HARD TALK
Connecting Education with Our Community
Taking a Fresh Look at Education and Our Community

Today, many communities are seeking new ways to talk about education. More and more citizens say they are frustrated by a lack of progress and action stemming from current discussions that attempt to address education concerns and needs.

All too often these discussions have been divisive, with citizens pointing fingers at each other trying to place blame for their education problems. These discussions turn into narrowly focused debates on class size, length of the school year, teachers’ salaries, and other specific concerns that relate to schools and not necessarily to education. “Solution wars” then emerge over the best strategy for action and citizens never move beyond these apparent solutions to discuss the larger, underlying issues. And in many communities, discussions on education become dominated by a handful of citizens, often labeled as experts, leaving little room for a larger public discussion even though education is tied to how a community works and to what its citizens value.

The purpose of Hard Talk is to help citizens break out of the old ways of talking about education and take the first steps toward developing a new approach. It is not intended to force through a strategy for addressing educational problems in a community. Rather, it encourages citizens to talk about education and their community in a way that enables them to take a step back to identify what it is they really seek.

Hard Talk enables citizens to look beneath their current debate to explore how education relates to what they want for the community. In making these connections between education and their community, citizens are better prepared to refocus their discussions on education.

HARD TALK helps participants make these connections through a series of questions. The booklet is divided into four steps, each focusing on questions that will help citizens look at community and education in new ways. At the end of each of these steps, you will have created “products” — written proof of the accomplishments of the discussion. The moderator will record your comments on a flipchart.
1. **What do we want for our community?** Before talking about education, explore what kind of community you want with the object of developing a *public agenda*.

2. **Where does education fit into our public agenda?** Consider the connections between what you want for your community and what you want education to be. By viewing education in terms of larger community goals you are challenged to redefine the way you think and talk about education. You now add educational goals to your *public agenda*.

3. **What human capacities can we marshal to help us create the kind of community we want?** Help participants recognize that, as individuals, they have a role to play in creating the conditions they want in their community. A goal of this section is to develop a list of capacities that each of you can call forth to build a better community — namely, a *community capacity inventory*.

4. **Who do we need to work with to get the job done?** Think about people who are not at the table: Who else should be involved in defining community and education goals? Developing a roster of individuals and groups that should be pulled into future discussions on this issue — a *community roster*.

Once your group has completed Hard Talk, you may find you want to keep your discussion moving forward. You may want to consider holding a series of Hard Talk meetings to broaden your *public agenda*, this time, perhaps, making an effort to include citizens and groups identified on the *community roster*. 
Starting Points for Participants

- This process is aptly named Hard Talk, which accurately describes the difficult and challenging nature of many of the questions included in this booklet. You will be challenged to think and talk about education in a new way, which requires patience and the efforts of all participants. The discussion is led by a trained moderator.

- While the HARD TALK booklet contains only a limited number of questions, the discussion the questions prompt may require some time. This is especially true in Steps One and Two, where more analysis and "working through" is required. It is not uncommon for participants to take four to five hours to complete their discussion on the entire booklet. For this reason, you may want to spread the discussion over two sessions.

- At the end of each session, you will leave with a "product" — the conclusions you came to through the course of the discussion.

- Hard Talk is a general discussion on education and the community; the discussion will not result in the development of a strategy or plan to address education problems. That is not the purpose of this experience.

- During each of the steps, you will find that you may often be revising what was said previously, or making additions to your lists. This process is one of constant revision; nothing you say will be engraved in stone. Rather, there will be numerous opportunities throughout the discussion to change your mind or add new thoughts to the discussion.
Working toward a Public Agenda

While many communities have plans for how they intend to move forward to tackle their challenges, few seem to have an overall view of what the public's agenda really is. Thus, before citizens discuss what they want for education, it is first necessary to gain a sense of what they want for their community.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you value most in your community? Why is it important?

2. What conditions must prevail in order to achieve what you want?

PRODUCT

The answers to these questions will serve as a starting point for a public agenda for your community — a list of those things that you want for your community. You should refer to them in the discussions that follow.
Making Connections between Education and the Community

Now that you have talked about what you want for your community, it is time to consider how this relates to education. The challenge is for you to make connections between what it is you want for your community and what you want for education. In effect, you will be redirecting the debate on education so that it reflects your public agenda for the community.

QUESTIONS

1. Given your public agenda, what do you want education in your community to be?

2. Now, recall and list some of the education solutions that have previously been put forward. What are they really trying to achieve?

3. Compare these ends to the values listed on our public agenda, and reflect on the similarities and differences between the two lists. Do you want to make some additional entries to your public agenda?

PRODUCT

The answers to the last question will likely result in an enlarged public agenda.
Uncovering Capacities

Communities can identify their more formal resources — schools, government agencies, public officials — but they are often unaware of the individual capacities citizens can bring to the table. This section is about uncovering these capacities to help individuals see roles for themselves in creating the community they want.

QUESTIONS

1. Teachers, principals, and public officials can help realize the goals on your *public agenda*. Who else can play a role in bringing about desired ends?

2. What can I do personally to build a better community? What experiences and capacities do I have that can be brought to bear on this goal?

3. What new kinds of things would I be willing and able to undertake?

PRODUCT

Responses to these questions will lead to a list of capabilities that individual citizens can call upon to bring about the conditions we want in our community to create a *community capacities inventory*. 
Identifying Others Who Can Help Us Get the Job Done

In this last step you should begin to consider who in the community you may need to work with you, in order to move ahead on your agenda. You should include in your considerations, people you do not customarily work with or those who always seem to be missing from these kinds of discussions. You should think, too, about people who hold different or opposing views from those expressed in your group.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is missing from the room who will be needed in order to begin work on your public agenda?

2. Who could be the “tough customers” in the community — those who appear disinterested or hold opposing views — those you need to work with?

3. Why are they not in the room? How can we get them here?

PRODUCT

We have created a community roster of individuals and groups with whom we may need to work, in order to reach our public agenda.
Reflecting on Our Hard Talk

Let's review the work that we have done in each of the four steps of Hard Talk. In summary, how did we answer the following questions:

- What do we want for our community?

- How does what we want for education relate to what we want for our community?

- What sorts of things can I do as an individual to create the kind of community we want?

- Who do we need to work with so that we can move forward on our public agenda?

- Through this discussion, what did we learn about ourselves?

- How will we now talk differently about education?