

PUBLIC AGENDA

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



The Purposes of Education

***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.”

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The Purposes of Education

What Should the First Priority of the Public Schools Be?

Introduction

Most people would probably agree it is important for America's public schools to pay attention to each of the following purposes of education:

Preparing students for success in the job market.

Widening students' horizons and helping them develop a love of learning.

Educating students to be responsible citizens.

While most schools probably pay some attention to each of these purposes, it is also the case that schools can't be expected to do everything equally well. Effective schools must set priorities in how they allocate resources, what they look for when hiring teachers, and how they construct curriculum.

To help you and your neighbors sort out what is most important to you about the purposes of education, we've created a scenario that describes three different school boards. Which school board would you prefer in your own community, and why?



Choicework

School Board A's first priority is preparing students for success in the job market

School Board A has decided that the district's greatest priority is to prepare each student to be successful in the job market.

Toward this end, the district emphasizes the academic basics, computer literacy, applying course work to real-world situations and good work habits. Rigorous technical training is offered to those students who are not likely to go on to college. Job fairs, job internships, and career counseling are a significant part of the curriculum for all students.

Those who like this approach often say:

Young people need to be prepared to make it in the real world when they're in school or they'll be lost when they get out.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *With the job marketing transforming so quickly some people say it's useless to focus on a particular set of so-called practical skills, and that the best idea is to provide as broad an education as possible so people can change with the times. What do you think of that argument?*



School Board B's first priority is widening students' horizons and helping them develop a love of learning

School Board B has decided that the district's greatest priority is providing students with rich and challenging educational experiences and a broad base of knowledge in order to expand their horizons and help them develop a love of learning.

Toward this end, the district emphasizes following the academic basics with in-depth course work in literature, science, math, history, and the arts. Students are also helped to find and pursue those areas of learning in which they have special interests and gifts. A high value is placed on creativity, independent thinking and effectively expressing ideas.

Those who like this approach often say:

If schools don't emphasize a challenging academic curriculum and rich cultural experiences, most students will never have a chance to experience them and their lives will be limited as a result.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What do you say to those who argue that not every kid is going to relate to a broad, liberal arts education, and are more interested in learning the practical skills to make a living?*



School Board C's first priority is to educate students to be responsible and capable citizens

School Board C has decided that the district's greatest priority is teaching students to be responsible and capable citizens, with the knowledge, values and skills to contribute to the life of their community and their country.

In addition to teaching the academic basics, the district places special emphasis on course work that helps students appreciate both cultural differences *and* the common history and values that all Americans share. Also, civics classes stress the importance of voting and citizenship. Finally, the district encourages all students to do some form of voluntary community service during their school careers.

Those who like this approach often say:

The public schools are the place where all different kinds of kids can learn to get along, establish the habits of responsible citizenship, and learn to appreciate both their differences and their commonalities.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Some would argue that the schools have enough on their plates without taking on the job that families and religious and civic institutions ought to be playing, and they should focus on teaching academics, which is hard enough. What do you think of that?*
- *If schools get involved in values and character building, is that stepping on the toes of families who may not share those particular values? How do you do this without infringing on the rights of parents?*



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?

