Parental Involvement: A Community Discussion

A PUBLIC AGENDA
CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, CLASSROOMS, STUDY GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS
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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Parental Involvement: A Community Discussion

Introduction

Most parents and educators agree that parental involvement is crucial for schools to be successful.

Is more parental involvement in the schools really so important?

Is it even possible, given the way parents live their lives these days?

Should parents be involved in actual school decision-making, or should their role be limited to working with their own children in cooperation with teachers?

To help you and your neighbors sort out what is most important to you about parental involvement, we've created a scenario that describes three schools with different approaches to parental involvement. Which school would you prefer in your own neighborhood, and why?
Choicework

In Elementary School A, parents help run the school by serving on a school management council with teachers and the principal. The council decides who to hire as principal, where to spend the school's money, what to emphasize in the curriculum, and what textbooks and other instructional materials will be used. Parents are elected to the council by other parents from the school, and have as many votes on the council as the professional educators.

Those who like this approach often say:

- Parents will be more responsive to the needs of the kids than professional educators.
- Parents have a right to have a say in what the schools are doing.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- Are there any downsides to this approach?
- Are parents really qualified to make decisions about important issues such as hiring and curriculum?
- Would you really want other parents making important decisions that affect your child's education?
- Is this choice realistic? Most parents are overstretched as it is – would they really have the time and commitment to play this kind of role in the schools?
In Elementary School B, parents are asked to support their children’s education at home in close cooperation with the school. Parents are expected to limit the amount of television their kids can watch, check their homework regularly, make sure their kids have the space and quiet they need to study effectively, and set high expectations for learning. Finally, parents are asked to support the teachers and principal on discipline and grading policies.

Those who like this approach often say:

- Parents should be parents, teachers should be teachers – each should do what they do best.
- If parents are able to control school policy, a few extremists with too much time on their hands will take over and take the school in directions most people don’t want.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- Are there any downsides to this approach?
- Shouldn’t parents be allowed to help shape the direction schools should go? After all, it’s their kids we’re talking about.
- Is this choice realistic? The idea of parents working with teachers to enforce school rules and encourage kids to study sounds nice, but look how many kids come from broken homes and troubled neighborhoods where both parents work full time. Are these kids really going to get the parent supervision this choice asks for?
In Elementary School C, parents are encouraged to attend parent-teacher conferences and open houses, and help with school fund raising. But with so many broken homes, social problems and people working extra jobs, the school cannot count on parents to be actively involved. Therefore, the school must take on many of the roles once filled by parents. This might include serving breakfast and lunch, getting teachers more involved in the home life of their students, mentor programs bringing in adult role models, and social workers helping kids in need.

Those who like this approach often say:

- You have to be realistic. Kids are on their own too much without enough supervision and the schools have to pick up the slack.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- Are there any downsides to this approach?
- Aren’t we asking too little of parents here? Sure parents are busy, and many face other problems, but that’s no excuse for not getting involved in their children’s education, is it?
- Shouldn’t schools stick to what they do best – education children – instead of trying to act like surrogate parents and social workers?
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?