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ON EDUCATION POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

## DELIBERATING ABOUT EDUCATION

### A New Policy Tool?

*Research*, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) defined the concept of deliberative dialogue and explored its implications for engaging the general public, educators, and policymakers in civil, inclusive, community-based discussions about schools and education reform. However, in recent years, many of the most contentious

At a time when many Americans believe the public school system “is in trouble” (Matthews, 1996), a handful of communities are dealing with education reform by deliberating among themselves. Across the country—from the small town of Orford, New Hampshire to suburban Ypsilanti, Michigan to the urban neighborhoods of Inglewood, California—small groups of educators, local officials, and community members have managed to unravel knotty issues of school funding, student achievement, and school governance (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1996; Study Circles Resource Center, 1999).

Their tool of choice? A long-standing model for public engagement known as **deliberative dialogue**.

While “deliberative dialogue” is a relatively modern term, its underlying principles—democratic participation, civility, mutual respect and responsibility—are as old as our nation itself. The roots of these principles lie in the public deliberations of the American colonists of Dorchester, Massachusetts, whose town meetings in the 1630s gave rise to the notion of government by a community of people (Kettering Foundation, 1997).

In the last edition of *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and*



... legislators report input from members of their immediate constituency as the most important source of information they use in policy decisionmaking.

**Table**  
**Primary Sources of Information**  
**Legislators Use in Policy Decision Making**

Constituents	36.5%
Experts in the specific policy area	20.2%
Staff analysts or advisors	18.7%
Lobbyists or special interest groups	15.0%
Other sources	9.6%

education policy debates have centered on reforms that are initiated not at the local but rather the state level: school choice, standards-based student assessment, and school funding equity. Indeed, the depth and ardor of public sentiment over these issues have often come as a great surprise to state legislators, governors, and departments of education—suggesting that their traditional means of understanding their constituents and the public at large may be insufficient (Mutchler, 1993). In this edition of *Insights*, SEDL examines the nature of the deliberative dialogue process within the wider, state policy context—exploring its potential as a communications tool among state policymakers and the public.

The first-person accounts presented in this *Insights* were gathered during interviews in early 1998 from eight state policymakers who have engaged in deliberative dialogues with constituents. Seven legislators in Florida, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania and one elected state official in Connecticut had participated in either study circles or National Issues Forums<sup>1</sup> about issues ranging from criminal justice to

tort reform to race relations (Mutchler & Knox, 1998). Analysis of these interviews contributed to the design of a study of impacts of community-wide deliberative dialogue on state education policymaking. That research study, completed by SEDL in 1999, focused specifically on the experiences of Arkansas and Oklahoma state policymakers who participated in community-wide study circles about education in fall 1998 (see page 3).

## HOW DO STATE POLICYMAKERS INTERACT WITH THE PUBLIC?

According to a mail survey of state legislators in Arkansas and Oklahoma (Pan, 1999), legislators report input from members of their immediate constituency as the most important source of information they use in policy decision making (see table above). The 30 legislators responding to the survey indicated they use multiple avenues for staying in touch with the views and needs of constituents; an average of seven different sources of information from the public were reported by each respondent. However, even with numerous information sources at hand for tapping the public mind, more than half of the policymakers (58 percent)

<sup>1</sup> The study circle is a nationally disseminated small-group dialogue process, refined and promoted by the Study Circles Resource Center, Pomfret, Connecticut. A National Issues Forum is a model for structured public discussion developed and promoted by the National Issues Forums Institute, Dayton, Ohio.

# The “Calling the Roll” Program

**C**alling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools is a deliberative dialogue program on education that was implemented in Arkansas and Oklahoma in late 1998. Beginning in the fall of 1997, a collaborative partnership among six organizations initiated, planned, and learned from the program, with each partner assuming a role in one or more key areas of responsibility:

- Southwest Educational Development Laboratory—state policy research, partner communications, materials and product development.
- Study Circles Resource Center—materials development, training and technical assistance, state and local coordination evaluation.
- Arkansas Friends for Better Schools—Arkansas program coordination.
- Center for Research on Teaching and Learning (now Center for Applied Studies in Education), University of Arkansas at Little Rock—participant data analysis, local impact research.
- League of Women Voters of Oklahoma—Oklahoma program coordination.
- Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma at Norman—research assistance.

## THE VISION AND IMPLEMENTATION

The vision for the *Calling the Roll* program was to create an open, non-partisan opportunity for ordinary citizens and their state decisionmakers to engage in deliberative dialogue about education. The collaborative partnership developed a program design, based on the principles and strategies of the community-wide study circle process, which offers an inclusive, thoughtful format for small group discussion. The two coordinating organizations adapted this design for their respective states. Each also had a unique but complementary set of goals for sponsoring the program.

The goals of Arkansas Friends were:

- to increase public involvement in and support for schools,
- to enhance knowledge and understanding of public education, and
- to institutionalize study circles and encourage its use as a method for community problem solving.

The goals of the League of Women Voters were:

- to educate citizens about education;
- to help citizens feel more connected to their community, particularly to their school and other educational opportunities;
- to increase the direct involvement of public officials with constituents; and
- to strengthen communities by introducing deliberative democracy as a framework for solving problems.

In each of the 15 participating communities, volunteer participants met in small groups (typically 8-12 people each) over a 4- to 6-



week period during fall 1998. Some met in schools or university buildings and others in churches or community centers. Assisted by a trained facilitator and written materials, they discussed:

- how schools have affected their lives and community,
- what they want high school graduates to know and be able to do,
- how they view different approaches to ensuring the “best education possible” for the children and youth in their community, and
- what they can do to improve public schools.

Based on state coordinators’ estimates, over 500 citizens attended one or more study circle sessions in each of the two states during the implementation period.

## POLICY RESEARCH

The goal of SEDL’s policy research study of the *Calling the Roll* program was to learn whether deliberative dialogue can be a useful and feasible way for state policymakers to interact with constituents about education policy-relevant issues.

Designed in June of 1998 and continued beyond the 1999 Arkansas and Oklahoma legislative sessions, the research study had two major objectives:

1. To explore how state policymaker participation in study circles affects the education policymaking process.
2. To learn about the process of implementing a statewide program of study circles on education that includes state policymakers.

Twenty-four state policymakers participated in the *Calling the Roll* program and/or SEDL’s research activities associated with the program: eight state Senators, thirteen members of the House of Representatives, and three other state-level decisionmakers. Within the group, experience in state policy ranged from zero (newly elected) to sixteen years, with eight individuals also having professional experience as educators. Twenty legislators attended study circles in either a community they directly represent or a nearby school district.

SEDL used a combination of two complementary research approaches to address its research objectives: an impact study of program effects on state policymakers and a process evaluation of the implementation. The most significant data collection was a set of pre- and post-program interviews conducted with each legislator who attended a study circle. In addition, SEDL conducted a baseline and post-program survey of legislators and observed selected study circles.

Key findings from the research report, to be published in early 2000, will be summarized in an *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research*.

There appears to be a mismatch between what [policymakers] gain . . . and what they want from their communications with the public.

expressed the need for better ways to gain insights into the views of their constituents. This is despite the fact that the majority of respondents indicated the information they obtain from these sources represents diverse viewpoints (93%), is sufficient in quantity (89%), and is reliable and up-to-date (74%).

It is clear that legislators value public input and appreciate existing opportunities to communicate with their constituents, but there appears to be a mismatch between what they **gain**—satisfactory as it seems—and what they **want** from their communications with the public. A brief look at a few of these conventional public opinion gauges provides some insight into this apparent paradox.

Direct constituent contact via **telephone calls, letters, and email** represents one of the most common avenues for information about public views reported by these 30 legislators. However, the perspectives they offer are likely to be skewed to reflect a rather narrow segment of the policymaker's total constituency—those who believe it is possible, important, and productive to communicate with their elected officials.

A similar effect holds true for the use of **human networks**; state policymakers often solicit trusted individuals' reactions to an issue as they seek a sense of the broader public opinion. Although this reaching out for public opinion allows the policymaker to tap additional constituent experiences and ideas, it remains likely that the views of people in their immediate personal and professional circles will not reflect those of the population as a whole.

A third source of direct, individual input from the public is the **hearing, town meeting, or other public forum**. This avenue—although generally representing an open invitation to

larger numbers of people—tends to invite position taking and debate. Further, these traditional public forums can compound the problem of bias if they degenerate into “media soapbox” opportunities for organized interest groups that regularly attend public meetings (National Conference of State Legislatures, 1997).

Finally, many legislators use **public opinion polls**. Well-designed polls and surveys can ensure that a representative section of the public is queried, and the results may provide an excellent snapshot of public opinion at a given point in time. However, these tools do little to capture the extent of respondents' knowledge or investment in an issue. Nor can they assist a policymaker by revealing any willingness on the part of the public to accept the tradeoffs of various policy alternatives (Yankelovich, 1992).

## WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE?

**D**eliberative dialogue is a structured, face-to-face method of public interaction that takes place within small groups over an extended period of time, to ensure that all voices are heard (Guzman, 1999). When people engage in deliberative dialogues in their community, their shared purpose typically is to understand the complexities of an issue of concern and come to an informed opinion about it. To accomplish this, the dialogues are led by trained facilitators who guide participants to exchange and consider, or **deliberate** on, personal experiences, information, and diverse ideas on the issue. Although there are several recognized dialogue methods, each with its own structure and procedures, certain features and techniques



are common across methods (see sidebar this page).

In the end, whether or not individuals in a deliberative dialogue reach a consensus judgement, they leave the dialogue with valuable first-hand knowledge of perspectives and opinions other than their own. As one of the eight policymakers interviewed by SEDL in 1998 observed:

This approach gives [citizens] a chance... to hear other people ... and they frequently find out that there is [a] side to some of these issues other than theirs. Theirs may still be the burning one to them and the most important, but they get a chance to hear another side (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 10).

When contrasted with the usual ways in which state policymakers hear from the public, certain aspects of deliberative dialogue might be of particular interest to those who want more from their communications with constituents.

First, the active engagement of a group of community members in a face-to-face discussion invites the exchange of a broad range of viewpoints. This differs from the many “one-way” means of communication between policymakers and their constituents—public hearings, constituent letters, and media reports—that are prevalent in shaping public policy discussion today (National Conference of State Legislatures, 1997). In a deliberative dialogue, legislators and other state policymakers are not designated as presenters of information, nor must they be the passive recipients of facts and testimony from their constituents. They have an opportunity to simply delve into education issues alongside other individuals whose personal backgrounds

# Features and Techniques Common Across Deliberative Dialogue Processes<sup>2</sup>

Feature	Description
Group member status	Democratic; dialogue participants are regarded equally around the table.
Dialogue environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal—in a circle or other formation suitable to face-to-face interaction.</li> <li>• Facilitated by a moderator trained in the dialogue process.</li> </ul>
Interaction principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducive to honest interaction.</li> <li>• Free of personal attack, disrespect, or coercion.</li> <li>• Invites diverse perspectives.</li> <li>• Suspends reaction and judgment.</li> <li>• Clarifies, tests, and compares personal and cultural opinions and assumptions—one’s own as well as those of others.</li> </ul>
Group norms or “groundrules”	Vary, with typical norms including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give everyone a fair hearing.</li> <li>• Listen carefully to others.</li> <li>• Speak for yourself, not for others.</li> <li>• Avoid name-calling or stereotyping.</li> <li>• Speak your mind freely, but don’t monopolize the conversation.</li> </ul>
Facilitator functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redirect dominant speakers and encourage quiet members to speak.</li> <li>• Summarize main thoughts or ideas that emerge.</li> <li>• Shift focus to invite other topics or points of view to emerge.</li> <li>• Build on ideas presented.</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup>Sources of processes reviewed include Bohm, 1990; Kettering Foundation, n.d.; Schein, 1993; Senge et al, 1994; Study Circles Resource Center, 1996.

... facilitated discussion tended to quell partisan rancor and open participants' minds to alternative views.

and experiences may run the gamut: ... people who were concerned with the [issue], people who worked in the [environment], people who had sons, daughters, husbands, and even grandchildren (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 12).

Comparing deliberative dialogue to the more traditional means of engaging with the public also reveals its potential to yield a more textured sense of public opinion than is typically provided by polls and personal networks. The interactive nature of dialogue seems capable of allowing participants to deliberate on issues in a deeper and more sustained manner. In the words of one policymaker who shared his experiences with SEDL in 1998:

When you hear the public hash it out and you listen to them talk... you can understand and appreciate the public's ability to weather the tradeoffs and to sustain the consequences of some action you might take (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 11).

Finally, consideration of the fundamental difference between deliberation and debate suggests that deliberative dialogue also may have a significant, positive impact on the tenor of public interaction. Several policymakers noted that the facilitated discussions tended to quell partisan rancor and open participants' minds to alternative views. "People are relieved of the pressure of having to agree with each other," one lawmaker said. He elaborated:

It frees people from having to defend their position and enables them to do something that we hardly ever get to do ... listen with the intent of

understanding, not with the expectation of having to refute what's being said (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 12).

Deliberative dialogue seems to fare well in this cursory comparison with the more conventional avenues state policymakers use to gain public input and opinion about education. But why would a state policymaker decide to actually **participate** in deliberative dialogues with members of the public?

As with all people, policymakers must give careful consideration to the specific benefits of incorporating something new into the way they do their work and the feasibility of doing so.

In order to weigh the **benefits** of participating in a deliberative dialogue, a state policymaker might ask, How does this process complement my existing methods of gaining input and opinion from constituents? What does it offer that will be useful to me in making state education policy decisions?

Regarding **feasibility**, a state policymaker might want to be aware of any features of deliberative dialogue that could influence his or her ability or willingness to participate. Important questions here include, What do I need to know about the process in order to decide to participate? How can I be certain the experience will be worthwhile?

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR A STATE POLICYMAKER?

Although deliberative dialogue has been most widely used by communities and local levels of government,

it may have important application for decisionmakers who work on problems at the state level. This may be particularly true for such issues as public education, where state policy frequently sets the direction and provides critical resources for local education reform.

While state policymakers generally are confident in their ability to decipher the will of the public through conventional methods of gathering public opinion, evidence is inconsistent regarding their success. Some studies show that legislators accurately determine major issues of concern in their districts, whereas others find they “often misread the public regarding its preferences for public policy” (Weaver & Geske, 1997, p. 316). Face-to-face, sustained dialogue appears to hold promise as a way state decisionmakers might better accomplish this task.

SEDL’s analysis of the 1998 interviews with state policymakers who had participated in deliberative dialogues identified positive effects in three specific areas. The first is an expected outcome of any good communication tool: **access to new information**. The second—**enhanced relations**—might be expected of this particular kind of communication method due to its personal, interactive nature. The third and last—**increased capacity for sustained communication**—suggests the potential for individual and even community benefits over time.

### Access to new information

Many of the policymakers SEDL interviewed said that the structured, facilitated nature of deliberative dialogue afforded them insights into public viewpoints that are often lost in the “big-picture” tabulations of

polls, surveys, and constituent letters:

...we got to dialogue with different people, got different feelings, got input from really all walks of life (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 12).

Furthermore, after participating, many policymakers found themselves better able to understand what their constituents found valuable or important about a given policy issue. This knowledge of what ‘really matters’ to the public was expressed by one as:

Sometimes it is specific, tangible things that they really care about, or that interest them most, or that they want solutions to the most ... I think it is helping me to understand that better (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 10).

The inclusive nature of the deliberative dialogue process has additional potential to bring policymakers into contact with those constituents who, for various reasons, tend not to use traditional means of communicating with policymakers. As one policymaker said:

[P]eople need to be heard and many people do not have that opportunity very often.... This approach certainly gives them a chance to be heard... (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 12).

### Enhanced relations between policymakers and the public

By fostering an atmosphere where the relative merits and tradeoffs of policy options can be discussed with civility, deliberative dialogue may



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“You begin to break down the barriers between citizens and their public officials . . . You can say, ‘This is something I worked on with citizens.’”

increase public appreciation for the efforts of policymakers themselves who must seek to balance competing interests in the process of making state policy decisions. One legislator described this change as follows:

People have a tendency to say ‘Why did you do that?’ [i.e., ‘Why did you make that decision?’] . . . because they never thought that there is a consequence for . . . doing something or not doing something. [Through the dialogue process] they begin to understand the difficulties of the job [and] what the legislator faces (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 13).

Conversely, at least one lawmaker gained an enhanced perception of the **public’s** capacities after participating in the process. “I was surprised to find that people were more knowledgeable than I had believed,” he said. “They were very ready to listen to legislators, to understand better how the system works” (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 13).

Overall, policymakers believed that face-to-face interaction with the pub-

lic through dialogue resulted in their increased personal credibility with constituents and heightened public confidence in the policy initiatives that come out of the state decision making process. In the words of one legislator, “You begin to break down the barriers between citizens and their public officials” (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 13). In the words of another: . . . they begin to understand the consequences [of policy options] and you begin to find common ground . . . you can say, ‘This is something that I worked on with citizens’ (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 15).

### Increased capacity for sustained communication

Interview results suggested that individuals and even the entire community might reap longer-term benefits through the deliberative dialogue process. Several policymakers were struck by the fact that participants were engaged in considering solutions, rather than passively accepting someone else’s opinion. They perceived





community members who engaged in deliberative dialogue as “committed to there being a workable solution” and ready to share information and experiences so they might work together to devise a solution to a local or state problem (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 15).

While the dialogue program in which one policymaker participated addressed an immediate and specific issue, the spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation engendered by the process endured after that issue was settled. He related the following story:

It was not long after [the dialogue] that we had some race problems in our town, and members of the African American community and the Caucasian community were able to get together. And I think, because of the discussions, they were better able to communicate and understand each other than might ordinarily have been the case (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 16).

Finally, one policymaker advocated the proactive use of deliberative dialogue as a way to galvanize the public into ongoing interaction about issues that affect the entire community, even though he cautioned against expectations of its effectiveness as a short-term problem-solving tool. “I would not want to fool legislators into thinking that there will be some immediate gain,” he admitted, but then went on to conclude:

There will be some gains that they [will] see in the short term, but it’s the long-term advantage—the long-term benefit it brings to the political process (Mutchler & Knox, 1998, p. 14).

## IS IT FEASIBLE FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS TO PARTICIPATE?

This second consideration—feasibility—is equally important to state policymakers interested in gaining public input and opinion through deliberative dialogue. Face-to-face, sustained dialogues with community members may be an unfamiliar experience to most—particularly when these interactions are designed to elicit honest yet civil expressions of experience and opinion about schools and the state of public education.

The prospect of participating in such a new and different exchange with constituents can raise special concerns for state policymakers, ranging from questions about the deliberative dialogue process itself to its intended impact. The answers to these questions will directly influence their perception of how worthwhile the experience will be—and thus determine their willingness to participate.

When the 30 Arkansas and Oklahoma legislators who responded to SEDL’s mail survey in 1998 were asked to suggest ways to encourage legislator participation in community-wide study circles on education, their answers flagged three factors in particular that might represent feasibility issues for state policymakers.

**Incentive.** Legislators and other state policymakers must weigh the many invitations they receive to participate in community and organizational events. They are likely to look for information in the invitation that tells them how participating might help meet their goals as state decisionmakers. A number of the legislators surveyed said that, for them,

“There will be some gains [policymakers will] see in the short term, but it’s the long-term advantage—the long-term benefit it brings to the political process.”

[Policymakers] may find that deliberative dialogue is an important and feasible addition to their tried and true methods of interacting with members of the public.

encouragement to participate is simply a matter of “just ask,” but others indicated there may be special needs for information in that invitation if state policymakers are likely to decide to participate.

One suggested that constituents deliver a personal invitation to the policymaker: “have local parents ... [or] ... local schools ask them.” In addition, one legislator responding to the survey said, “Guarantee broad community involvement and the legislators will want to be there.” Still another indicated a need for information on “[dialogue group] make-up and context of meetings.”

**Time.** A major feasibility issue is likely to be the time commitment required for participation—particularly the scheduling of dialogue sessions during the day and week. State policymakers are already burdened by competing obligations due to their multiple roles as private citizens, employees, and public servants. Other respondents raised the need for program implementers to avoid election years and the months during legislative session, which could indicate either a time concern or a desire to avoid politicization of the process.

**Political safety.** State policymakers may be sensitive to the context for public dialogue and want to be confident their participation will take place in a “protected” environment. One of the survey respondents insisted there needs to be an assurance that the dialogues “would not be, or devolve into, some ... attempt to force a narrow view upon the community.” As there is always the possibility that an individual participant will attempt to disrupt the deliberative process or attack the political views of other group members, a policymaker will want to

know about the ability of program organizers and discussion facilitators to manage the process as it is designed.

## CONCLUSIONS

Deliberative dialogue appears to have the potential to complement state policymakers’ traditional means of communicating with and representing the public. As they work to resolve education problems shared by communities across their state, legislators and other policymakers might find that dialogue offers them important benefits, such as:

1. Access to new information that represents:
  - a broader, more representative sampling of constituent opinion; and
  - potentially better quality input due to the special features of deliberative dialogue.
2. Enhanced relations with the public, as both policymaker and constituent come to have better understanding of each other’s knowledge, experience, and point of view.
3. Increased capacity for sustained communication with constituent communities as they work on persistent education problems.

On the other hand, deliberative dialogue also appears to present feasibility issues for state decisionmakers. Each policymaker on his or her own will need to explore and weigh such factors as the likely benefits of the particular dialogue to which he or she has been invited, personal and professional time constraints, and sense of political safety.

If they carry a realistic set of expectations into their deliberations with constituents, state policymakers might expect to emerge with a more complete and valuable understanding of the public's beliefs, goals, and expectations for public education. Ultimately, they may find that deliberative dialogue is an important and feasible addition to their tried and true methods of interacting with members of the public.

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# INSIGHTS AT A GLANCE

## INSIGHTS

This edition of *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research* examines the potential of deliberative dialogue as a way for state decisionmakers to gather information from the public for setting education policy. Research indicates legislators and other state policymakers value the public input they presently receive, yet many say they need better ways to gain insights into the views of their constituents.

**Policymakers traditionally gain information from the public through:**

- telephone calls, letters, and email;
- human networks;
- hearings, town meetings, and other public forums; and
- public opinion polls.

**Deliberative dialogue differs from these conventional ways policymakers interact with the public in that it tends to elicit:**

- the exchange of a broad range of viewpoints, which is not possible via one-way avenues for public input;
- a better sense of the context and complexity of constituent opinion; and
- a willingness among people to listen to and understand other perspectives with an open mind.

**Direct participation in deliberative dialogue may benefit state policymakers by:**

- providing access to new information from the constituent perspective,
- enhancing relations with the public, and
- increasing the capacity for sustained communication with members of the communities they represent.

**Feasibility issues for policymakers who want to directly participate in dialogues include such considerations as:**

- incentive to participate (source and delivery of the invitation, and availability of information about what to expect);
- competition for time (dialogue schedule, duration, and proximity to other planned political events); and
- political safety (knowledge about the dialogue process and how it will be carried out).

**On balance, state policymakers may find participation in deliberative dialogue to be a useful and feasible addition to their present methods of gaining input from the public on how to improve and support education.**