

- Requiring teachers to have a graduate degree in education and a strong command of the subject area they plan to teach.
- Improving teacher education programs to make sure teachers-in-training are getting the most reliable and up-to-date knowledge of what works in the classroom.
- Ensuring that potential teachers have experience in front of a classroom and learn classroom management skills from experienced professionals, and are prepared to deal with a diverse student population.
- Requiring teachers – without exception or loopholes -- to pass rigorous licensing exams, and continue their professional development throughout their careers and renew their licenses every five years.

Those who like this approach often say, “If we’re going to set higher standards for students, we’ve got to do the same thing for teachers.”

And those who do not like this approach often say, “It’s not realistic to demand higher standards and extra training unless we are willing to pay for it.”



**Approach #2: Improve the working environment for teachers in the classroom**

Approach #2 emphasizes that teachers are capable professionals who care about children, but too often they are blamed for all the problems facing education. They face a lack of respect from students, parents and society, and even physical threats, yet they still work hard every day. What would really help ensure teacher quality is making the school environment more conducive to learning and more supportive of teachers.

This approach could involve:

- Reducing class size so teachers can provide more attention to each child.
- Providing networking opportunities with other teachers, principals, and administrators, and continued training so they feel supported in their work.
- Making sure schools are safe places to work by using various school-safety strategies.
- Improving student behavior and attitudes by getting parents more involved.

Those who like this approach often say, “Teachers, like every professional, can better succeed under reasonable conditions.”

Those who don’t like this approach often respond, “Aren’t there lots of examples of teachers who succeed even under tough conditions? We need results, not excuses.”



**Approach #3: Attract more talented people to the field and get the most out of them through better pay and smarter incentives**

Approach #3 takes the position that teacher quality would improve if there were better pay and other rewards to attract highly talented people to the field in the first place, that districts need to actively recruit quality teachers and promote the teaching profession, and, as in any field, quality and high performance should be rewarded.

This approach could involve:

- Providing salaries competitive with other fields so talented people are drawn to the profession and can afford to stay in it.
- Offering prestigious awards, such as 'Teacher of the Year,' to recognize high-performing teachers.
- Providing financial bonuses and prestigious awards to teachers who get exceptional results raising test scores, especially in the toughest schools.
- Making sure there is room for job advancement, such as becoming mentors to new teachers, so talented people have room to grow.
- Making it easier to better evaluate, retrain, or possibly replace ineffective teachers.

Those who like this approach often say, "If we want to attract and keep high quality professionals, we need to reward them appropriately."

Those who don't like this approach often say, "Most districts can't afford to think about paying teachers at the level of lawyers and doctors, and making teachers compete against each other for higher salaries isn't likely to help kids learn."



## **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?

