



**The Busy Citizen's
Discussion Guide:**

**Education in
Our Communities**

Contents

Foreword – Why talk about our schools?	1
Introduction – New challenges facing our schools	3
Session 1 – How have schools affected our lives, and how do they affect our community?	5
Session 2 – What do we want our graduates to know and be able to do?	7
Session 3 – Issues in education	
3A – How can we meet every student's needs?	12
3B – How can we make our schools safer?	17
3C – How can we deal with racial and ethnic diversity?	20
3D – How can we provide a quality education with limited resources?	23
Session 4 – Making a difference; What can we do in our community?	27
Ground rules for useful discussions	inside back cover

Additional copies of *The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide: Education in Our Communities* are available for \$1.00 each, plus \$2.00 per order for shipping and handling; discounts are available for large orders. Contact the Study Circles Resource Center if your organization or corporation would like information on sponsoring distribution of Busy Citizen's Discussion Guides on education, violence, racism and race relations, sexual harassment, or civil rights for gays and lesbians.

This booklet is an abbreviated version of *Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?*, available for \$5.00 plus \$2.00 per order from shipping and handling, from the Study Circles Resource Center.

Copyright 1995 Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

Publications of SCRC include topical discussion programs; training material for study circle organizers, leaders, trainers, and writers; a quarterly newsletter; a clearinghouse list of study circle material developed by a variety of organizations; and an annotated bibliography on study circles, collaborative learning, and participatory democracy. Many of these publications are available at no charge. Write or call for more information:

Study Circles Resource Center
PO Box 203, 697 Pomfret St.
Pomfret, CT 06258
(860) 928-2616, fax (860) 928-3713

Foreword

Why talk about our schools?

Schools are facing tougher challenges than ever before, and they cannot face them alone. There are no easy answers to meeting these challenges, but it is clear that any meaningful answer will require the involvement of citizens from all parts of the community.

The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide: Education in Our Communities is designed to help you get involved by talking with others about your community's schools and how best to support them. It is a brief version of a more complete guide entitled *Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?* Whether you use this Busy Citizen's booklet as part of an organized discussion program or in more informal settings, you will be taking part in the kind of open, constructive dialogue that is essential to your schools and your communities.

Following a brief background piece on new challenges facing our schools, this booklet presents a number of different ways to discuss education and encourages you to consider a range of ideas and views. The inside back cover provides ground rules for making your discussions more productive: respectful listening, open exploration of the experiences and beliefs behind opinions, and careful consideration of the views of others.

Involving other community members

Communities that attempt to involve their citizens in improving education face many obstacles. Some people who want to be involved in schools don't know where to begin. Others feel too overwhelmed or unprepared. Some feel disconnected because they don't have children in the schools. Still others are put off by the rancorous debate that often surrounds these issues. At the same time, some educators fear that if they expand public involvement, parents and others might make demands of the schools without considering what they can do to help.

Small-group, democratic, peer-led discussions known as “study circles” provide a practical way to overcome these obstacles. They create the kind of genuine, productive dialogue that allows people to consider many different viewpoints. There is no pressure to come to consensus, accept a particular view, or take a specific course of action. Coming together in this respectful and democratic way allows people to get past political disputes and enables them to thoroughly examine the issues, develop new ideas, and find common ground for constructive action.

Moving from discussion to action

Education in Our Communities includes many examples of productive partnerships between educators and community members, and provides opportunities for you to talk about what will work in your own setting. It can help you build on your community’s unique assets: the many dedicated professionals who work in the schools; businesspeople, public officials, and workers in social service agencies and other community organizations; committed and concerned parents and students; and other concerned citizens.

When students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other community members talk and listen to each other, they gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing education and how to meet them. Through dialogue, community members become better prepared to take individual and collective action. In the process, they also build the bonds of community that are essential to improving education.

Introduction

New challenges facing our schools

Twenty years ago, what we wanted out of our schools seemed clear-cut. We expected that high school graduates would have a good grasp of reading, writing, and math; would know how to be responsible citizens; and would have the skills to qualify for college admission or the average entry-level job.

Today, when we consider the new challenges confronting education - and our whole society - it seems especially difficult to know what we should expect of our schools:

- ◆ **Jobs are changing.** The skills that used to qualify high school graduates for entry-level jobs in established trades or for further training in the professions are no longer enough. Schools have the difficult task of preparing graduates for an uncertain economic future.
- ◆ **Racial and ethnic tensions are growing.** In the cities and towns which are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, the question that people strive to answer is "How can we learn to live together?" In the cities and towns which remain segregated or homogeneous, people ask, "How do we begin to know about others when we have no contact with them?"
- ◆ **There is a wide income gap between many urban and suburban communities.** The differences in income and tax revenues between urban and suburban communities present severe challenges to society and to schools. Many of the students with the greatest needs go to school in communities with the fewest resources.
- ◆ **Families are changing.** In just a generation, the structure of the average American family has changed dramatically. One-fourth of children are growing up in single-parent homes, and in many of the homes where there are two parents, both parents work. As the family changes in these ways, adults are spending less time with young people. Teachers often feel that they must take on

parenting tasks on top of trying to teach children who are unprepared for learning.

- ◆ **There is increasing concern about values.** Commonly shared values such as honesty, respect, and responsibility seem to be in decline. When it comes to the behavior of young people, some people look to the schools for help, thinking that families, churches, and other institutions have failed. On the other hand, teachers who are forced to spend their days enforcing discipline know that schools alone can't teach young people values.
- ◆ **Violence is on the rise.** Violence is entering schools everywhere, taking the forms of harassment, fistfights, and even gang- and drug-related shootings. In 1988, only 2% of the nation's 50 largest school districts used metal detectors. By 1993, 50% of these schools were using them. Students and school staff not only face immediate safety problems, but are left to deal with the long-term effects of violence on motivation, learning, and emotional well-being.

These new challenges have a powerful and immediate impact on our schools and on what we expect them to accomplish. Though they affect different communities in different ways, one thing is clear: we all need to think about how we can meet these challenges and improve education.

Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and people representing all parts of the community must reconsider the most basic questions about education: What do we want our students to know? What do they need to succeed? What can schools do to help them achieve these goals? What can we, in our various roles in the community, do to make education work? How can schools and communities work together to meet the challenge of education?

Session 1

How have schools affected our lives, and how do they affect our community?

The purpose of this session is to give you the opportunity to share your personal experiences, stories, and perspectives about schools. Since personal experiences often shape our ideas and beliefs, this session lays a foundation for the rest of your study circle. It will also set the tone for open, thoughtful discussion.

These questions provide some starting points for the discussion:

1. **Think back.** What was school like for you? What did you like and dislike? (For students, talk about what school is like for you today. What do you like and dislike?)
2. **How do you think today's schools are different from the schools you attended?** (For students, how do you think today's schools are different from the schools your parents attended?)
3. **What do you think are the most pressing challenges facing the schools in our community?**
4. **What do you think are our greatest strengths, both inside and outside the schools, for dealing with the challenges we face?**
5. **What kind of relationships do our schools have with parents, businesses, community organizations, religious institutions, the media, and other sectors of the community? In what ways can schools and other sectors of the community better communicate with each other and work together?**
6. **Based on your experiences, what kind of impact do you think schools have on the community? For example, how does the quality of our graduates affect the community?**

7. How have your personal experiences influenced your definition of a good education? How have they influenced your ideas about what it means to be an educated person?

8. How have your personal experiences shaped your ideas about what our community's schools should try to accomplish?

Session 2

What do we want our graduates to know and be able to do?

The best way to create a basis for productive community involvement in the schools is for community members to share ideas about their goals and visions for education.

This session provides the opportunity to consider some very different views about what our graduates should know and be able to do. Each of the views is written in the voice of a person who thinks this particular skill or kind of knowledge should have high priority. Don't feel that you or your group needs to choose one of the views. Rather, use them to start your discussion and to develop your own thinking about what is most important.

View 1 – Graduates must have a strong grounding in the basics.

According to this view, every graduate should be able to read, write, and do math at functional levels. Without a solid foundation in these skills, students can't learn anything else. Also, graduates can't succeed in most jobs or at fundamental life tasks, such as managing a budget, without these skills. We should be careful about expanding the definition of "basics" too far. When we try to teach too much, we end up shortchanging the subjects that are critical.

View 2 – Graduates must have job skills.

According to this view, graduates must know the basics, but they must also have the higher-level skills that will make them employable in jobs that offer living wages. We must teach technical skills such as computer competence, "people skills" such as the ability to work in teams, and traits such as dependability and adaptability. We must offer apprenticeships, internships, and school-to-work transition programs. When students know that their education will help them get a good job, they will be more motivated to learn.

View 3 – Graduates must have strong character.

According to this view, the most important thing we can do is to prepare our students to be responsible, mature adults. A narrow focus on academics is not enough, since in real life many other traits are more important for success and fulfillment. Basic values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, accountability, and service to others are vital. If we don't teach those values, graduates won't have the moral strength to be good family members, workers, and community members.

View 4 – Graduates must have skills for everyday life.

According to this view, young people need certain skills and information just to survive. We need to teach practical skills such as establishing a workable budget and balancing a checkbook. The breakdown of families and communities shows that we must teach basic human relations skills that graduates can use in work settings and in family life. Students need to know how to get along with others and how to construc-

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What do you think our graduates should know and be able to do? Which view (or combination of views) best describes what you think? Why?
2. What other responses would you add to the list?
3. Of the view(s) you think are most important, which do you think schools should concentrate on?
4. If schools can't take on all that is important, how would you set priorities for what the schools *should* do?
5. What experiences and beliefs lead you to your ideas?
6. As you listen to others' ideas, try to learn why they hold their views. What new insights or different ways of thinking do you gain from others in your study circle?
7. What are the common ideas in your group about what graduates should know and be able to do?
8. What new ideas do you have about how you and others in the community can help schools achieve the goals you think are most important?

Community Goals and Goals 2000

In 1990, the Department of Education adopted a list of goals for education in America, to be achieved by the year 2000. This set of goals, called *Goals 2000*, covers areas such as academic achievement, young children's readiness for school, and school safety.

The *Goals 2000* report (which is available from the Department of Education) can be a useful resource for people who are trying to decide what the educational goals of their community should be. But it cannot replace the need for people to set goals for their own communities.

Goals are meaningful only if community members and educators have a chance to talk about them, decide which are most important, decide how to achieve them, and then work together.

tively settle disagreements. We must communicate the hard realities of parental responsibilities, of sexually transmitted diseases, and of substance abuse.

View 5 - Graduates must be ready to learn *throughout* their lives.

According to this view, the most important thing we can do is to help students know *how* to learn. They must be able to communicate effectively, think critically, solve problems, search out information, and work in teams, since those are the kinds of skills that they can apply to any new learning situation that they will face. Today's high school or college graduates can expect to change jobs many times in their lifetimes, and we must prepare them to learn quickly in new situations.

View 6 - Graduates must have the skills to participate in public life.

According to this view, graduates need to have basic democratic skills and attitudes so that they can contribute to their communities and the country. Students need practice in thinking critically about social and political issues, in building consensus, and in decision-making. They also need to learn the practice of community service. Too few of our graduates know that they can make a difference in their communities and the country, or *how* to make a difference.

With the problems facing our society, we must have citizens with these skills.

View 7 – Graduates must have a well-rounded, liberal arts education.

According to this view, our graduates must, above all, be prepared for college. Even though not all students will choose to go to college, all graduates should have the academic preparation they need to make college a viable option. That means a student must be educated as a “whole person” – receiving a solid foundation in math, science, literature, history, languages, and the arts. In addition to academics, students should explore music, drama, athletics, and other facets of a well-rounded education. Graduates can get specialized skills in colleges and technical schools. Before then, they need many opportunities to develop their minds and their bodies.

**What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion**

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools so that students will have the skills they need when they graduate. Some ideas:

Individuals can volunteer as classroom aides, mentor or tutor students, bring unique talents to the classroom for special learning units, lead extracurricular activities such as athletics, organize field trips, and talk with educators about educational goals.

Small groups of concerned citizens can facilitate partnerships between schools and businesses, run seminars in character education or life skills for students, strengthen parent involvement and parent education, and help make the school a center for adult learning in the community.

Community organizations can create apprenticeship and internship programs, donate equipment to schools, raise money for education, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools.

Session 3 Issues in education

On the following pages you'll find suggestions for discussion sessions on four different topics:

Session 3A – How can we meet every student's needs?

Session 3B – How can we make our schools safer?

Session 3C – How can we deal with racial and ethnic diversity?

Session 3D – How can we provide a quality education with limited resources?

Choose the session or sessions that best fit your community's needs, or use these as models for developing discussion material on *your* community's most critical issues.

Session 3A

How can we meet every student's needs?

One of the greatest challenges in educating any person is finding ways to meet his or her distinct needs. Some young people have particular physical or learning difficulties. Others have unusual strengths, such as an aptitude for science or a gift for art. Every person has unique interests and ways of learning.

This challenge is magnified in the classroom, since teachers are responsible for not just one student, but for an entire group. Even students who are the same age have a wide range of strengths, needs, and skills. It is not obvious which approach schools should take, and in some communities this issue is a matter of controversy.

This session provides an opportunity for you to consider some views about how to meet every student's needs. Some views focus on what the schools should do, and others include parents and community members. The views overlap, so don't feel that you or your group must choose one. Rather, use them as a way to think about the challenge from different angles, to weigh pros and cons, and to come up with your own approach to meeting every student's needs.

View 1 – Group students according to abilities and special needs.

According to this view, the most effective way to teach is to place students into groups by ability, a practice sometimes called “tracking.” Many schools operate this way. Students learn best when the teacher can present concepts at a pace that is comfortable for everyone in the group. When students of different ability levels are grouped together, it is easy for students to become either overwhelmed or bored. On the other hand, when students are grouped by ability level they have a better chance to succeed and are more likely to keep trying. Some students are motivated by the possibility of moving to a more advanced group.

Students who are unusually talented and gifted need their own classes and groups so that they can fully develop their abilities. These students will be our future leaders: we must nurture them and provide settings where they are motivated to strive for excellence.

Children with special needs such as physical or learning disabilities also require their own classes so they can get special help. Placing them in classes with other students is not fair to them, since they are unlikely to get the attention they need.

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What do you think is the best way to meet every student's needs?

2. Of the views, is there one (or a combination) that best describes your ideas, and why? Are there other ideas you would like to add?

3. What experiences and beliefs have helped form your ideas?

4. As you listen to others describe what has shaped their views, what new insights and ideas do you gain?

5. What are your greatest concerns about how our schools are trying to meet every student's needs? What do you think the schools should do?

6. What are the common concerns or ideas in your group about how best to meet every student's needs?

7. What new ideas do you have about helping to meet every student's needs?

View 2 - Teach all students together.

According to this view, "tracking" is unfair and is not the best way for students to learn. Students in the lower tracks are thought of as slow, and they begin to doubt their own ability to learn. They usually get a less challenging curriculum that stresses lower-level skills. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: since less is expected of these students, they are less successful.

When tracking starts early, children who start kindergarten with less preparation are placed into lower levels. Since students usually remain in their original groups, it is difficult for these children to overcome their late start. By high school, the division between the "high" and the

“low” groups, which often follows class and race lines, has become entrenched.

Advanced students learn at least as well when they are grouped with others of different ability levels as when they are grouped by ability level. That is because students learn well when they learn with others who think differently or who have different kinds of strengths. Most people thrive in a cooperative learning environment.

Whenever practical, children with special needs should be placed in regular classrooms. Many of them benefit greatly when the children around them exhibit the academic or social skills they are trying to master. Special-needs children also provide unique learning opportunities for the other students. In these settings, students can develop empathy, see how people can succeed in spite of personal challenges, and learn to see the world in new ways.

View 3 – We should focus on parenting skills and parental involvement.

According to this view, how schools teach is not as important as what happens in the home. By the time children get to first grade, the most important stage in their education has already passed. The life skills and attitudes toward learning that very young children develop at home are critical in preparing them for school and life. Young people continue to need attention and encouragement from their parents throughout their schooling.

Teachers and parents need to work closely together. Some parents feel uncomfortable going into their children’s schools, often because of the way they feel about their own school experiences. Teachers and administrators must reach out to all parents and build relationships with them. Parents must make it clear to teachers that they want to support them and work cooperatively with them.

Many parents feel isolated and unsure of how to be a good parent. With changes in families, parenting can be very difficult: it’s harder to be a parent when there is only one adult in the home or when both parents work outside the home. Also, parents often have no members of their extended family nearby.

Some communities offer parent education or support groups to help parents:

- ◆ learn how to give their preschoolers a good start for a lifetime of learning
- ◆ learn how to more effectively discipline their children
- ◆ learn how to deal with the challenges and frustrations of parenting
- ◆ think about their relationships with their children
- ◆ build supportive relationships with other parents
- ◆ learn how to keep track of what their children are learning in school and learn ways to express their concerns and questions to teachers
- ◆ learn ways to help their children with homework
- ◆ improve their own basic skills in reading, math, or English.

View 4 – We must have high expectations of all students.

According to this view, we need to have the same high goals and hopes for all students that we've typically had for only a small number of academically "gifted" students. All young people can achieve remarkable things if they are challenged and supported by teachers and parents. They deserve the opportunity to realize their full potential and develop their strengths.

The most critical element for the success of all students is for parents, teachers, principals, coaches, and other adults to believe in them. We must never give up on any young person.

In reality, some young children who come to school are not as well-prepared as others. In these cases, it can be difficult to see their potential. But these young people and their families need more support, not less. Effective leaders in schools and the community must work to provide that support.

It is also important to be aware of the influence of our biases and stereotypes. Some teachers or parents, for example, expect less of girls, particularly in math and science. Some people expect less from low-income families, or from black or Hispanic students, or from non-native-English speakers. These low expectations reinforce the negative messages that are common in society. Often, when educators and parents become aware of their own biases, they can begin to teach in ways that bring out the best in all young people.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to help meet the needs of every student. Some ideas:

Individuals can mentor or tutor students, teach English to parents whose native language is not English, volunteer for preschool programs, and take part in extra-curricular activities.

Small groups of concerned citizens can strengthen parent involvement, run parent education workshops, give recognition to student achievements, build playground equipment that is suitable for many levels of physical ability, and work with educators to change existing school policies.

Community organizations can sponsor students to take university courses, foster student-run businesses, create internship programs, support education programs for parents and preschoolers, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools.

Session 3B

How can we make our schools safer?

Students and teachers need to feel safe in order for learning to take place. Sadly, in a growing number of our communities, young people are afraid to go to school because of the crime and violence they encounter on the way to school or in the school itself.

Schools and communities are exploring ways to prevent violence and to make their schools safe. This session provides four views on how we can best do this. Use them as a starting point for your discussion and for developing your own view of how to approach this problem.

View 1 - We need to make sure that young people have adult guidance.

According to this view, in class, at home, and in their neighborhoods, young people need the encouragement and discipline that only adults can provide. Many young people don't have adults around to guide them. In addition, many adults don't work together to support and guide young people. Often parents and teachers don't regularly communicate with each other about how young people are doing. Young people need a community of adults who know them and hold them accountable for their actions. They need schools where parents and other community members are involved. In addition to supervision at home, youngsters need after-school activities where adults can coach, tutor, and mentor them.

View 2 - We should teach students the skills they need to resolve conflict without violence.

According to this view, many young people see and hear violence all the time - in music, on television, in the schoolyard, on the streets, or at home. These influences make it more likely that they will use violence to resolve their conflicts. We must teach young people the skills they need to handle violent situations, to resolve conflicts, and to help other young people work out their disputes

more peacefully. At the same time, adults must resolve their own conflicts without violence, so that young people will have positive examples to follow.

View 3 – We must address the major social problems in our communities that lead to youth violence.

According to this view, young people who are hungry, who come from broken homes, and who see little hope for their future are more likely to act violently. If we are going to reduce the violence that is affecting our young people and entering our schools, the community must address its root causes. School programs such as free meals for students from low-income families are just a beginning. School-based social services for students and their families can address some basic problems at a deeper level. The community, and especially businesses, must offer jobs, internships, training, and hope for a brighter future. All sectors of the community must contribute and work together. By coordinating their efforts, they will be better able to identify and assist the young people who are most at risk.

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. Have you ever feared for your physical safety while in school? If so, how did you handle the situation?

2. What kinds of violence do students and teachers face in our community's schools?

3. What do you think is the major cause of violence in our schools?

4. What do you think the community should do to help make the schools safe? Of the views, is there one (or a combination) that best describes your ideas, and why?

5. As you listen to others describe their views, what new ideas or insights do you gain?

6. What are the common concerns among group members? What are the key areas of agreement and disagreement? Where is there common ground on what should be done?

7. What is already going on in our schools and community to address concerns about violence in the schools? What new ideas and suggestions do you have?

View 4 - We should demand high standards of behavior from our young people.

According to this view, as a society we are much more lenient than we used to be. In homes and schools we often tolerate rude and disrespectful behavior. When “acting out” and violent behavior go unchecked, they usually get worse. Teachers, parents, and other adults who are responsible for young people must set and enforce stricter behavior standards. Young people should know that when they violate those standards, they will face consequences. Some schools, for example, set policies of “zero tolerance” for gang-related clothing or activities.

**What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion**

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to make schools safer. Some ideas:

Individuals can monitor school hallways and routes to school, volunteer for anti-violence programs, serve as mentors for students, and help all the young people they know to avoid situations that are likely to be violent and to resolve their conflicts without violence.

Small groups of concerned citizens can run conflict resolution and substance abuse prevention seminars for students, help students run peer mediation and peer leadership programs, and organize patrols of school hallways and school grounds.

Community organizations can finance extracurricular activities for young people, sponsor public information campaigns against violence, provide free breakfasts and lunches for students, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools. Businesses can provide jobs, internships, apprenticeships, and training for young people.

Session 3C

How can we deal with racial and ethnic diversity?

Race has been a major issue throughout our history, particularly in relation to African-Americans. As we have dealt with the aftermath of slavery and with each wave of immigration, we have struggled toward equality for people of all races and ethnic groups.

Now, the racial and ethnic makeup of our society is changing once again. The large wave of Latino and Asian immigration that began in the 1980s is continuing. By the year 2000, one in three Americans will be a person of color.

Public schools have often been at the center of our struggles about race and ethnicity. This session provides an opportunity to consider several views about how our schools should deal with racial and ethnic diversity.

View 1 – Focus on a core set of Western values and traditions.

According to this view, in the past our country dealt with waves of immigrants by teaching them Western cultural heritage. It's vital for us

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What are your greatest concerns about how our schools are dealing with racial and ethnic diversity?
2. What do you think is the best way to deal with racial and ethnic diversity? Which of the views best describes what you think, and why?
3. What personal experiences and beliefs have shaped your ideas?
4. As you listen to others describe their views, what new ideas or insights do you gain?
5. Are there common concerns among group members? Where is there common ground on what should be done?
6. What ideas and suggestions do you have for helping to carry out the ideas you support?

to do that today, so that our schools will be a unifying force in our society. In English, history, and social studies classes, young people need to learn about the Western tradition and the core literature, traditions, and values that bind our nation together. Teaching about different cultures is good in theory. But in reality there is not enough time in school to teach the fundamentals of our Western values and to cover a multicultural curriculum. People from different races and ethnic backgrounds are never going to get along if we value the things that separate us more than the things that unify us.

View 2 – Study different cultures, but emphasize our common bonds.

According to this view, the United States is a “melting pot” of many cultures. We have a core set of values – democracy, freedom and equality – that unites us and makes all of us American. This description of our country is so important that it is printed on our currency: *E pluribus unum*, which means “Out of many, one.” We should teach both our multicultural history and our common values to students. In English, history, and social studies classes, students should learn about European and non-European cultures and about the contributions of all ethnic groups to our communities and our country. This will convey a more accurate view of history and our society, and affirm the cultures and contributions of all Americans. At the same time, whether in our books or in our classrooms, we should treat students as Americans, rather than as African-Americans, European-Americans, or Asian-Americans.

View 3 – Strengthen our cultural identities and celebrate our differences.

According to this view, before students learn about a “common heritage,” they need to strengthen their own cultural identities and ethnic pride. The myth of the American melting pot that has long been taught in our schools has covered over the painful realities in our history. Instead, school curriculum should honor the struggles and strengths of many cultures. Students also need to strengthen their attachments to their own ethnic groups. In some communities, this may mean setting up Afro-centric schools or teaching in both Spanish and English. In all cases it means that we must help our students acknowledge and respect the important differences that result from our

various cultural heritages and experiences, and encourage students to re-examine what it means to be an American.

View 4 - Integrate the schools.

According to this view, racial tension and separation is one of the central problems of our entire society. If we don't learn to value each other's differences and at the same time realize that we face common problems, we will fail as a society. It's not enough for students to read books about people of other races and ethnic groups, to meet different kinds of people once in a while, or to have discussions about how to get along with other kinds of people. Our students must come into daily contact with people from different backgrounds. Racial and ethnic segregation between schools and school districts keeps this from happening. The best way to prepare people for diverse societies is to have diverse schools. Only when integration has taken place can our schools begin to help students value each other and learn to get along.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to help them deal with racial and ethnic diversity. Some ideas:

Individuals can volunteer to help with civic or cultural school trips and events, learn another language that is common in their community, teach English to parents whose native language is not English, help set up culture fairs, and serve on committees that are making plans for school integration or school choice.

Small groups of concerned citizens can provide extracurricular activities that allow people of different cultures to interact, sponsor school activities to coincide with community events that promote cultural awareness, help overcome racial and ethnic barriers among parents, and work with educators to change existing policies.

Community organizations can sponsor student trips to civic or cultural institutions or events, support internships in civic or cultural organizations, sponsor study circle programs on race relations, and propose plans for school integration or school choice.

Session 3D

How can we provide a quality education with limited resources?

The purpose of this session is for you to consider the available resources in your community and think of how best to use them to provide a quality education. When most people hear the word "resources," they think about school budgets and taxes. While taxes and spending are critical to this discussion, many communities have begun to look at resources more broadly. In these communities, they are enlisting many community groups outside the schools to contribute to education, through volunteerism, school-business partnerships, and financial support.

The seven views below describe different ideas about how we can expand, allocate, or better utilize resources to provide a quality education. Use them as a starting point for your discussion, to weigh pros and cons, to develop your own approach, and to search for common concerns in the group.

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What are your greatest concerns about resources for education in our community?
2. As you consider the views, which best describes your thoughts about how we can provide a quality education with limited resources? Why?
3. What personal experiences and beliefs have shaped your view? As other group members express their views, how do they influence your thinking?
4. What are the common concerns in your group? Where is there common ground on what should be done? What are the key areas of agreement and disagreement?
5. What do you think *our* schools could do to expand resources or to use available resources more effectively?
6. What do you think community members and organizations could do to help our schools provide a quality education with limited resources?

View 1 – Quality is expensive, so we should increase the resources we give to schools.

According to this view, if we want quality education, we have to pay for it. We're asking a lot of our schools, and we're going to have to find ways to give them the resources they need. This might mean increasing property taxes and school spending, but it's worth it. A good educational system is essential to a healthy, prosperous community. Community members and groups also need to contribute to schools in new ways. They can volunteer in the schools or in early learning programs, raise funds for educational activities, and create partnerships between the schools and other community organizations. We must convince a greater number of community members that a quality education is valuable and that all of us must contribute to it.

View 2 – We should develop specific, high standards and hold schools accountable to them.

According to this view, most schools could provide a quality education if they clearly understood what they had to accomplish in order to be judged a success by their communities. We must set clear standards and then hold administrators, teachers, and students accountable to them. For example, students should be promoted to the next grade only when they pass a year-end exam that tests specific goals set by the community. Teachers who demonstrate excellence, or who show improvement according to community standards, should receive raises and promotions. The schools that demonstrate measurable improvement should be the ones to receive more funding. We must reward and acknowledge the students, teachers, and schools that demonstrate improvement and excellence.

View 3 – We should allow families and students to choose their schools.

According to this view, giving families the right to choose the public school their children will attend is a powerful way to raise the quality of education. School choice provides incentives for improvement: if a school cannot attract students, it will lose funding in the future. School choice can lead to greater flexibility for administrators and teachers in deciding how to run their schools and classrooms. Also, since each school in a system of choice must make itself marketable, educators have incentives to more fully develop their own unique knowledge and talents. As another benefit, school choice can begin to achieve racial diversity in schools because it will lead to

desirable schools that attract a mix of students. The right to choose is a traditional value in America, and we should apply it to education.

View 4 - We must let schools manage themselves.

According to this view, most school systems are bureaucratic and inefficient. Teachers and principals are unable to make even the simplest decisions without going through miles of red tape at the district office. We must give schools the freedom they need to provide a quality education. When given the opportunity, teachers and principals around the country have found creative and efficient ways to achieve high goals in the classroom and in the school as a whole. In many places, schools have decided to share management with the community by including parents and other community members in their local decision-making processes. We should allow our schools the freedom to manage and improve themselves, and they will deliver.

View 5 - We must devote sufficient resources to the schools that face the greatest challenges.

According to this view, the most serious problem is not that most of our schools are mediocre. Rather, the schools in our poorest communities don't have the basic resources they need to educate their students. Schools in poorer areas often have old, poorly maintained buildings, crowded classrooms, and few courses for students beyond the basic requirements. Meanwhile, schools in wealthy areas have good buildings, smaller class sizes, and many extracurricular offerings. Even though money alone can't create good schools, we can't have good schools without adequate funding. We have two increasingly separate educational systems. We must do more for the communities and the schools that have the fewest resources and face the greatest challenges.

View 6 - We must achieve racial diversity in the schools.

According to this view, the first and most important requirement for a quality education is racial diversity. The historic 1954 Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case made this clear when it asserted that separate schools are inherently unequal. Nobody can get a quality education in isolation from people of different backgrounds and racial groups. Increasingly, we have two separate, segregated educational systems, and that is what must change. Interracial contact itself will not provide a quality education

for everyone, but it is an essential requirement. However this is accomplished, through first integrating our neighborhoods or through school integration plans, it will result in a more equal distribution of resources to our schools.

View 7 - We must support early childhood education.

According to this view, the first several years of a child's life are the most important learning years. If young children have supportive environments and positive learning experiences, they are much more likely to succeed in school. Today, when most parents spend less time with their preschool children, day care centers and preschools must provide many critical early learning experiences. Whether in the home or other settings, the most efficient way to raise the quality of education in our schools is to think consciously about our children's education before they go to school. We can detect many learning problems in their early stages and deal with them before they hinder schooling. In addition, we can give every child a strong start for a lifetime of learning through effective early childhood education at home or elsewhere. We must support the families and professionals in our community who work with very young children.

**What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion**

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to provide quality education with limited resources. Some ideas:

Individuals can volunteer in classrooms and child care centers, tutor students, keep track of how schools are meeting their standards and goals, talk with teachers about how they can help their children meet the year's education goals, and volunteer to assist with extra-curricular activities.

Small groups of concerned citizens can encourage partnerships between schools and businesses, help raise funds for schools, propose plans for school integration or school choice, run child care centers, and monitor school standards and efficiency.

Community organizations can establish child care centers, create magnet or charter schools, serve on commissions that monitor the schools, donate equipment to schools, raise money for education, publicize and present awards to outstanding schools and teachers, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools.

Session 4

Making a difference: What can we do in our community?

As the challenges to education grow, many community members and community groups are finding ways to help schools meet those challenges. At the same time, many schools are finding ways to reach out to their communities. All kinds of people and groups are making a difference in education.

This session describes some of the ways we can improve education - in our homes and neighborhoods, in our schools, and in the organizations we belong to. It provides an opportunity for you to think about new ways to get involved.

Coming together to learn from each other and develop our ideas about education is a critical form of action. Finding ways to continue this dialogue and to include more community members is a valuable next step. In some communities, study circles lead to action groups, where some of the participants implement the ideas they develop during their study circle.

What can we do in our homes and neighborhoods to improve education?

Whether as parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, godparents, day care providers, or neighbors, many people come into regular contact with young people. While people may endorse different parenting practices, practically everyone agrees that the most decisive factor in a young person's life is the presence of caring adults.

In addition to "being there" for a young person, there are many ways that parents and other mentors can contribute to a youngster's education:

- ◆ Read to and talk with the children in your life. After they can read by themselves, keep reading together, and talking with them about what they're reading and what they think.

- ◆ Model civil, honest, respectful, and responsible behavior toward others, and expect the same from young people.
- ◆ Listen to and talk with the young people in your life – about their concerns, their friends, what is happening in school, what they are learning and want to learn, their homework, and what they are watching on television.

Discussion questions

1. What can we do in our own homes to improve education? What can we do as individuals?

2. What are the channels of communication between the schools and the community? How might those be improved?

3. What is already going on in the community in terms of improving education? What organizations – businesses, civic organizations, non-profits – are involved in improving education? What other organizations might help, and how can we approach them?

4. How have communities similar to ours effectively addressed challenges like the ones we face? How can we learn more about those efforts, and how can we use what we learn?

5. What are the strengths of our community and our schools? What assets have gone untapped? How can we put those assets to work?

6. What steps do we want to take? What type of support or help do we need to take these steps?

- ◆ Share your ideas with your children and other young people in your life, and ask them what they think.
- ◆ Get to know the children in your neighborhood, and help others do the same by organizing small-scale neighborhood events.
- ◆ Get together with other parents in your child's classroom and talk about your concerns and ideas.
- ◆ Attend teacher conferences and parent nights, and try to keep in regular contact with teachers and the school.
- ◆ Go to teachers and administrators with your questions and concerns on a regular basis. Ask about what your child is learning, how he or she is doing, and what you can do to help.
- ◆ Many communities offer parenting seminars, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and refresher classes in math and English so that par-

ents can understand what their kids are learning. Participate in the classes you think will help you.

How can schools connect to the community?

Many teachers would like to see more parents and other community members supporting education and becoming involved in the schools.

The most common frustration teachers have with parent groups is that they usually represent only a small part of the school's parents. Often racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented, few parents from low-income families attend, and women vastly outnumber men.

Following are ways that actual schools have successfully reached out to parents, including some parents who might not usually get involved:

- ◆ The Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project provides English as a Second Language workshops after school for non-English-speaking parents, using other parents as volunteers. The workshops have boosted attendance at parent group meetings and strengthened communication between teachers and individual parents.
- ◆ A Philadelphia school realized that many of its parents weren't attending "back to school night" because it wasn't providing them with information they could use. The parent group organized a seminar called "How to Help Your Child Succeed With Homework," and attendance at the event increased ten-fold.
- ◆ Parents at Croton-Harmon High School in New York held discussion groups centering on the question, "What should our graduates know and be able to do?" The opportunity to talk broadly about goals brought out many parents who had not been involved in the school before.
- ◆ Family Math Night at P.S. 146 in East Harlem has been a big success. Parents and students learn math together and parents learn how to help with homework.
- ◆ Buffalo's Chapter 1 Parent Resource Center provides a place for regular meetings between parents and teachers, provides materials and information for parents to take home, and gives parents an opportunity to practice new skills and meet other parents.

Lessons from the Community

I went everywhere with my parents and was under the watchful eye of members of the congregation and community who were my extended parents. They kept me when my parents went out of town, they reported on and chided me when I strayed from the straight and narrow of community expectations, and they basked in and supported my achievements when I did well. Doing well, they made clear, meant high academic achievement, playing piano in Sunday school or singing or participating in other church activities, being helpful to somebody, displaying good manners (which is nothing more than consideration toward others), and reading.

My sister Olive reminded me recently that the only time our father would not give us a chore ("Can't you find something constructive to do?" was his most common refrain) was when we were reading. So we all read a lot! We learned early what our parents and extended community "parents" valued.

Children were taught – not by sermonizing, but by personal example – that nothing was too lowly to do. I remember a debate my parents had when I was eight or nine as to whether I was too young to go with my older brother, Harry, to help clean the bed and bedsores of a very sick, poor woman. I went and learned just how much the smallest helping hands and kindness can mean to a person in need.

– Marian Wright Edelman
*The Measure of Our Success:
A Letter to My Children and Yours*

- ◆ The Minneapolis Public Schools used study circles to involve parents and other community members in deciding whether to adopt school choice, maintain the current system, or create a couple of magnet schools and leave the rest of the system the same. Forty study circles met for several sessions, and influenced new performance standards and planning initiatives for the school district.

Schools often seem isolated from their communities. Keeping school buildings open after the school day and making the school

facilities available for other community functions can help more parents and community members feel a connection to the school. Schools around the country are using innovative ways to make the school a community center:

- ◆ School District Four in New York City has a lively after-school program that includes a seven-week summer camp for children and adults, and a variety of tutorial and recreational activities for people of all ages.
- ◆ In Rockville, Maryland, senior citizens read stories and play games with young schoolchildren after school and on Saturdays, through a program administered by the local Senior Center.
- ◆ Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, brings in community members who are knowledgeable in particular fields to serve on juries for student academic exhibitions.
- ◆ The School-Based Youth Services Program in New Jersey has established “one-stop centers” at 29 high schools to provide health

“Old-Fashioned Democratic Virtues”

After a decade of education reform efforts, most high schools remain about the same, and some college educators claim that the writing and thinking skills of entering freshmen continue to get worse every year. . . .

I believe that we are running out of time. What we need to improve schools are not new policy gimmicks, a national curriculum, or more multiple-choice tests, but rather some old-fashioned democratic virtues – courageous leadership, greater clarity and consensus about goals, and many kinds of cooperative ventures to develop new strategies. The high school of the future must be invented in many individual schools and towns by groups of active citizens working together to define and teach real adult competencies, to create community, and to express more active caring for the next generation.

– Tony Wagner
“Improving High Schools:
The Case for New Goals and Strategies”
Phi Delta Kappan, May 1993

services, job training and counseling, mental health counseling, and child care. Making the school the center for social services strengthens the link between schools and parents.

How can community organizations connect with the schools?

Most community members belong to many different organizations within the community. They work for a business, government, or nonprofit organization; they belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque; they are students at or alumni of local universities; they belong to a civic organization or political party; or they participate in some kind of club or recreation league. We can help education meet new challenges by enlisting the help of these and other community organizations.

- ◆ Most of the students at Messalonskee High School in Oakland, Maine, are involved in public service projects. They host block parties, raise money for children in poverty, and volunteer at homeless shelters. Most of their “team leaders” are adult volunteers from the community.
- ◆ The Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce created a Partners-in-Education program that links local businesses to individual schools for a year of ongoing activities, including apprenticeships, instruction in technology, factory tours, and classroom presentations.
- ◆ Members of the First Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas, arranged to guide field trips and do arts and crafts workshops with children at a local school which had a high number of low-income families. They have also organized a consortium of local organizations such as the YWCA and the Lion’s Club to provide services for the children.
- ◆ The Baltimore Learning Network, run by community volunteers, coordinates projects that link the schools to the city’s cultural institutions. The Network makes it possible for students to spend time at the aquarium, the science center, the zoo, museums, libraries, theaters, businesses, and government agencies.

Ground rules for useful discussions

This section offers some brief suggestions for useful discussions about social and political issues. Some people say that, in this age of television and busy lives, our conversation skills leave something to be desired. Still, the art of conversation can be revived with practice.

Whether you are talking with close friends or casual acquaintances, effective communication requires that you respect others and take their ideas seriously – even when you think they are dead wrong.

Talk about public issues can bring out strong emotions, because many of our beliefs are a large part of how we identify ourselves. You can respect another's feelings without necessarily agreeing with the conclusions that person has come to.

There are no sure-fire rules, but applying some basic principles will make your conversations more productive, satisfying, and enjoyable. Though many of these ground rules seem common-sensical, we all know that in practice they are not so commonly applied!

- Listen carefully to others. Try to really understand what they are saying and respond to it, especially when their ideas differ from your own. Try to avoid building your own arguments in your head while others are talking.
- Think together about what you want to get out of your conversation.
- Be open to changing your mind; this will help you really listen to others' views.
- When disagreement occurs, keep talking. Explore the disagreement. Search for the common concerns beneath the surface. Above all, be civil.
- Value one another's experiences, and think about how they have contributed to your thinking.
- Help to develop one another's ideas. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions.
- Don't waste time arguing about points of fact; for the time being, you may need to agree to disagree and then move on. You might want to check out the facts before your next conversation.
- Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the conversation.

The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide: Education in Our Communities is designed to help you have productive conversations on how schools and communities can work together to meet the challenge of educating young people in today's society. It can serve as the basis for informal discussions whenever you have the opportunity to talk, or it can serve as a handout for more formal discussion programs. The booklet is balanced in its presentation of ideas, and offers suggestions for discussing several difficult aspects of education.

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), producer of this Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide, is a project of Topsfield Foundation, Inc., a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC carries out this mission by promoting the use of small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as study circles.

Study Circles Resource Center

PO Box 203, 697 Pomfret St.

Pomfret, CT 06258

(860) 928-2616

Fax (860) 928-3713

