

The Future of K-12 Education

A Guide for Public Discussion

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Interactivity Foundation Reports:

A Way to Start Discussions, Not Settle Arguments

	TYPICAL POLICY REPORTS	IF CITIZEN DISCUSSION REPORTS
WHY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To make or influence immediate decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To provide a starting point for exploratory discussions
WHAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analysis of a problem• Recommendations for solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Areas of concern• Contrasting possibilities• Possible outcomes
WHO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experts and representatives of interest groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expert-specialists and citizen-generalists
HOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public discussions• Decisions made by compromise or consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In “sanctuary”• Freedom to speak openly• Focusing on ideas, not personalities or participants’ interests• Decisions made through convergence, while preserving contrasts

Notes

Summary of Public Policy Possibilities

Possibility	Motive		Response
	Concern(s)	Goal(s)	
<i>Back to Basics</i> (pgs. 8-9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too many add-ons • Overall decline in quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation for adult life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core subjects • Standards • Remedial help • Integrate K-12 schooling and higher education
<i>Aim Higher to Compete</i> (pgs. 10-11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic competition • Change • Other countries outperforming U.S. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobs • Wages • Economic strength 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase resources for education • Teach adaptive and creative skills • Enlist teachers' unions • Expand access to college
<i>Coordinate Education Policy with Anti-Poverty Policy</i> (pgs. 12-13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term underachievement by minority groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal opportunity • Jobs • Strong economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus welfare policy on helping families support children's education
<i>Free Individuals</i> (pgs. 14-15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insensitivity to individual needs • Conformity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to individual differences • Ability to think and act for oneself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop thinking skills • Customized learning plan, alternative settings • Insulate schools from outside influence • Teachers as guides • Use information technology • External mentors to guide choices
<i>Real Public Education</i> (pgs. 16-17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No ownership, little involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active citizenship • Community building • Dealing with common concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizenship training for students: content, skills, practice • Citizens involved in all facets of schools

Introduction

Purpose and Origin of This Report

You are here because you're interested in discussing the future of K-12 education. The materials in this Citizen Discussion Report will help you do so in a way that is exploratory, rather than competitive or argumentative. The more exploratory your discussion, the more likely you will leave thinking about K-12 education as a social concern and about how public policy might respond to it. You will also be better equipped to make more informed choices as a citizen.

This report has two main parts: a short list of possible questions and answers about K-12 education policy, followed by five public-policy responses. The information is designed to help launch your discussion. It will serve as a point of departure for your discussion, not as a map of what's already been "discovered" through expert study or what's been agreed on by influential groups. It will also help keep your discussion exploratory, as it provides general possibilities rather than final answers.

The descriptions you will find here examine a variety of perspectives on K-12 education policy, while maintaining the idea that there are always more to consider. Because they are general, or conceptual, they should guide you in examining the "big questions," while helping you avoid technical arguments over details. They invite you to develop them further or come up with entirely new ones of your own.

Who Developed the Report

This report is a product of the Interactivity Foundation (IF), a nonpartisan public-interest foundation that was established to promote citizen discussions like the one you are about to have. One of IF's roles is to produce discussion materials like this report.

Typically, IF reports result from a series of discussions that unfold over the course of a year and half. They are organized and conducted by a single IF Fellow, who also edits and collects the material in the form of a report. In this case, an IF discussion project produced an initial set of possibilities, which were then re-drafted and tested in four additional discussion series during the fall of 2010. In all, six discussion panels (meeting in four regions of the country) and seven IF facilitators had a hand in this report.

Generally, participants in IF projects are selected for their ability to think creatively and constructively about the chosen area of concern. Discussion panelists are then divided into two groups: one of expert-specialists; the other of citizen-generalists. The advantage of having two groups is that the resulting discussion report will draw on different and complementary skills. The expert-specialists contribute professional or special knowledge; the citizen-generalists contribute their life experiences and general insight. When they come together at the end of a project, each group's thinking enriches the other's.

Another important feature of the IF process is that IF panels meet "in sanctuary," meaning panelists are guaranteed confidentiality from start to finish. This way, they are not expected or obligated to assert their authority, defend a particular constituency or organization, or avoid probing questions or mistakes. They are free to think and speak openly and creatively. This also means that those who discuss IF reports are free to focus on the ideas presented rather than the personalities or backgrounds of the authors.

In other IF projects, discussion panels are free in another important sense: They make selections or decisions through a deliberate process of exploration and convergence rather than consensus or compromise. Panels can take their time exploring and developing a wide range of possibilities. Convergence occurs as panelists agree on a range of possibilities that they believe are worthy of public discussion rather than ones they personally or collectively endorse. In addition, throughout the sanctuary discussion process, any single panelist can keep alive a particular possibility simply by asking that it be preserved. This procedure helps ensure that the panels achieve their goal of developing a series of contrasting possibilities, rather than a single set of recommendations or conclusions.

If you are interested in further information about the process used to develop IF reports or IF's work in general, we invite you to consult our Website at interactivityfoundation.org.

Questions to Consider

What do we want education to achieve for individuals? And for society?

- Equip people with skills to live as independent adults
- Ensure economic growth and national wealth
- Provide economic opportunity for individuals
- Create jobs
- Promote individualism (choice, autonomy)
- Encourage morality (decency, respect, responsibility, compassion, sense of limits)
- Support democracy (competent citizens, community, participation)

Which of these might be most important? Why?

With the prior list in mind, what skills or content knowledge should education focus on?

- Academic skills (the three Rs, science)
- Self-awareness
- Discipline, maturity
- Creativity
- Learning to learn





What matters most in achieving the right educational outcomes?

- Individual child's talents
- Parents/family background
- Peers
- Wider social setting
- Organization of schools
- Teachers
- Using the right educational approach
- Adequate funding

How might policy be used to affect these in a positive way?

Who should be in charge of K-12 public education?

- Educational experts (teachers, administrators, academics)
- Those funding it (taxpayers, those who pay private tuition, corporate donors)
- Local school authorities such as school boards
- Higher levels of government (state, federal)
- Involved citizens/ residents
- Groups with the biggest stake in education (parents, corporations, unions, community leaders)

Back to the Basics

Quick Version

There's really nothing wrong with the basic approach to education in the United States. We just need to do what we've always done, but get back on course. We need to get back to the basics. That means sticking to core subjects and being stricter about everything, from discipline to standards to monitoring a school's performance.



What's Behind It

Education is critical to one's development as a functioning adult, from working to voting, from parenting to becoming members of the larger community. Schooling needs to equip students with the minimum content knowledge and skills to fulfill all of these roles—this means the three Rs (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic). But it also means helping people foster social skills, such as teamwork and communication. Finally, it means sorting students into groups: those who should go on to college and those who should pursue vocational training.



The United States is adept at instituting all of these practices. So what's called for is continued reform, not wholesale or radical changes.

What It Might Do

This possibility actively pursues the following to make sure that education in the United States gives all students a solid foundation for life:

- **Back to basics (getting rid of frill subjects, even some expensive extracurriculars)**
- **Clear performance standards for students, schools, teachers, and districts (state or national)**
- **Better performance monitoring**
- **Help for underperforming students, schools, teachers, and districts**
- **Better integration of high school education, as well as for higher education and vocational training**



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Aim Higher to Compete

Quick Version

Although important, the basics aren't enough in a world as fast paced and interconnected as ours. We're competing against many countries, and many are outperforming us. Not only do we need a new national commitment to investing in education, but we also need an entirely new approach, one that prepares students for the more intense demands of the 21st-century marketplace.



What's Behind It

The world is catching up to the United States economically, and many countries have already surpassed us. To keep our edge, we have to do more than just tinker with our educational system. We need a makeover, one that fosters skills that will be increasingly valuable in the world economy. Those skills fall into two groups: The first group helps one adapt to change by fostering a sense of curiosity, teaching young people how to frame questions, using information and concepts, and critical thinking—all of which contribute to an ongoing desire to learn. The second set of skills promotes problem solving and creativity or inventiveness.

What It Might Do

An adaptive, inventive workforce is the United States' best hope for maintaining its global competitiveness and its middle class. This possibility supports more resources for education by promoting the following:

- **Changes in basic teaching strategies to develop adaptive and creative skills among students through instructor-student mentoring; studios, hands-on projects, experiments, and experiences; group projects; and skills development into content subjects**
- **Enlisting teachers' unions to serve as active partners by trading higher pay/prestige for demonstrated merit and accountability**
- **Significantly expanding access to college through measures such as lower tuition and cheaper federal loans**

Notes



Coordinate Education Policy with Anti-Poverty Policy

Quick Version

One of the greatest hopes we place in education is that it will level the playing field and equalize opportunity. Yet the U.S. educational system remains terribly skewed. Some students, especially those from minority and low-income families, continue to underachieve year after year. This is not only challenging to them as individuals, but as minority populations grow, it increasingly undermines society as a whole.

What's Behind It

The notion of equality for all is central to the development of “the American identity.” Yet despite the great success we’ve had in inventing and then expanding mass education, the gap between those who do well in the system and those who are consistently left out continues to widen. And it’s a tough nut to crack, too. Just think of busing, the huge sums spent over decades on federal and state aids to disadvantaged schools, and the more recent efforts of holding schools accountable—none of which has had a marked or lasting impact. But what if we treated education as part of a larger whole rather than in isolation from other parts of everyday life? To break the cycle of failure that results from poor



families being unable to support their children’s education, which in turn means they are unable to climb the social ladder later, this possibility directly supports low-income families, so that they can support their children’s education. Instead of the usual view that education is the answer to poverty, this possibility says: Deal with both of them together.

What It Might Do

This possibility encourages a reexamination of policies that prevent low-income families from taking advantage of educational opportunities. It supports the following:

- **Educational opportunities such as charter schools and after-school tutoring and activities**
- **Flexible work-hour requirements**
- **Child care for younger children**
- **Easy physical and financial access to public transportation**
- **Parent-to-parent mentors to help challenged parents deal with school issues**
- **Partnering with teachers' unions to provide incentives for good teachers**



Notes

Free Individuals

Quick Version

Education may be important economically, but its biggest challenge is balancing individual differences; its biggest responsibility is ensuring that adults are capable of exercising individual choice. This calls for a policy that emphasizes customization and encourages students to think for themselves.

What's Behind It

Education shouldn't produce cookie-cutter graduates—however well they can cope with everyday life or the increasing demands of a fast-paced, modern economy. Children enter the educational system with different talents and temperaments, including different learning styles. Inevitably, they leave it that way, too, no matter how much effort is put into equalizing opportunity. Meanwhile, isn't the very point of education to allow people to make their own way, not only in their careers, but also in every aspect of life? If anything, education in the United States needs to be more flexible and less conformist.



What It Might Do

This possibility encourages the development of skills that will allow students to think and act for themselves, as well as pursue their own career paths. It encourages the following:

- **Offering a wider variety of subjects, even a customized learning plan for each student**
- **Limiting or eliminating non-public influences on subject selection and content**
- **Relying much more on information technology to widen educational options**
- **Deemphasizing school buildings as settings and increasing the use of alternative settings**
- **Helping teachers direct, coordinate, and guide students' educational progress**
- **Reaching out to external (lay) mentors to supplement formal curriculums**



Notes

Real Public Education

Quick Version

Making public education truly public would mean making it not just “for” the public, but also “of” and “by” the public, too. Public schools could be places where community members come together to forge a common “public” identity. What better place to do that than in an institution that encourages young people to become members of their local, state, and national communities?



What's Behind It

The United States may have invented “public education,” but do people really feel like the schools are *theirs*? To what extent do public schools provide citizens with an opportunity to explore

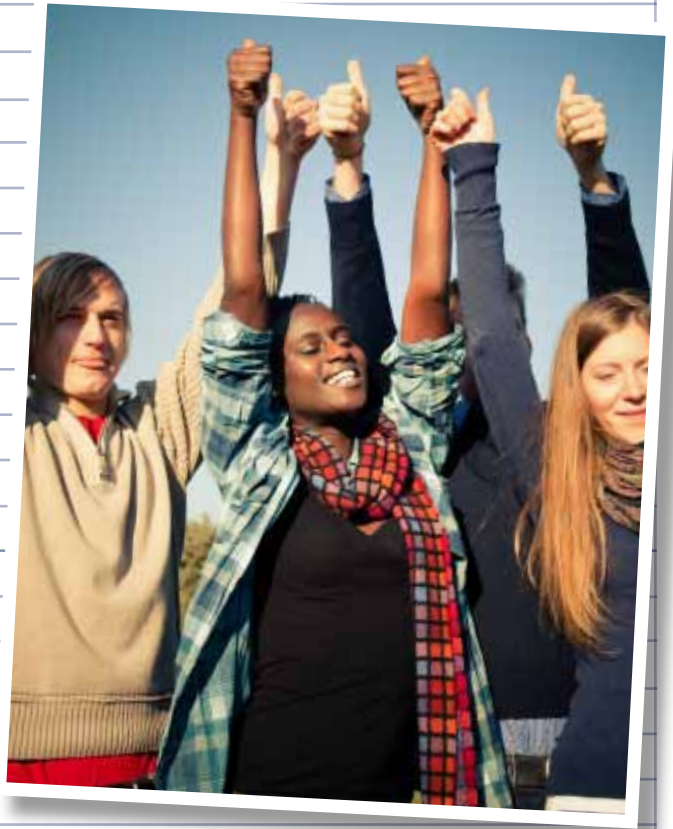
concerns and to solve problems? As for the graduates, don't schools need to equip them with the skills and knowledge to become involved citizens? Schools can be places where the community participates actively in educating its children—and where children participate in the larger community. Citizens wouldn't just “hire” schools, they'd be part of them. And students wouldn't just learn about their community, they'd help contribute to it. Schools would be places where people of all ages practice democracy by discussing and acting on common concerns.



What It Might Do

This possibility promotes significant student involvement in their respective communities through the following:

- **Encouraging young people to develop citizenship knowledge and skills**
 - How government works
 - Teamwork and conflict management
- **Seeking out direct citizen input into organizing and running neighborhood and district schools**
- **Greatly expanding volunteer involvement in schools to promote practical education and career mentoring and guidance**



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