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SPEAK UP!

Engaging Policymakers with Educators and Communities in Deliberative Dialogue

Scenario: A Community Deliberates

A young couple in a small Arkansas town hears about shootings at a school not unlike the one their children attend. They decide they will not sit on the sidelines and watch something like that happen to their young children—not without first trying to make a difference. They meet with their district superintendent, whom they know to be interested in building greater public engagement in the schools. The three of them talk about what they see as a growing school safety problem in their community and across the nation. They decide to invite the community to participate in a **deliberative dialogue** about this and other education issues of importance to their town. Together, and with other community leaders, they coordinate a

“community-wide study circles” program.

Nearly 100 members of the community—teachers, parents, students, school administrators, entrepreneurs, retired persons, school board members, and legislators—take part. They meet in small groups at different sites around town—a church, a school, an office building—for four to six weekly, two-hour sessions. Having begun with the issue of school safety,

the coordinators have now created a dialogue program that includes a session on safety but also explores broader issues the community faces, such as community goals for education and supporting a diverse student body. Guided by trained group facilitators and using written discussion materials, participants share their perspectives on what they want children to know and be able to do. In the final session, they begin to address what they as a community can do about these issues.



In many of these school communities, education decision makers are turning to some form of structured dialogue as a civil, inclusive, and meaningful way to engage the public in addressing issues of common interest.

The citizens of this Arkansas town chose to participate in study circles, a particular method of public engagement that offers participants a structured process and resources for deliberating about important community issues, such as public education. Communities such as this one—struggling with a particular issue like student safety, equitable school resources, or student achievement—are turning to deliberative dialogue to work through the challenges.

In other communities, school board members and administrators work to encourage more public involvement in and support of their public schools. They recognize that achieving public support for local school reform and improvement is more likely to happen and be sustained when school and district goals fit with the educational goals of the community. In many of these school communities, education decision makers are turning to some form of structured dialogue as a civil, inclusive, and meaningful way to engage the public in addressing issues of common interest.

Regardless of the impetus, policymakers, educators, or community members who initiate deliberative dialogue on education expect that participants will:

- openly share their diverse perspectives and concerns;
- come to understand the complexities of education issues their community faces; and
- identify solutions to education problems, as well as reasons and ways the community can support and be involved in education.

This edition of *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research* looks at the definition, potential, and issues related to the use of deliberative dialogue to connect policymakers, educators, and the general public. Future articles in the *Insights* series will

examine SEDL's findings about the effects of the study circles model of deliberative dialogue on state education policymaking (see sidebar on page 3 for information on SEDL's work in this area.) For information on how to choose and implement a deliberative dialogue model, contact one of the organizations in the table on page 4.

What Is Deliberative Dialogue?

Advocates of deliberative dialogue build on a long history of engaging the public. Since colonial town meetings in the 1600s, Americans have engaged in various forms of dialogue as a means for individuals to share opinions with each other in a democratic manner.

SEDL uses the term "deliberative dialogue" to refer to a face-to-face method of public interaction in which small groups of diverse individuals exchange and weigh ideas and opinions about a particular issue in which they share an interest. In some methods of deliberative dialogue, such as the study circle, participants begin the discussion from their personal experience with the issue and proceed over time to examine multiple views and perspectives. In the end, whether or not they come to consensus, the group will ideally understand the complexities of the issue and come to an informed opinion about it.

The concept of deliberative dialogue may be better understood by contrasting it with other methods of voicing ideas and opinions:

- **Public opinion research.** Daniel Yankelovich distinguishes deliberation—or what he refers to as coming to “public judgment”—from opinion research, which is usually conducted using polls or surveys with which to quickly assess the

“will of the people.” He argues that public opinion polls measure only the “vagaries of public viewpoint at a moment in time, however vague, confused, ill informed, and clouded with emotion it may be” (National Issues Forums [NIF], N.D., p. 32).

Deliberative dialogue provides a forum in which to assess the “public’s viewpoint once people have had an opportunity to confront an issue seriously and over an extended period of time” (NIF, N.D., p. 32).

- **Public hearings and meetings.**

Local communities are familiar with the concept of public engagement (although perhaps not the best term) when it comes to school board, neighborhood association, and city council meetings that are open to the public. Unlike these community-centered meetings or public hearings, which often attract the same faces and voices from local professional, policy, and advocacy groups, deliberative dialogue *ideally* involves representatives of every major point of view in the community, including those who have been historically underrepresented in public forums. Rather than respond to presentations or proposals by experts and advocates, deliberative dialogue participants engage in a structured exchange of ideas on a social issue of common concern in a safe, neutral setting. Participants do not attend only to be heard or to listen, but to think together with others from their community and examine the multiple perspectives available.

- **Debate.** Deliberative dialogue differs from debate in that dialogue involves two or more sides working collaboratively toward common understanding, rather than two sides opposing each other and attempting to prove each other wrong. In debate, winning is the

SEDL Research on Deliberative Dialogue and Public Policy

In 1993, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) produced an *Insights* policy brief, “Education Activism of Cultural Conservatives,” to help regional audiences better understand the source and nature of opposition from well-organized public groups to various education policies, curricula, and practices. In addition to describing the context for controversy in public education, the policy brief challenged both education agencies and policymakers to build and maintain productive, ongoing relationships with the public (Mutchler, 1993, pp. 17-18). Among strategies offered in the policy brief was the recommendation that readers find ways to “open the dialogue about education policy and practice to all constituents with all points of view, in new and different ways” (p. 15).

SEDL has since been exploring the concept of deliberative dialogue and its application for helping to resolve tensions between education reform efforts and public support for these efforts. “Speak Up! Engaging Policymakers with Educators and Communities In Deliberative Dialogue” discusses the general characteristics of deliberative dialogue and how it might benefit policymakers, educators, and the general public as they seek to improve public education.

Subsequent *Insights* policy briefs in this topic series will address how state policymaker participation in study circles affects the state education policy development process. The series will draw on findings from a research study in which SEDL has been involved. The study is part of the *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools* program that took place from September through November of 1998 in 15 communities in Arkansas and Oklahoma. Working collaboratively, SEDL, the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), Arkansas Friends for Better Schools (with research assistance from the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, University of Arkansas, Little Rock), and the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (with research assistance from the Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma, Norman), developed and implemented study circles on education in the two states.

The primary goals of research by SEDL in *Calling the Roll* have been to: 1) explore how state policymaker participation in study circles affects the education policymaking process, and 2) learn about the process of implementing a statewide program of study circles on education that include state policymakers.

goal, and thus those involved listen to each other with the purpose of finding flaws and countering arguments. They seek to affirm their own points of view and assumptions and defend their position as the best solution. Deliberative dialogue participants, on the other hand, listen to other perspectives in order to understand, find meaning, and reach agreement. With finding common ground as the goal, they attempt to keep an

What Are Some Deliberative Dialogue Models?

For information about a wide variety of public engagement and dialogue models, visit the Civic Practices Network (CPN) Web site (<http://www.cpn.org>). The models listed here are examples that meet the definition of **deliberative dialogue**.

Who to Contact

Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC)
P.O. Box 203
697 Pomfret St.
Pomfret, CT 06258
(860) 928-2616
Fax: (860) 928-3713
E-mail: scrc@neca.com

SCRC, sponsored by the Topsfield Foundation, provides training in coalition building, coordination, and facilitator training, as well as assistance with or copies of discussion materials.

National Issues Forums Institute (NIF)
P.O. Box 75306
Washington, D.C. 20013-5306
(800) 433-7834
<http://www.nifi.org>

NIF, funded by The Kettering Foundation, provides training and materials, and sponsors forums.

Citizens Jury®
Jefferson Center for New Democratic Processes
3100 West Lake Street, Suite 405
Minneapolis, MN 55416
(612) 926-3292
Fax: (612) 926-3199
E-mail: mail@jefferson-center.org
<http://www.jefferson-center.org/>

The Process

Study circles bring together members of a community in small groups of 5-15 individuals who agree to meet several times (usually 4-5 sessions) to work through a social or political issue in a democratic, nonpartisan, and collaborative way. Discussion materials provide a common starting point for the discussion and help participants consider a number of different viewpoints about the issue. Trained facilitators help guide the discussion.

The SCRC model of community-wide study circles involves multiple study circles in a large-scale, broad-based effort across a community. Representatives of community institutions collaborate to involve ordinary citizens from all parts of the community in open discussions about an issue of importance to them. After the conclusion of the study circles, results may be shared with the community, and action ideas may be considered and developed in an “action forum.”

National Issues Forums are locally-sponsored discussion groups that bring people together to talk about important issues. Forums range in format from small study circles which meet for several sessions to large community gatherings modeled on New England town meetings. All forums use nonpartisan issue books designed by NIF to guide dialogues on specific issues and help participants learn about the issue. The structured discussions are led by trained moderators who help participants weigh solutions to problems and the arguments for and against them. The results of the forums are shared with national and local leaders. In addition, citizens who have attended a forum often decide to continue to work together to try to solve problems in their community.

Citizens jury panels consist usually of 18 randomly selected and demographically representative individuals who meet for four or five days to carefully examine an issue of public significance. Jurors hear from a variety of expert witnesses during moderated hearings. They then deliberate together on the issue and present recommendations to the public.

open mind, and reevaluate, weigh, enlarge and possibly change their own points of view. This open-ended process sometimes produces better solutions than any originally considered (Study Circles Resource Center [SCRC], 1996).

Communities that have engaged in deliberative dialogue report anecdotal evidence suggesting that participants developed shared, better informed—although not necessarily consensus—opinions, clearer definitions of persistent problems, more coherent perceptions of the range of solutions and their consequences, and a sense of public priorities (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory [SEDL], 1998).

What Might Deliberative Dialogue Offer to Policymakers, Educators, and the Public?

Scenario Continued: A Community Acts

After the study circles end, participants in the small Arkansas town decide to call on their fellow community members to work with them in bringing to life some of the ideas conceived in the study circles. They convene an “action forum” where they share and discuss the study circle results with their neighbors, and everyone has a chance to sign up for committees to address specific school issues. Among other things, one group commits to work with the school district to find the resources and time to build a fence around the school playground. Some of the parents in the study circles feel strongly that keeping



children in and strangers out of playgrounds plays an important part in their children’s safety. They have learned that resources for such a venture are not available, and so they are willing to find funds and help build the fence themselves.

During the action forum, study circle participants also discuss with attendees some ideas they intend to present formally to the local school board and superintendent, as well as other ideas and special school programs under development by the district. One of these proposals, which had been discussed first by school administrators and then expanded on in the study circles, introduces conflict resolution training in the K-12 schools. Some study circle groups have researched how to approach the school safety issues the town has and have concluded that helping students and adults learn how to stop violence before it starts is the first step.

“**T**o be effective, we need to listen to the patrons of the school district. . . . We are all in this together. I need to know if [the parents and community members] have concerns . . . [we] administrators are not addressing.”

Policymakers are frequently surprised to see that issues raised by some community members in dialogues differ from those the policymakers anticipated.

Education policymakers—administrators, school superintendents, school board members, legislators, and other government officials—must weigh many factors when creating and implementing education policies. Educators face a changing context (e.g., shifting demographics) for tending to their students’ everyday needs. Other community members have their own unique investments in the education of their youth. Deliberative dialogue can allow local community members to express their concerns to policymakers, and in turn help policymakers to better know the communities they serve. It can begin a process of building support for and community involvement in education. And it can help ensure that educators are not alone in the work of educating children. Like the community in the scenario, policymakers, educators, and community members all benefit when they understand each other and share a common vision for what their children need in order to learn well.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY CONCERNS AND NEEDS

Some school leaders will recognize their own sentiments in the words of one local superintendent who agreed to be interviewed by SEDL. Asked why she participated in a community-wide study circle program in Arkansas, she said, “To be effective, we need to listen to the patrons of the school district. . . . We are all in this together. I need to know if [the parents and community members] have concerns I and other administrators are not addressing.”

Policymakers need exposure to diverse perspectives. Some policymakers rely solely on their own instincts to determine the needs and concerns of constituents. Many, however, like the superintendent above, appreciate the chance to sit down

face-to-face with a diverse group of their fellow community members to hear what is on their minds. These policymakers are frequently surprised to see that issues raised by some community members in dialogues differ from those the policymakers anticipated. For example, a school board member making decisions about whether to emphasize job skills over the “basics” in schools may not previously have considered the perspective of a member of the business community who tells her he values literacy in a job applicant above job skills that he can teach his employees himself.

Members of the public welcome opportunities to share openly with each other and their policymakers.

Most members of the public seldom have the opportunity to sit down with policymakers and other community members as equals at a table and talk about their opinions on an issue. Deliberative dialogue participants say that dialogue in small groups, in an informal setting, and for a prolonged period of time allows them to really get to know each other and feel comfortable sharing thoughts with each other. The door is opened for them to share frankly and say, “What can we do about this? How can we do a better job for our young people?” Community participants in deliberative dialogues particularly value the experience as a departure from the usual one-way interaction with policymakers, in which the policymaker addresses the public and presents his or her position on an issue.

When education leaders become aware of public concerns, they can examine and adjust ideas and policies in light of these concerns. As community members see their opinions valued, they may be more receptive to new policies. Deliberative dialogue provides a vehicle for all stakeholders in education to hear what their neighbors are thinking in a civil, constructive atmosphere.

GAINING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

Polls show that most Americans today believe the nation's school system is in trouble (Mathews, 1996). Evidence suggests that public support of public schools has declined. Growing interest for alternatives to public schools, such as independent charter schools and private school vouchers, indicate the public has lost touch with the ideal of public schools as the glue binding a diverse, democratic society (Bradley, 1996). "What appears to be a web of interconnected problems prompts us to say that everyone has to rally round and pull together as a community in order to combat these threats," says David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation. "But that isn't happening with the public schools" (Mathews, 1996, p. 2).

One key to gaining public support of schools is communicating the complexities of education.

Community support is crucial to successful public schools. Taxpayers fund public schools; voters approve bonds and elect officials. Improving election turnouts and increasing the level of respect for and confidence in schools, especially among people who know only what they read from media reports, is essential for successful public schools. To be supportive, parents and community members need to understand the challenges educators face and how school districts are dealing with them.

Paul Houston, Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators, believes educators should improve communications with the public and can do so by "creat[ing] a whole structure within our communities to allow us to get our message to the public more directly" (Houston & Bryant, 1997, p. 758).

Deliberative dialogue can provide this structure and allow both adminis-

trators and teachers to communicate on a level playing field with non-educators. They can educate fellow community members on the basics of funding, state mandates, or limits on time and resources. But they can also listen to community perceptions and try to understand why they differ from educators' realities. Education professionals may find that this openness to community opinion may itself encourage support.

The public might be more likely to support schools and education-related laws and policies when decision makers listen to their concerns and opinions. People need to be able to make their concerns known. When the public is left out of the decision making process, they sometimes assert themselves by blocking efforts that can only thrive with widespread support (Briand, 1995). Mathews suggests that the solution for bringing the public back to public schools is for the mission for education to come from the purposes of the community. "No plan for reform or reorganization should be attempted without looking at its impact on what appears to be a very fragile relationship linking the public and the schools" (Mathews, 1996, p.8).

The *Education Week* (1996) series "Divided We Stand" begins with a story about Olmstead Falls, Ohio, a town which had a tax levy for schools on the ballot in 1994. School administrators and board members chose to listen and dialogue with the town rather than engage in the traditional public relations campaign to solicit support for more money. They held a "state of the schools" meeting and did small group dialogues to hear what was on the community members' minds. By listening to concerns and "gripes" about the district, which may have kept the town from supporting the bond issue, the school board was able to respond to the concerns. The levy passed (Bradley, 1996).

An open, two-way, deliberative dialogue can give communities the tools for getting involved and for understanding the realities educators and students face in schools.

“Children make connections, and they make connections with whomever is involved. If the community is involved, then they’re going to make connections with that community.”

Connecting the public at the local level with its schools and helping people understand the programs and reforms being considered and implemented is the first step to restoring a sense of community around schools. School reforms and efforts are better supported, better understood, and more effective when communities are involved in schools. Those who get involved with resolving the issues the schools face will more likely recognize their role in making schools successful and are also more likely to vote for school-related bond issues (Houston & Bryant, 1997). An open, two-way, deliberative dialogue can give communities the tools for getting involved and for understanding the realities educators and students face in schools.

INVOLVING PARENTS AND COMMUNITY IN THE SCHOOLS

“Children make connections, and they make connections with whomever is involved. If the community is involved, then they’re going to make connections with that community.” Many educators would agree with this statement made by a kindergarten teacher who participated in a study circle program in Oklahoma. Educators and other education experts widely believe in the value of some level of parent and community involvement in education. The community can provide human, physical, and financial resources to help school children. Furthermore, parents are essential in the daily learning process of their children. Dialogue can be a doorway for community involvement in the work of educating children.

Educators need the cooperation of the community to educate.

Deliberative dialogue can help parents and neighbors of school children work with educators to understand and work with the unique, changing situations of their children and youth.

Investigations of the changing face of America’s young people reveals, in particular, an increasingly diverse student population, many of whom come from language and cultural backgrounds not previously represented in some schools (Ashby, Garza, & Rivas, 1998). Furthermore, many children live in difficult personal situations and come to school hungry, tired, or in poor health. If teachers and other school personnel are to make informed decisions regarding the day-to-day teaching and learning environment for all children, they need the information and cooperation other community members can offer. The kindergarten teacher above stressed that her primary concern each day is meeting the needs of the children in the classroom—children who come to school with diverse backgrounds and experiences. After trying to meet their basic needs in addition to their basic education, she welcomes the perspectives of fellow community members familiar with these children and values the opportunity to engage the community in helping meet those needs.

Together, dialogue participants can design creative solutions for education problems. Some education issues persist despite every effort to resolve them. Often neither educators nor policymakers have the professional freedom or detachment to try new approaches to old problems. The research they have read or experiences they have had, although very valuable, may keep them settled into certain ways of thinking, making it difficult for them to conceive of other options and viewpoints. The public can offer a fresh, practical perspective on these persistent problems and concerns in education. Involving the public permits an innovative reconsideration of the issues that policymakers or educators see as “cut and dried” (Briand, 1995).

Combining the thinking of diverse educators, policymakers, and the

public in a structured, facilitated deliberative dialogue has the added potential of generating group ideas that would not arise absent the interaction. People with fresh ideas but limited knowledge about school realities may expand their perspectives by talking with educators and working with these professionals to brainstorm innovations. Conversely, educators may be better able to open their minds and think “outside the box” after hearing other thoughts and ideas. Policymakers may see new ways to overcome policy obstacles. Collectively, participants can build on each other’s ideas and find a common ground among them in the process.

In addition to their support and ideas, non-educators in the community have many tangible resources they can contribute to schools.

Engaging parents and community members in deliberative dialogue about education can serve as an introduction to the schools for those who, for various reasons, have stayed away or have not seen an opportunity to get involved. Some parents’ only contact with the school is in relation to a problem with their child. Others have not set foot in a school since they were students themselves or since their children were very small. An inclusive dialogue program can be effective in engaging people from the community and exposing them to school practices, challenges, and successes. Long after the dialogue has ended, community members can become involved in helping schools by volunteering, contributing to funds and fund raising efforts, participating in extra curricular activities, and working with their own children on schoolwork outside of school.

All willing members of the community need to contribute to the dialogue regarding what and how students should learn. These include taxpayers who fund schools and vote for bonds; policymakers and adminis-



trators who shape education for the community; the business community who will receive students into the workforce; and educators, parents, and students, including home schoolers and private school representatives, who directly engage in the day-to-day work of education. Not only do they each have a valuable stake in what children know and are able to do as a result of education, but they can each play a part in the effectiveness of education policies and practices. The deliberative dialogue process can help establish a supportive environment for discussing education and build collaborative relationships among decision makers, educators, and non-educators.

Implementation Issues to Consider

A well-designed and successfully implemented deliberative dialogue process can help expose community members, educators, and education policymakers to diverse perspectives, and encourage open and thorough dialogue on issues and solutions. A poorly implemented dialogue program may result in something less than an open,

The public can offer a fresh, practical perspective on these persistent problems and concerns in education.

Recruiting a diverse representation of community members, including groups traditionally underrepresented, is essential if an education issue is to be examined from all sides.

inclusive, deliberative dialogue, or may yield unintended consequences. The essential elements of using deliberative dialogue to engage the public in education may introduce factors community leaders should consider before launching such an effort.

- **Dialogue Models**—How a community organizes a deliberative dialogue effort will depend on which model it chooses. That choice, in turn, depends on the community’s needs and capacity. Who will be involved, how much time the community can invest, what kinds of issues they want to address, and what the community hopes to achieve are all important considerations in selecting the most appropriate model.

Most importantly, community members must be ready and willing to come together in dialogue about an issue that affects them. Deliberative dialogue cannot be done **to** a community. The community needs to want to do it and be willing to commit the time and energy to make the program successful. In addition, organizers will need to be careful to remain faithful to the process. Knowing what the essential elements or principles of each model are and ensuring they are respected in the program, will help protect against unproductive or negative results. (See the table on page 4 to learn more about some models and to find help getting started.)

- **Inclusivity**—Deliberative dialogue organizers seek to recruit participants representing the range of racial, ethnic, age, gender, socioeconomic, work, and civic groups present in the community. Recruiting a diverse representation of community members, including minority groups that may traditionally have been underrepresented, is essential if an education issue is to be examined from all sides. Individuals from every sector of the community can offer unique perspectives and creative ideas for

approaching community issues. Their support, assistance, and resources will often be instrumental in carrying out resolutions to problems that affect them. The key to achieving this diversity is involving representatives of every major stakeholder and demographic community group in all stages of the program.

- **Organizing**—For most deliberative dialogue efforts to be effective, a community should have one or two people who will serve as the central coordinator(s) responsible for seeing that things run smoothly. The study circle process used in the Arkansas scenario required coordinators with the time, skills, neutrality, and credibility to be able to reach out to all corners of the community to locate and recruit collaborators, volunteers, resources, meeting sites, facilitators, and participants. The coordinators were then able to lead a team of trusted community leaders and representatives who could gain broad-based local support for the program.

- **Implementation**—Several important steps will take place before the deliberative dialogue begins. They will vary by model, but may include:

- 1) Deciding on or creating the discussion materials that will guide the dialogue. A model like the community-wide study circle process offers the option for the community to frame its own education issue for discussion in a way that will be inviting to a broad representation of the community.
- 2) Finding capable and objective facilitators and ensuring they are trained to carry out their critical role effectively.
- 3) Finding non-threatening, convenient, and comfortable locations for deliberative dialogue groups to meet.
- 4) Arranging training sessions for facilitators.
- 5) Working with media and communi-

ty leaders to publicize the program and recruit participants from all sectors of the community.

6) Timing the deliberative dialogue so that all major voices in the community can be present and be heard.

- **Resources**—In addition to human resources, several of the implementation steps may require financial or material resources. These can be donated or funded by individuals and organizations in the community. Obtaining grant money (e.g., from foundations, government entities) may facilitate implementation of a dialogue program, especially in rural areas with access to fewer businesses or individuals from whom they might get donations.

- **Results**—Although the main purpose of most deliberative dialogue efforts is to achieve mutual understanding of different viewpoints on an issue, they can also lead to action. Some deliberative dialogue models incorporate structures for moving to action or planning next steps. Others leave it up to participants to continue efforts begun in a dialogue. If action is an intended outcome, coordinators may want to set up a process for taking suggestions and ideas arising from the dialogues, creating tasks, and convening community members interested in taking on some of these tasks themselves.

Another intended result may be to influence policy, in which case the program will probably need to include a process for recording and summarizing what is said in the sessions. Coordinators or participants may con-

sider submitting a report to city or state policymakers that describes the deliberative dialogue and lays out specific suggestions participants made. A written summary of the discussions may also be desirable for participants as a personal record of what they discussed and learned, as well as for non-participants who are interested in the issue.

Conclusion

Initiating a deliberative dialogue effort may not be the solution for every community wrestling with an issue. To plan and implement it successfully will require work, time, resources, and especially the willingness and enthusiasm of the people involved. For it to be a uniquely valuable experience, participants will need to explore the topic they discuss at a deeper level than they usually do and with others whose perspectives significantly differ from their own.

Implemented successfully, a deliberative dialogue program on education can help bring educators, policymakers, and members of the general public together with a common goal of ensuring that children receive the best education possible. Deliberative dialogue may be the key to breaking existing adversarial or passive traditions of dealing with difficult education topics. From the dialogue, participants may find themselves developing new relationships and perspectives, and they may approach problem solving with a new enthusiasm and eagerness to get involved with the education of their young people.

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INSIGHTS AT A GLANCE

INSIGHTS

This edition of *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research* looks at deliberative dialogue in the context of connecting policymakers, educators, and the general public.

Deliberative dialogue is:

- the exchange and weighing of ideas and opinions over time about a particular issue or set of issues;
- a face-to-face method of public interaction that takes place within small groups of diverse individuals who share an interest in the issue;
- a process through which the group will ideally come to understand the complexities of an issue or issues and come to an informed opinion about it.

Deliberative dialogue is not:

- **public opinion research** in which polls or surveys are used to quickly assess the “will of the people;”
- **public hearings and meetings** in which active representatives of local professional, policy, and advocacy groups respond to presentations or proposals by experts and advocates;
- **debate** in which two sides oppose each other and attempting to prove each other wrong.

Deliberative dialogue offers policymakers, educators, and the public the potential to:

- understand community concerns

and needs by giving policymakers exposure to diverse perspectives and giving members of the public opportunities to share openly with each other and policymakers;

- **gain public support for education** as a result of communicating the complexities of education and listening to the public’s concerns and opinions;
- **involve parents and the community in the schools** in order to help educators understand the changing situations of the youth, design creative solutions for education problems, and attract community resources to the schools.

A well-designed and successfully implemented deliberative dialogue process requires consideration of several implementation issues:

- choosing the best **dialogue process** for your community,
- ensuring **inclusivity** so that the dialogue is representative of groups in the community,
- identifying one or more people responsible for **organizing** the program,
- addressing **implementation** steps and logistics required for the process the community uses,
- locating **resources** needed for implementation,
- deciding and delivering **intended results**.