

Community conversations about education

Building an informed citizenry working on behalf of education in Connecticut by DAVID NEE

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund opened its doors in 1993 with a focus on education in the state of Connecticut. One of our very first grants—\$200,000 to the nonprofit research organization Public Agenda to survey the attitudes of parents, educators and community leaders and help us learn more about education issues—continues to influence much of our grantmaking and how we think about solutions to difficult public problems facing young children.

The results from Public Agenda's survey were counterintuitive. In our state, we often talk about the “two Connecticuts” to explain the deep splits between urban and suburban, between black and white, between affluent and poor. The research revealed, however, that there was no great difference among Latino, African-American and white parents. They all wanted the same things for their children, and they all led their list of education priorities with safety first. The great divide in Connecticut at the time was not between minority and white parents, it was between educators—who were focused on lack of public support and funding—and the general public—who were focused on school safety, the basics and discipline.

The report based on the survey, *The Broken Contract*, received national attention and many saw that the gap it identified was not just a Connecticut problem. Somehow, public dialogue had evaporated in the field of education, and along with it had gone, in some measure, the public's trust in one of the country's most fundamental institutions. The more interesting question for the Memorial Fund became what to do about it.

Our initial step was to convene—in partnership with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and Public Agenda—six forums in three days to encourage community discussions about these different education priorities. At the end, we were excited but also exhausted: We realized a “retail” approach to dialogue was not going to work. Instead, we needed a more “wholesale” approach to supporting community dialogue, and we invited the League of Women Voters in Connecticut to help us create a more replicable model.

From these efforts emerged the *Community Conversations about Education* project. *Conversations* provides communities with modules and assistance to plan and hold a different kind of civic dialogue—one that seeks to build an

engaged, informed citizenry working on behalf of education. As of June 2008, the project has grown to touch 93 communities in Connecticut, more than half of the state's 169 towns and cities.

What communities choose to talk about varies, but the goals for the discussions are the same:

- Give participants an opportunity to speak openly about critical education issues.
- Bring together diverse groups to share thoughts and opinions.
- Help participants find common ground.
- Identify insights that generate new actions to tackle tough local issues.
- Build a community's capacity to have these sorts of discussions for other purposes.

For example, in Bridgeport, a city with a fairly high degree of poverty, the dialogue resulted in the local schools creating more specific academic standards for each grade level and then communicating these to every parent who had a child enrolled in school. Now other community groups have adopted the *Conversations* model, including for a regional conversation on violence and public safety.

In Putnam—a very small community that yielded one of the largest gatherings—outcomes included opening schools to seniors and others so that they could walk in the wintertime and the formation of a team of volunteer high school seniors who offer free, basic computer instruction to all residents. These modest new programs benefit both Putnam's elders and its children but also have created stronger intergenerational commitment to local schools.

In Stonington, the discussion focused on a dire lack of child care options. In response, a regional early-childhood program provider was persuaded to open a new branch, Head Start agreed to fund and train parents to run new home-based programs, and a nearby business approved a private program. The result from all these efforts was increased capacity for 100 children.

These outcomes didn't happen by accident; *Conversations* are meticulously planned events. Communities submit a two-page application for up to \$2,500 in grants and technical assistance. Selected communities learn how to undertake special outreach efforts to segments of the community that are not often well-represented at

the usual decision-making tables (what we call “rounding up the unusual suspects”). Another critical piece is careful training of local moderators and recorders, especially helping them learn to maintain neutrality and diffuse hot situations.

Over time, *Community Conversations* has remained a key initiative of the Memorial Fund but also has been integrated into our other grantmaking. For example, our current work to improve early school success of children from birth to age eight—called the Discovery Initiative—operates in 54 Connecticut communities. These communities are given special consideration for *Conversations* grants, and many use the process to develop more broadly supported agendas for young children.

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The Memorial Fund believes it takes the involvement of the broadest spectrum of parents and other community members to improve educational outcomes. By bringing new voices to the table, making people more aware of the opportunity to connect, and broadening the perception of what education is and how people can support it, we think *Community Conversations* is improving the decisions made in Connecticut regarding early childhood and K-12 education. ■



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