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What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools?

Public education for all children is a foundation stone of this nation's success. But changing times bring changing challenges. We can agree that children should learn basic skills, but what else do they need? What central purpose do we want our schools to serve today?

APPROACH ONE

Prepare Students to Be Successful in the Workplace

There are alarming signs that the United States is losing its competitive edge in a burgeoning global economy. If we are to continue to prosper as a nation, the guiding purpose of our public schools must be to prepare students for an increasingly complex workplace.

APPROACH TWO

Prepare Students to Be Active and Responsible Citizens

Public schools were founded to foster the skills and behaviors citizens need to govern themselves and contribute to the public good. A 40-year decline in civic education has taken its toll on the citizen participation our democracy depends on. Instilling civic values is the most important contribution public schools make to society.

APPROACH THREE

Help Students Discover and Develop Their Talents

A one-size-fits-all model does not serve our children or our society. The mission of public schools should be to help each child make the most of his or her abilities and inclinations. Schools must be able to respond to the variety of ways children learn.



Approaches and Choices—Choice Work and NIF

If you're preparing to moderate an NIF forum, then you've become familiar with the structure of deliberative dialogue that NIF supports. Discussion guides, starter tapes, and deliberative forums focus on approaches, also called "choices" or "options" in NIF material.

And you know that each approach represents a distinctly different way of approaching an issue, with its own set of benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.

This structure undergirds the basic premise of public deliberation—that citizens in a democracy have a responsibility, and need opportunities, to make choices about how they want to live together, how they want to act together, and how they want their government to function.

Sometimes, forum participants find these uses of the word *choice* confusing. Some assume that they are being asked to choose one of the approaches. And, of course, they are not.

Many moderators find it helpful to clarify, at the beginning of the forum, that the work of the forum is to weigh each approach, to "work through" consequences and trade-offs, and to form a shared sense of what's at stake in the issue. They make it clear that, by developing shared directions for public action, forum participants are laying the foundation for making public choices together.

If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator

You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Reading the issue book thoroughly, considering questions that get to the heart of the issue, and thinking through the essence of each approach is the critical part of preparation.

Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Your natural curiosity and your interest in understanding diverse views will be your greatest assets; they're probably what got you here in the first place. So use them to ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each approach, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

No matter the level of experience, most moderators find timekeeping to be a challenge. National Issues Forums examines complicated issues, worthy of deep discussion. Sometimes it's hard to move on to another approach with so much more that could be said. But in order to deliberate—to really make progress on the issue—participants need the opportunity to weigh all the major approaches.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

Between allowing time for participants to lay out their personal concerns about the issue at the beginning of the forum and the demanding work of deliberating in depth on each of the approaches, it's easy to find yourself at the end of the forum with little time left to reflect on what's been said. But, in many ways, this is the most important work the group will do—if they have time to do it. Explain clearly at the outset that it is important to reserve this time, and then enlist the participants' support in working with you to preserve it.

Your Role as a Moderator:

- to provide an overview of the process of deliberation—the rationale for the kind of work the participants are getting ready to do
- to ask questions that probe deeply into what's at stake in the issue and in each choice
- to encourage participants to direct their responses and questions toward one another
- to remain neutral throughout the discussion, while encouraging participants to explore all facets of their own and others' opinions
- to keep track of the time, so participants can move through a discussion of each of the major approaches and into an ending period of reflections

The Role of the Recorder:

- to support deliberation by reminding forum participants of their key concerns, the areas of greatest disagreement, and the benefits and trade-offs their discussion highlighted
- to serve as a written record of the group's work, which might feed into future meetings of the group or additional forums
- to help inform other members of the community about the outcomes of the deliberation
- to capture the tensions, trade-offs, and common ground for action
- to express main ideas in clearly written, brief phrases

Forums or Study Circles—or Both?

Many NIF convenors choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two-and-one-half hours.

Other convenors, however, arrange multiple sessions (study circles) to allow participants greater opportunities to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings; others might devote a separate session to each approach. And still others plan ahead of time for a session after the forum to come back together to consider next steps.

Some communities begin their examination of an issue in a large group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse also can be helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums is about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

Guidelines for National Issues Forums and Study Circles

At the beginning of deliberative discussion, most moderators review these guidelines with participants. (A free poster with these guidelines is available to use in your forum. To request a copy, call 1-800-600-4060.)

The moderator will guide the discussion, yet remain neutral. The moderator will make sure that:

- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- No one or two individuals dominate.
- The discussion will focus on the approaches.
- All the major choices or positions on the issue are considered.
- An atmosphere for discussion and analysis of the alternatives is maintained.
- We listen to each other.

The Importance of the Questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had. And they give an opportunity to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside of the forum. As a means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, and to other citizens.

Nationally, a report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and on the

questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of reports on the outcomes of local forums.

So it is very important that you, as the forum moderator, take a few minutes to gather and return the questionnaires to the National Issues Forums Institute. Please include the Moderator Response sheet on page 12 with your contact information so that follow-up for the national report is possible.

Return the completed questionnaires to:

National Issues Forums Institute
100 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777

Communicating about Your Forums

Another important role of the moderator is to communicate with the NIF network about the forums you are conducting in your community. Please post the dates and locations of your forums by e-mail at forums@nifi.org.

What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools?

Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together with forum participants, you (and they) will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. Many of these questions will arise during the forum, based on responses of the participants to you and to one another. This topic lends itself to storytelling. And while accounts of participants' personal experiences with schools will enrich the discussion, it is important that you keep the deliberation on track with regard to the broader underlying concerns raised by this issue. Moderators often find it helpful to consider ahead of time, the basic, broad questions that need to be addressed in each approach. Here are some possibilities:

A P P R O A C H O N E Prepare Students to Be Successful in the Workplace

- What do you think public schools should be doing differently to prepare students for the world of work?
- Should preschool programs become a public obligation?
- What could be done to close the achievement gap, which leaves many low-income and minority students behind?
- Should we beef up math, science, and computer requirements in order to remain competitive in the global market? What would be the downside?

A P P R O A C H T W O Prepare Students to Be Active and Responsible Citizens

- How do you think today's young graduates view their roles as citizens in a democracy?
- Is it the obligation of our public school system to teach children to become responsible, contributing members of society? Or is that job best left to families?
- Should schools increase formal instruction in government, history, and civics?
- In what ways do you think school-sponsored service-learning programs benefit students? Would their time be better spent in academic pursuits?

A P P R O A C H T H R E E Help Students Discover and Develop Their Talents

- How can we help teachers give more individual attention to all their students?
- Would you support the development of one or more magnet schools in your district? What are the advantages? Is there a downside?
- Should teachers be given more discretion in creating curricula best suited to the students in their classrooms?
- What might be the consequences of dropping grade standards and requirements for graduation that apply to all students?

>> Comparing Approaches

THIS NATION HAS long prided itself on a public school system that successfully educates its children to be productive citizens of a flourishing democracy. And, by many measures, that continues to be the case. But there is increasing evidence that American schools have failed to keep pace in a rapidly changing world.

U.S. students consistently do poorly in comparison with students from other developed countries. In a recent study, U.S. youngsters ranked in the bottom half in math and science and only average in reading.

Large numbers of low-income, minority students are falling behind their white and Asian American peers. Only about one-half of African American, Hispanic, and Native American students graduate from high school on time; only one-fifth of them are ready for college.

Today's students are less likely to graduate from public schools with the knowledge and skills they need to be good citizens. Civics courses have dropped dramatically in recent decades. The result is that only one-quarter of high school seniors perform at a competent level in civics and government on national tests.

These trends do not bode well for our children as individuals or for the future of this nation. But what can be done? What can schools do? Most Americans agree that children should learn reading, writing, and arithmetic as well as computer literacy and critical thinking. But beyond teaching these basic skills, there is little agreement about the central mission of our schools. Should it be to prepare youngsters for jobs in an increasingly global and technological economy? To train them to be responsible citizens in their communities and in their country? To educate each child to make the most of his or her individual potential?

These forums are designed to help you consider different perspectives on these questions and to think together about the advantages, costs, and trade-offs of alternative courses of action. An outline for talking through this issue appears on these pages.

APPROACH ONE

>> Prepare Students to Be Successful in the Workplace

As technological advances increasingly define the tasks in today's offices and factories, and a global marketplace puts pressure on the U.S. economy, good jobs increasingly depend on well-educated workers.

The top priority of our public schools must be to prepare students to succeed in the workplace and maintain a labor force that keeps America economically strong.



Some Likely Actions

- Taxpayers and schools invest in state-of-the-art technology.
- Local and state school boards establish high-quality preschool programs.
- State education agencies set high standards and monitor achievement.
- Parents help students explore different career choices.
- Employers collaborate with schools about workforce needs.

Trade-Offs

- Focusing on employability may narrow the breadth of public school education.
- Setting high standards may result in fewer students getting high school diplomas.

Concerns about This Approach

- Is it realistic to expect schools to prepare students for jobs in an ever-changing workplace where many positions require job-specific training?
- Is there a risk that schools may become agents of corporations, serving the special needs of business rather than of society as a whole?
- Does economic success provide too narrow a vision for public education?

APPROACH TWO

>> Prepare Students to Be Active and Responsible Citizens

The most important goal of public education is to enable students to become responsible, contributing members of society, regardless of the kind of work they do. Now, more than ever, we need to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility for our democracy. Schools must take the lead by emphasizing the development of character, civic knowledge, and service to the community.



Some Likely Actions

- School boards increase formal instruction in government, history, and law.
- Teachers add discussion of current events to their lesson plans.
- Local organizations and businesses partner with schools to develop service-learning opportunities.
- Students participate in student government and community projects.
- Public officials provide opportunities for students to learn how government works.

Trade-Offs

- The resources spent in developing service-learning projects might be better spent on academic pursuits.
- Active discussion of issues sometimes leads to conflict, which teachers and students will need to manage constructively.

Concerns about This Approach

- Is this approach too focused on American culture and institutions given the increasingly global society in which students must be prepared to function?
- How will schools ensure that experiential learning outside the classroom is well supervised and of high quality?
- Is it really the role of schools to instill moral and ethical values?

APPROACH THREE

>> Help Students Discover and Develop Their Talents

The most important goal of public education is to help students develop their individual abilities, not mold them into model workers and citizens. Encouraging students to do what they do best will help them become productive adults and contribute to a robust society.



Some Likely Actions

- Teachers have more leeway in designing curriculums suited to the particular needs of their students.
- Schools reduce class sizes to provide students more individual attention.
- Teachers use individualized education methods with all students.
- Government agencies allocate more resources to magnet schools.
- Community volunteers and parents mentor students.

Trade-Offs

- Diverting public money to magnet schools may undermine the quality of neighborhood schools.
- Expanding the quantity of offerings in a school may undermine academic quality.

Concerns about This Approach

- How do we measure school performance without standards that apply to all schools?
- Does this individualized approach prepare children for the “real world” where they will be expected to “fit in” without special attention?
- Does this approach encroach on the role of families in raising their children?

Suggested Format for an NIF Forum or Study Circle

Welcome

Let participants know who is sponsoring the forum/study circle. Stress the cosponsorship if several organizations are involved.

Ground Rules

MAKE CLEAR THAT THE FORUM IS NOT A DEBATE. Stress that there is work to do and that the work is to move toward making a choice on a public-policy issue. The work will be done through deliberation. Review the paragraph “How Do We Do It?” (See page 11.) The responsibility for doing the work of deliberation belongs to the group. Deliberation is necessary because there are competing approaches to solving the problem.

Starter Video

Explain that the video reviews the problems underlying the issue, then briefly examines three or four public-policy alternatives. In so doing, it sets the stage for deliberation. (Starter videos for each issue book are available from National Issues Forums Institute Publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, OH 45441.)

Personal Stake

Connect the issue to people’s lives and concerns—in the first few minutes—by getting participants to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and to tell their stories. This makes the issue genuine, human rather than abstract. Some questions you might ask include: “Has anyone had a personal experience that illustrates the problems associated with this issue?” “Within your family, or circle of friends, is this an important issue?” “What aspects of the issue are most important to you?” “How does this issue affect people?”

The Forum/Study Circle Deliberation

Consistent with what deliberation is, moderators ask basic types of questions in a forum:

What Is Valuable to Us?

This question gets at why making public choices is so difficult: the approaches turn on things that people care about very deeply, such as being secure or being treated fairly. This question can take many forms:

- How has this issue affected you personally? (Usually asked at the beginning.)
- What things are most valuable to people who support this option?
- What is appealing about this approach?
- What makes this approach a good idea—or a bad one?

What Are the Costs or Consequences Associated with the Various Approaches?

This question can take as long as it prompts people to think about the likely effects of various approaches on what is valuable to them. Examples include:

- What would result from doing what this approach proposes?
- What could be the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
- Can you give an example of what you think would happen?
- Does anyone have a different estimate of costs or consequences?

What Are the Tensions or Conflicts in This Issue That We Have to Work Through?

As a forum progresses, moderators will ask questions that draw out conflicts or tensions that people have to work through. They might ask:

- What do you see as the tensions between the approaches?
- Where are the conflicts that grow out of what we've said about this issue?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?
- What are the “gray areas”?
- What remains unresolved for this group?

Ending a Forum/Study Circle

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect both individually and as a group on what has been accomplished. Questions like the following have been useful:

I. Individual Reflections

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other people's views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

II. Group Reflections

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

What trade-offs are we, or are we not, willing to make to move in a shared direction?

III. Next-Step Reflections

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?

Do we want to meet again?

Questionnaire (Post-Forum)

The questionnaire is a way to face the conflict within ourselves. Often we discover aspects of each choice we hold most valuable. Yet, the things we care deeply about are often in conflict. After the forum, please return the questionnaires and the Moderator Response sheet on page 12.

Suggested Time Line

Stages of a Forum/Study Circle

15% for Opening

Welcome—The convenor or moderator introduces NIF program.

Ground Rules—Participants review desired outcomes of forum.

Starter Video—The starter video sets the tone for the discussion.

Personal Stake—Connect the issue to people's lives and concerns.

65% for Deliberation

Deliberation—Participants examine all the choices.

20% for Ending the Forum/Study Circle

Ending the Forum—Reflect on what has been accomplished.

Questionnaire—Participants complete questionnaire.

NIF Forums and Study Circles

Why Are We Here? What Are We Going to Do?

We are here to move toward a public decision or CHOICE on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

How Do We Do It?

Through a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- Understand the PROS and CONS of each approach, its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- Know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- Get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things people consider to be most valuable in everyday life.
- Weigh carefully the views of others; appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

How Can We Know Whether We Are Making Progress?

By constantly testing your group:

- Can your group make the best case for the approach least favored?
- Can your group identify the negative effects of the approach most favored?

For More Information

To order the *What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools* issue book and starter tape, call 1-800-600-4060, FAX 937-435-7367, or mail to National Issues Forums Institute Publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, OH 45441. Other issue books and tapes may also be ordered from this source.

Moderator guides and forum posters are also available.

For other information and comments, visit the NIFI Web site at www.nifi.org or call NIFI at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: forums@nifi.org.

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Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum.

Moderator's Name _____

Phone _____ Date and location of forum _____

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, age of participants, and number of participants.

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult to the participants?

What common concerns were most apparent?

Were there trade-offs most participants would accept? Describe.

Were there trade-offs most participants would not accept? Describe.

Did the group identify shared directions for action?

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