



May 2008

Preparing Today's Kids for Tomorrow's Jobs

What Should Our Community Do?

A rising chorus of complaints from the nation's employers is a troublesome sign that too many of today's high school graduates are ill prepared for the jobs they seek. What and how should young people be taught to best equip them for tomorrow's workplace and to help strengthen the economy of the communities they live in? What community resources—including but not limited to schools—can be brought to bear on the problem?

APPROACH ONE

A Firm Foundation

Americans' strong work ethic has long been credited for this nation's flourishing economy. In this view, today's emphasis on "me-first" and instant gratification has eroded this sense of responsibility. Our focus should be on teaching basic work skills and character traits that are fundamental to job success at any level.

APPROACH TWO

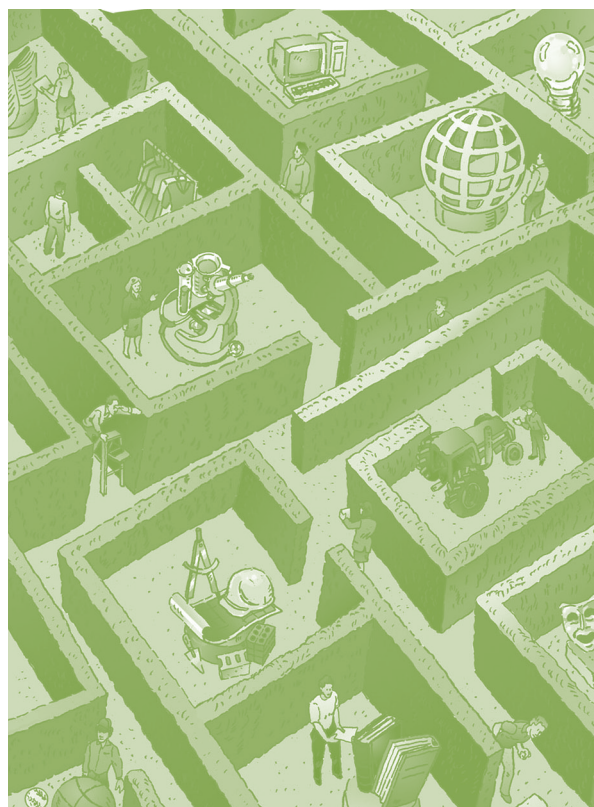
Academic Competition

The United States has been losing ground in an aggressively competitive global economy. Technology, math, and science are the keys to our economic future. If American young people are to hold their own in tomorrow's marketplace, it is critically important to improve the number and rigor of K-12 courses and to create community expectations for excellence in these areas.

APPROACH THREE

The Community First

There is a critical need for qualified workers to fill jobs in the local businesses that are the backbone of a community's economy. In this view, community and educational goals should be created with the needs of the local economy in mind. This will not only benefit graduates and businesses, but will strengthen the community as well.



>> National Issues Forums and Study Guides

Why are we here? What are we going to do?

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

How do we do that?

We do that by engaging in 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 they consider to be the 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.

>> Forums or Study Circles—or Both?

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

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

In some communities, people begin their examination of an issue in a large group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also 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.

>> Stages of a Forum

Welcome

The convenor or moderator introduces the NIF program.

Ground rules

Participants and moderator review desired outcomes and agree on ground rules.

Getting started

One good way to start is for participants to take a few minutes to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. Sometimes the convenor or moderator begins by showing a starter video that reviews the problems underlying the issue.

Deliberation

Participants examine all the choices.

Ending the forum

Participants reflect on what has been achieved.

Questionnaire

Participants complete the questionnaire.

>> If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator:

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

Reading the issue guide 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.

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. Listen to others.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's hard to move on to another approach with so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need the chance to weigh all the major approaches.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

In many ways, this is the most important work the group will do. The moderator will provide reminders that time is passing, but it is up to all the participants to help preserve the time to reflect on what they have said and what they might want to do about it.

>> Beginning a Forum

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. They should agree that:

- everyone is encouraged to participate,
- no one or two individuals should dominate,
- the discussion should focus on the approaches,
- all the major choices should be considered,
- they will maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion, and
- they will listen to each other.

>> Ending a Forum

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect, both individually and as a group, on what has been achieved. Consider the following kinds of questions:

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?

Which trade-offs are we willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Which are we unwilling to make?

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?

Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together you 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 participants to one another. This topic lends itself to storytelling. And while accounts of participants' personal experience will enrich the discussion, it is important that you all share the responsibility for keeping the deliberation on track with regard to the broader underlying concerns raised by this issue. It is 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

- Should character education be a component of the curriculum in your schools?
- What school and community resources could be combined to teach children the creative problem-solving skills needed to develop new approaches, new inventions, and new jobs?
- How much can or should we depend on community groups to help prepare young people for the world of work?
- Will this approach disadvantage young people interested in pursuing highly competitive professional fields?

A P P R O A C H T W O

- How important is it that U.S. students are falling behind those from other developed countries in most academic fields?
- How important is regular testing in keeping schools accountable for tracking student achievement?
- If we beef up math, science, and computer requirements in our schools, what will we have to give up?
- What can our community do to attract the well-qualified teachers we need to teach the technical courses our students will need to compete for good jobs in the global economy?

A P P R O A C H T H R E E

- What effects might the success or failure of local businesses and nearby industries have on the stability of our community?
- What role should the business community play in determining educational outcomes and school curriculums? Are there some pitfalls here?
- Would apprenticeship programs, internships, and other "real world" learning opportunities keep more kids in school?
- How important is it to prepare all students for college and urge them to go if they can?

>> 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 give them a chance to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside the forum. As one 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 the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of the reports they generate on the outcomes of local forums.

Please return completed questionnaires to your moderator or to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>> The Role of the Moderator

- To provide an overview of the deliberation process
- To ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each choice
- To encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- To remain neutral

Another important job for the moderator is to fill out the Moderator Response sheet on Page 7 and return it with the questionnaires to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>> For More Information

To order the *Preparing Today's Kids for Tomorrow's Jobs* issue book and starter tape, call 1-800-600-4060, FAX (937) 435-7367, or mail to National Issues Forums Publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, OH 45441. Other issue books and tapes may also be ordered from this source.

For other information and to make comments, visit the National Issues Forums Institute 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.

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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