School Funding

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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School Funding

Introduction

School funding is one of the most controversial issues facing many districts today. Do schools have the funds necessary to do a good job, or are they limited by their budgets?

Do schools need more money to deal with the social problems kids bring to school these days, or should schools concentrate on academics and not try to address social problems? If more money were given to the schools, how well would it be used?

The following scenario about two school board candidates with very different approaches to school funding will help to open a conversation on this topic. Which would you vote for in your own district, and why? If they were here, what questions would you ask them?
Choicework

School Board Candidate A stresses that educating our kids should be our top priority and that the schools need more money to do the job right. He argues:

- Because schools are under-funded, classes are too large and school buildings are falling apart.
- Schools also need more funding to invest in new computer and media technologies. These are the wave of the future and essential for a good education today.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- What are the downsides to this approach?
- Are lack of money and complaints about things like class size just excuses for poor school performance?
- If the public schools were given more money, do you think the new funds would be more likely to go toward things like new textbooks and computers, or increased school bureaucracy?
- If we agree schools need more money, where should it come from and how should it be allocated?
School Board Candidate B stresses that while educating our kids should be a top priority, the schools don’t need more money, they need to use their money better. He argues:

- Increasing school budgets has not led to better results in the past. If the budget were increased, it would get eaten up by administration and too little would get to the classroom.
- The schools need to discipline their budgets, cut administrative fat and get rid of the few teachers who are not up to the job.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- What are the downsides to this approach?
- School budgets are spread thin already, aren’t they? Many schools have rundown buildings, old textbooks and too few computers. Can schools really be expected to do a good job under these conditions?
- Aren’t most public school teachers and administrators doing a pretty good job under tough circumstances? Wouldn’t we lose the most talented people if we froze – or cut – educators’ salaries?
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?