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CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ON EDUCATION IN CONNECTICUT

A REPORT ON THE CONNECTICUT COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS PROJECT

UPDATED VERSION

2005

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About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization dedicated to nonpartisan public policy research. Founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich, the social scientist and author, Public Agenda is well respected for its influential public opinion polls and balanced citizen education materials. Its mission is to inform leaders about the public's views and to educate citizens about government policy.

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A note to readers:
We have made a few slight changes to the original report released in 2004, such as reformatting for greater ease of reading, as well as updating data on the number and location of community conversations which have taken place.

I. Introduction

Educators and citizens eager for school reform can ill afford a breakdown in communication and cooperation. A telling example is the story of "Outcomes-Based Education" (OBE), which inspired school improvement efforts in many parts of the nation in the early 1990s based on the straightforward notion that reform should be judged by results, or "outcomes." Despite public opinion research showing that most citizens agreed with this concept, OBE turned into a political football and ultimately disappeared. Instead of focusing on demonstrating that kids learned their basic school work—what the public wanted—some reformers began applying the concept to controversial values lessons, which drew culture warriors of every persuasion to the topic. As a result, the debate became increasingly symbol-laden and confusing, which was not helped in the least by the tone-deaf manner in which reform experts and professional educators explained OBE to parents and taxpayers.

The OBE example—and many others that could be marshaled from the history of school reform—shows that it simply makes good sense to pay attention to the relationship between educators and the public. Doing so can build common ground and a shared sense of ownership and responsibility for new initiatives. It can also create a coordinated effort among educators, parents and the broader community that amplifies the effects of reform and sustains it through inevitable bumps in the road.

The question, then, is less about whether to engage parents and citizens but rather how to do so most effectively. In the early 90s, this line of thinking was on the mind of David Nee, Executive Director at the Graustein Memorial Fund, a New Haven-based foundation dedicated to improving the lives of Connecticut's children. "I wanted to…find out what was on the minds of Connecticut citizens as far as education was concerned. I was especially interested in the opinions of people of color," Mr. Nee said. "With Public Agenda, we did survey research and focus groups [in 1994] to find out where people [in Connecticut] are on education."[1]

Of course, many policymakers have come to understand the usefulness of getting a read on public views prior to initiating new programs. What is more unusual and noteworthy is how Graustein responded to the results. As Mr. Nee explained:

> The interesting thing…was that the gulf was not between city and suburb, or classes, but between educators and all others. Parents [of all backgrounds] all sounded the same in terms of their aspirations and frustrations with the school systems. That was pretty rich. That survey became a national story.

> The challenge was, having discovered the problem, what are you going to do about it?...People really understood this was a powerful disconnect and really needed attention. Out of this came the glimmerings of Connecticut Community Conversations. [2]

Graustein decided to try to put in place a process that would, according to Mr. Nee, "change the conversation about education in Connecticut." This meant real dialogue between educators and the public, not finger-pointing or traditional, formal public hearings.

> You want to be respectful of the system, and build capacity on the community side to have that conversation. I've seen pretty amazing scenes…superintendents who want to talk about education policy and people want to know if they got three bids for the Xerox machine… So I think there's wariness among superintendents about public dialogue because they've seen it all too often become pro forma or the gong show, and they didn't want either.

Around the same time, Public Agenda was working nationally in partnership with the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) to develop a set of strategies and materials that would facilitate just such fresh conversations. Thus, it was not surprising that, in 1997, Graustein asked Public Agenda and IEL to help apply this new expertise to Connecticut, in partnership with the state's League of Women Voters. This case study describes and discusses the work that ensued.

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II. Public Agenda's Model of Public Engagement
And Its Application in Connecticut

Public Agenda's approach to community dialogue and engagement involves a half-dozen key principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings. They are:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of citizen participants
- Small, diverse dialogue groups
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives
- Trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders
- Forum follow-up[3]

Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers

Public Agenda, by itself, does not come to communities to convene public dialogue. After all, why would local citizens attend? How could the results be integrated into the life of the community if it had no local roots?

Instead, Public Agenda works with local organizations and leaders to support their efforts to improve collaboration within their community. Typically one or two key local players act as catalysts, with Public Agenda helping them throughout the process. The first order of business is to create a nonpartisan/multi-partisan coalition to sponsor, organize and act on the public engagement process.

In Connecticut, Graustein recruited the League of Women Voters (LWV or the League) to act as statewide coordinator for the project, to be assisted by Public Agenda and the Institute for Educational Leadership.

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Why did the League sign on? As the two statewide coordinators explained (in a joint email), the project helped the League fulfill its mission of promoting honest debate and political engagement, and they felt that if it worked, it would fill a real need for Connecticut's citizens.

> We recognized that Connecticut is hungry for community conversations. They don't really enjoy fighting about school issues. We know that we are meeting a need.
>
> *Nancy Polk and Sonja Ahuja*
> *Connecticut League of Women Voters*

The League, Public Agenda and IEL kicked off the project by inviting hundreds of organizations (school districts, parent groups, community-based organizations, etc.) across the state to participate. Initially, eight local sponsors were chosen, covering 17 towns. By design, they were to work as a network to build statewide capacity for civic dialogues on the range of issues facing Connecticut's schools. Each site received a modest stipend to offset organizing expenses ($2,000 for single community sites and $3,000 for regional sites). And they received technical assistance from Public Agenda and IEL (organizational consulting, moderator training, discussion-starter materials, etc.), as well as support from the League, Graustein and the new network of other sites involved in the project.

Diverse cross-section of citizen participants

The Public Agenda model emphasizes that public engagement must involve more than "the usual suspects"—that colorful cast of characters that inevitably shows up to any public meeting on its pet topic, prepared remarks in hand. Indeed, in the original R&D work by Public Agenda and IEL when developing the model, participants were asked what aspect of the experience they found most rewarding and useful. Most frequently, the answer was— and this is heartening to those who value democracy, pluralism and diversity—"talking to people I don't usually talk to" or "talking to different kinds of people."

Thus a major task confronting local organizers was to recruit a cross-section of the community to participate in the dialogue, including those who would not typically attend public meetings. As those who have toiled in the field of community organizing know, this is a labor-intensive process that relies on multiple strategies, with the most important being

one-to-one outreach. Given sufficient time, motivation and the right set of strategies, it can be achieved.

Small, diverse dialogue groups

Large halls with hundreds of people elicit speechmaking, not the honest give-and-take and self-reflection of quality dialogue. The latter requires small groups, and that's where the real work takes place in the forums.

While there is plenty of room to improvise on the exact size, form and timeline, the typical forum design involves between 60 and 120 participants and follows an evening schedule roughly along these lines:

5:30-6:30	Registration and dinner
6:30-7:00	Welcoming remarks
7:00-9:00	Dialogue in small diverse groups
9:00-9:30	Small group reports and final remarks

This was the design of most of the Connecticut sites, although over time there have been variations. Whatever the precise structural design, the results of these sessions are always organized around the following themes. These results are then followed up on in a wide variety of ways:

- Areas of common ground (a platform for common action)
- Areas of disagreement (where more dialogue may be needed)
- Questions and concerns raised by the discussion (including information people need to move ahead in their thinking and actions)
- Ideas for action and collaboration (less a specific action plan than a prioritized set of ideas that most agree ought to be seriously explored)
- Next steps (by individual participants and dialogue organizers)

Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives

Conveners can structure community conversations in a variety of ways by providing different kinds of materials to help inform and focus the deliberations. Each will have different effects, so the first question is, what impact do we wish to have?

In developing its approach and materials, Public Agenda set out to do everything possible to (a) make the discussion accessible and engaging for average citizens, and (b) ensure that regular citizens can participate effectively in discussions where some people are bound to have a great deal more experience and expertise than others. Our approach drew heavily on Dan Yankelovich's seminal work on how citizens progress from knee-jerk reaction to "public judgment" (solidly held views that emerge only after people have had opportunities to reflect on what is most important to them and what, practically speaking, they think makes the most sense).

Drawing on decades of hands-on study of public opinion formation, Yankelovich stresses the usefulness of presenting citizens with a variety of *choices* to weigh against each other as a means to help them learn about an issue, sort out their views, work through their resistances to making tough decisions, and move toward public judgment. As he explains:

> Choices are so necessary to working through [toward public judgment] that in many contexts the process does not begin until the choices become real... [As an example], parents…want the schools to do everything: teach the basics, prepare young people for jobs, help them be good citizens, impart moral values to them, introduce them to the arts, make them good drivers, teach them to be computer literate, engage them in sports, and help them cope with emotional difficulties. Our schools are in crisis today partly because people have refused to work through the hard choices.[4]

When the Connecticut Community Conversations project began, Public Agenda already had six videos designed to start discussions on the following education topics: Purposes of Education, Standards and Expectations, School Funding, School Choice, Teaching Methods, and Parent Involvement. Each presented various choices for viewers to consider,

and each had been tested in a wide variety of settings. Since then the number of videos has doubled.[5]

In Connecticut, each site began its work with a community conversation on an education topic selected from this menu of prepared materials and then followed up according to their initial results. Two sites began their initiatives by focusing on Parental Involvement; one selected Purposes of Education, and the rest chose Academic Standards, which, as in much of the rest of the nation, had become a hot topic across Connecticut.

Trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders

Skilled, fair-minded moderators help discussion groups deepen their dialogues and stay on track. Well-prepared recorders capture the group's deliberations to enable effective follow-up. Public Agenda trains local volunteer moderators and recorders to use both the discussion model and the materials so that a community can build capacity for future dialogue.

Public Agenda provided the first rounds of training for the Connecticut Community Conversations project. Eventually, Graustein decided to bring the capacity to train in-state, and Public Agenda conducted "train-the-trainer" sessions with League staff, which has effectively managed the state's training needs ever since.

Forum follow-up

Changing, and presumably improving, the conversation is one thing. But what is the connection between good dialogue and better results for our kids, schools and communities?

Some practitioners of dialogue believe that it should not be used as a problem-solving exercise because doing so exacerbates power dynamics and the immediate stakes of the conversation, making an honest, insightful, self-reflective exchange of values and ideas more difficult. Other more action-oriented and pragmatic types believe words without action are meaningless, and tend to view a detailed action-plan as a sign of a successful meeting.

Public Agenda has staked out a middle-ground on this question. We suggest that community dialogue is best used to promote mutual understanding and communication about a shared problem and to identify general ideas and directions for solutions. Thus the dialogue builds a solid foundation for action, but detailed action-planning is best handled in a follow-up stage. As noted earlier, the dialogues described here are designed to help people identify areas of common ground, disagreement, questions/concerns, and high-priority ideas for action and collaboration. Such insights form a strong basis for concrete action, planning for which should, and usually does, follow each forum. But if a dialogue begins with the admonition, "We are not leaving this room without a concrete action plan that maps out every one of our responsibilities," it can indeed stifle the thoughtful and honest exchange of perspectives and ideas.

In practice, this means that community sponsors and organizers are coached to think early on about how to create the conditions for effective follow-up to their forums. At the very least, they are advised to:

- Provide a summary report to all participants
- Report results to decision-makers, and when possible, convey decision-maker response(s) back to participants
- Disseminate the results in other ways, such as online and through media channels
- Suggest or help create ways that participants who are inspired can stay involved, such as joining organizations dedicated to some aspect of the topic at hand, helping with future forums, or joining task forces to plan and promote specific policies or new initiatives

In Connecticut, some communities have, naturally enough, been more successful than others in following up on their forums. The next section describes how nine of them have applied this model, as well as some of their more interesting outcomes.

III. Community Conversations as Seen Through Nine Sites

What began as a pilot in 1997 in eight sites has grown to involve more than 75 communities and more than 5,000 people across Connecticut—and it's still growing. This section gives a fuller sense of how these forums have taken place and examines some of the effects they have had by, primarily, drawing on the reflections of organizers in nine diverse sites. [6]

Wide range of communities and issues

Community Conversations have been held in just about every kind of district Connecticut has to offer, from urban Hartford to suburban Greenwich to rural Colebrook. Many towns or regions have held one or two forums, several as many as five or six, and one (Bridgeport) is approaching 30.

Figure 1: Participating Community Conversations Sites as of 2003

Source: www.ctcommunityconversations.org

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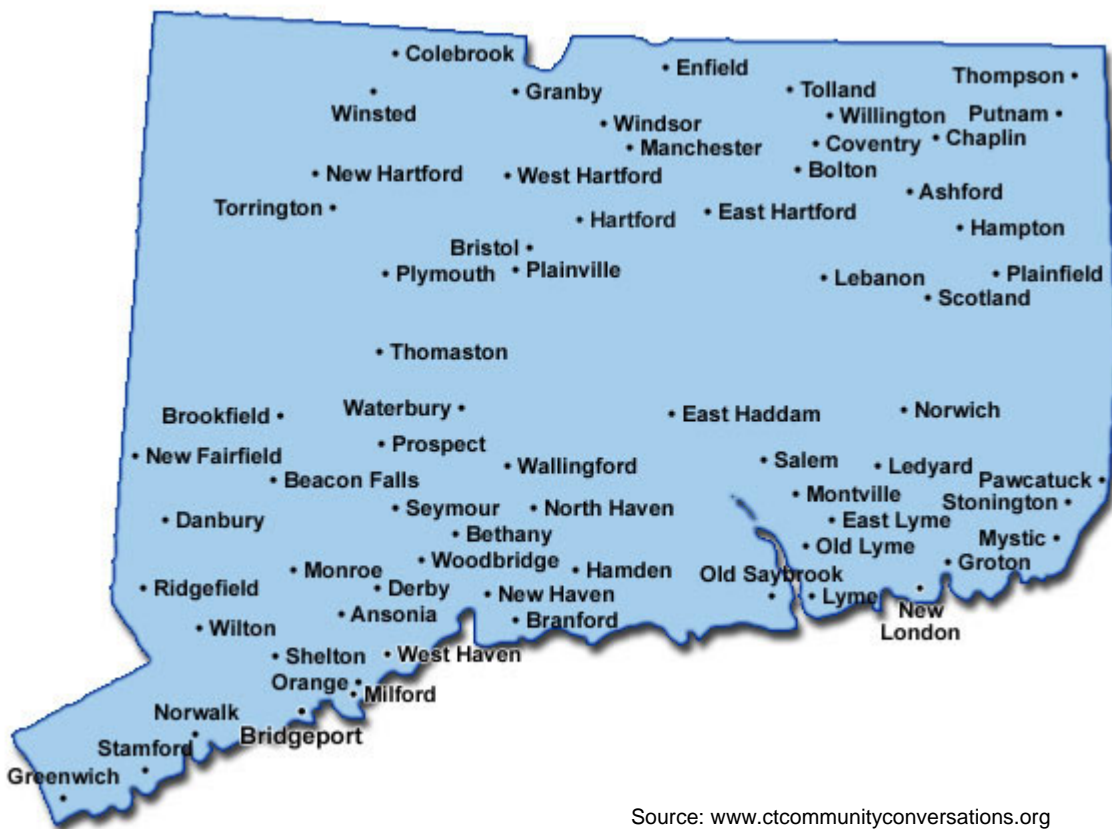
Given the differences among these districts and communities, it is not surprising that the issues they address cover a wide spectrum of school reform possibilities. Table 1 (below) shows the range of topics covered in the nine sites where we conducted interviews (below), while Appendix 1 (page 26) lists all sites to date and their topics.

Table 1: Forum Topics in Nine Sites

Town	First Forum	# Forums Convened	Topics
Colebrook	2000	1	Planning For Student Success
Granby	2003	1	Finding the Balance: Public Services, Education and Taxes
Greenwich	2000	1	Helping All Students Succeed/Diverse Society
Project *LEARN* (Multiple Sites)	1999	10	Academic Standards Racial Isolation Early Care and Education School Safety Future of Education
Stamford	2001	3	Academic Standards Helping All Students Succeed/Diverse Society Student Empowerment
Stonington	1990	5	Childcare
Wallingford	2003	2	Helping All Students Succeed/Diverse Society Child Care and Early Learning
West Hartford	2002	2	Early Care and Education
Wilton	2001	3	Helping All Students Succeed/Diverse Society Are Wilton's Youth Under Too Much Pressure? (Community) Are Wilton's Youth Under Too Much Pressure? (H.S. students)
Windsor	2002	1	Helping All Students Succeed/Diverse Society

Most of the sites chose topics from the Public Agenda menu, although several developed their own topics and materials (more on this below). For example, Granby chose "Finding a Balance" as its discussion topic, which one of its organizers said was "an attempt to allow participants to find a balance between maintaining adequate town services and educational programs and the willingness and ability to pay." Others, like Stamford, modified existing materials to suit particular audiences, in this case, students.

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Reasons for taking on the project

Most of the community organizers we spoke with said they became involved in the conversations in order to address very specific needs in their communities.

> This being a one-school district town, there was a strong need to become united again, as there was increasing distance growing between those…with kids in the school…and those with no kids in school. As the test scores fell, the distance between the two increased. In learning about the conversation format, we saw it as a vehicle to assist us in unifying the town again…
> *Colebrook Organizer*

> There were two Greenwich schools that were not performing well and this offered an opportunity to [address it].
> *Greenwich Organizer*

Who were the organizers?

Throughout this document we refer to "communities" holding conversations, but it was not always the typical community leaders, such as town and school officials, who convened the discussions—or at least not them alone. Those officials did support the endeavors in many communities, even though they did not always take hands-on leadership roles. Instead, the Community Conversations were typically planned by coalitions of organizations clustered within a single school district (see Table 2, next page).

Table 2:

Local Organizers/Sponsors of Community Conversations

Town	Local Organizers/Sponsors					
	Board Of Ed	Town Officials	Civic/Business Organizations	Private Citizens	Churches	Other Ed Orgs
Colebrook	+	+	+	+		
Granby	+	+	+			
Greenwich			+			
LEARN			+	+		
Stamford		+	+		+	+
Stonington		+	+			
Wallingford	+	+	+			
West Hartford	+	+				
Wilton	+		+			

Civic organizations, such as local chapters of the League of Women Voters, the YMCA, or various community-based organizations were often key players. Business organizations also provided critical support in many instances. To a lesser extent, private citizens, religious organizations and other educational groups also played a part in conducting the conversations.

Outcomes

Of course, there was much more tangible follow-up and evidence of impact in some sites than in others. For their part, organizers generally reported that the conversations met their expectations and more. In Stamford, an organizer noted, "While it generated highly interesting conversations among a diverse group of participants, it also had a number of smaller, spin off conversations within the community. The spin off conversations were the surprise. It seems to go on and on." Another explained the impact in this way:

> There are many more people involved in the town's work and the school concerns than before, and since the conversation there has been a wave of concern in this town and we are riding the wave…People are not so distant now.
>
> *Colebrook Organizer*

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For towns that have had the most conversations, like Bridgeport and Norwalk, they seem to have become an ongoing mechanism for discerning public opinion and promoting community involvement on various issues. Even those that have had only one or two often report very concrete outcomes, such as West Hartford, where the conversation helped the district clarify its own goals. After its forum, the Board of Education adopted the goal of Early Childhood Education—a four-year-plan for initiating an educational program for all four-year-olds.

In Greenwich, the impact was directly political. According to a local organizer, the conversation "showed participants where the PTA of these [two failing] schools stood. And since that time, those PTA members have been voted out of office." In other cases, the conversations led to specific action when key people heard calls for changes and acted on those requests quickly. For example, Stonington held several discussions on the lack of quality child-care centers, and afterward the town acted quickly to reopen some day care centers.

Another example is the town of Wilton, which held a discussion on whether its students were under too much pressure. One of the major action recommendations was that the school start later in the day, and after a study was conducted on the question, the start time was changed.

> The community is now taking a long, hard look at itself and its youth. We now have students address their concerns in a constructive forum where the school leadership listens and makes changes such as no longer listing honor students in the local newspaper, which students saw as sending a signal that those not listed were less worthy.
>
> *Wilton Organizer*

Anecdotes from a number of additional sites show the range of impacts that these civic events can produce:

- In Putnam, school administrators discovered that residents did not feel comfortable coming into the school. They responded by opening the new school auditorium for community events and a weekly free movie night. They also established a corps of high-school volunteers to teach basic computer skills to town residents.

- In Hamden, a Muslim resident asked if she could donate books to the children's library about Islam, a request the assistant superintendent was pleased to accept.

- A recent Hartford forum asked how the schools should handle the problem of harassment of gay and lesbian students. As a result, according to organizers, the issue has officially been taken up by the school board.

- Brookfield followed-up on its recent, well-attended dialogue on "Purposes of Education" by creating a *Brookfield Conversations About Education* website, along with five task forces to pursue the major themes that emerged. These address "parental involvement," "love of learning," "diversity, understanding and core values," "community involvement," and "communications."

Statewide effects?

The above are all examples of the effects of Community Conversations at the local level. It's hard to tell in any systematic way if and how they have made an impact at the state level. Maria Mojica, senior program officer at the Graustein Memorial Fund, does report that the foundation's new "Discovery" initiative seems to be progressing more rapidly than similar projects have in the past. She attributes this to the "groundwork" created by networks of communities and groups across the state with experience in broad-based community dialogue.

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IV. Lessons for Statewide Public Engagement Efforts

Connecticut Community Conversations is unusual in being a statewide public engagement initiative that has taken root and sustained itself over time (about seven years) on a relatively wide scale (involving over 75 communities and 5,000 people). Of course, many communities in the state are not involved, and of those that are, many have done so in only a limited fashion. Nevertheless, it's fair to say that community dialogue on education issues has become significantly more widespread since these activities began, and has led to significant impacts and spin-offs in many communities. This section discusses implications of this experiment, in particular, factors that seem—to local and statewide organizers, as well as to Public Agenda—to be key to civic engagement on a statewide scale.

Laying a solid foundation

Graustein did not rush headlong into a huge statewide project. Instead, it emphasized quality over quantity in the early stages and allowed time and opportunity for the solid, organic growth of the initiative.

As noted earlier, the project began with a demonstration in a handful of communities, where, fortunately, the results were promising enough to continue. According to Nancy Leonard, Public Affairs Officer at Graustein:

> That early experience, those six to seven conversations showed that people really wanted to grapple with these issues in a different way. Light bulbs went off in certain people, some of whom were parents. There were some glimmers from those early experiences of how valuable it was to hear and express [different views].

The LWV organizers built on this initial success by adding a new cadre of communities each year, and by building up the statewide infrastructure to support the initiative. This approach created a system with a considerable amount of cross-pollination, maintained by holding regular cross-site meetings, and having experienced sites mentor new ones. Progressing in this step-by-solid-step manner has been important in allowing state organizers develop their expertise in recruiting and supporting communities as the initiative grew.

Strong statewide organization and support

According to local organizers, Graustein provided just enough seed money to help them get off the ground while the League provided all the training and support sites could want. Ms. Leonard, of Graustein, explained, "It's not about bringing outside expertise into a community. It's really about helping a community develop a capacity to do the work itself on an ongoing basis. And now we have state resources to help communities do this." Local organizers agree:

> We could not have done it without the Graustein money, as we are indeed a small district. And the LWV women were always there and were just wonderful—helped to keep us focused.
>
> *Colebrook Organizer*

> Dollars, training and information in the [organizers' manual] are great strengths. The personal support from the [LWV] staff is extremely helpful, and sometimes is overkill. I have heard comments about "being hounded.
>
> *East Lyme Organizer*

Not all organizations would be effective as the League has been as statewide coordinators of a venture such as this. They need statewide scope, the capacity to manage the project, training skills, and—perhaps most importantly—nonpartisan credibility.

> One of the factors that led [Graustein] to choose the League was its statewide presence. There are LWV chapters in cities, in suburbs, and rural areas. Another factor was its reputation for integrity…[and] as a trusted convener. The LWV [also] had organizing skills and experience in planning successful events. [And there]…is its "outsider" status. The League is not an education organization so it would not be perceived as partial to any of the players, such as the school boards, or the teachers or the parents, or the unions."
>
> *LWV Statewide Organizer*

While the League has been the lead statewide organizer, other organizations were recruited to form an effective and legitimizing advisory and support group for the initiative. These groups—such as Connecticut's Association of School Boards, Commission on Children, Education Association, Parent Teacher Associations, and Urban League—are experts on various aspects of Connecticut education. As such, they know the intricacies of many of the

communities that apply, from their ability to organize civic events to the personalities involved.

Quality local leadership

According to statewide organizers, the nature and quality of local leadership makes a big difference in every facet of a community's success. According to Ms. Leonard, "It's often difficult to tell ahead of time where it's going to go a year from now [in a given community]. But having really good [local] people leading it certainly is one of those indicators." A League organizer added that some sites get going because they have a dynamic leader who "gets" the concept and purpose of Community Conversations.

While a strong individual can be a catalyst, there's no way they can succeed alone—successful forums are necessarily group projects, and require piecing together the right coalition of local organizations and leaders. For example, state organizers report that, "If key members of the school board and the administrators are enthusiastic, that makes a big difference."

> Several times we have seen a single, strong individual accustomed to going it alone who is reluctant to share the burden. …And one person can…make the arrangements for food and meeting space, materials, design and printing. But when it is time to invite a diverse group of 100 people, it is impossible for one person to do it alone.
>
> .   *LWV Statewide Organizer*

A key way in which the initiative has been able to ensure strong, diverse local leadership is through a Request-for-Proposals model. Each year, communities across the state are invited to apply to the program. One of their questions is this: "Please list up to six organizations, agencies, community groups or individuals which have agreed to co-sponsor the Community Conversation about Early Childhood Care and Education and will participate in the planning process."

The RFP approach also ensures that local organizers are truly motivated. As there is a considerable amount of work involved in convening the forums, local leaders only do so if they truly think it is important for their community and their own agendas, and are ready to

get to work. Moreover, the implementation grant is enough to cover the basic expenses (invitations, phone calls, food if volunteer resources do not come through, and the like). But, wisely, it is not nearly enough to tempt people to get involved just for the money. The upshot is that only local leaders who see a compelling reason to facilitate greater community dialogue and engagement are likely to apply.

Model and materials that work

Once communities decide to participate in the initiative, it is important they have a well-tested forum model and set of materials to help them achieve their goals. By the time of their application in Connecticut, Public Agenda's design and materials had been tested and refined in close to 20 sites—it had become a fairly well-oiled machine.

> I've participated in a number of these conversations—those using other formats—and have found that this model is the most efficient of them all. Participants don't go searching for the purpose of being there.
>
> *Stonington Organizer*

> [We] stuck to the format we were trained in, because it made sense.
>
> *West Hartford Organizer*

Some of the sites did improvise on the model or materials to try to make them more attuned to their specific needs and goals, but most did not stray far and seemed convinced by the basic formula.

> For two conversations we used the same [Public Agenda] model in which we trained. However, we modified the model for the conversation with students. The model works—it's a springboard for getting people talking—so why change it?
>
> *Stamford Organizer*

> We pretty much stuck to the design—it's a good process and it worked for us. However, we changed the topic, wrote our own script and made our own video. We felt we needed a script that suited our needs.
>
> *Granby Organizer*

This isn't to say that Public Agenda's model and materials are the only productive way to organize community forums; it's just that they have proven themselves as one successful

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approach in a great variety of settings. The point is that a statewide initiative could have all other variables well-covered, but if the forum design itself is weak, the initiative is unlikely to be very successful or sustainable.

Local vs. Statewide Goals and Strategies

The Connecticut Community Conversations project is much more concerned with building capacity within each community for quality public engagement than in creating a statewide process that focuses on a specific larger policy question. As Nancy Leonard of Graustein put it, "It's really about helping a community develop a capacity to do the work itself on an ongoing basis." As a result, the initiative is marked by a considerable degree of local control—for example, each site can pick its own topic from a long menu of choices.

By contrast, other statewide initiatives in which Public Agenda has been involved are focused on specific state policy goals, with the purpose of leveraging a public engagement process toward reforming statewide policies. One example is the Campaign for Fiscal Equity's (CFE) public engagement activities in New York State in conjunction with its historic school funding case.

In 1995, CFE won a court decision from the New York State Court of Appeals that declared the state's school funding system inadequate to ensuring that all students have proper opportunities for a "sound, basic education"—a promise made by the state's constitution. The court, however, did not define a "sound basic education," nor specific funding implications, leaving that to further legal action. CFE chose to develop this definition and its funding implications in large measure through a multi-year, iterative public engagement process of forums held regularly across the state.

In its literature, CFE explains its rationale for public engagement in this way:

> Every community in New York State is affected by the quality of our public schools and the CFE decision. Creating and implementing fair and lasting reforms, therefore, requires broad community input and involvement. For this reason, CFE has been committed to an innovative public engagement process to develop a statewide coalition for reform. This process has already involved thousands of advocates,

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educators, school board members, business people, parents, students and community members throughout the state in honest, focused dialogue on how best to ensure real educational opportunity for all of New York State's students.

It is difficult to assess whether or how CFE's recent victory in New York's highest court may be tied to its public engagement strategy. It is certainly the case that its thinking about solutions has been informed by its many community dialogues, and that many people across the state are aware of and closely following CFE's work as a result of the public engagement activities.

Another example of public engagement's role in statewide policymaking took place in Nebraska in 1997. There, the state's regionally elected Board of Education was split on whether the state should have a policy of academic standards that applied to all schools, and if so, what those standards should look like. The Board attempted a process of public input through a series of "listening sessions" held in various venues across the state, but had little luck engaging a broad cross-section of the public. Instead, these sessions tended to be dominated by groups of activists with strong local-control views.

To allow the general public to vet the idea of statewide standards more fully, and to gain more input from a variety of perspectives, the Board asked Public Agenda to help local communities organize their own conversations on the topic. Board members sometimes observed these sessions, or they learned about them through reports. But as they were not always in attendance, and were never so as authorities up on a dais, these sessions did not tend to attract as much attention from interest groups. Instead, they provided good opportunities for broad public discussion and input. As a result, the Board was able to craft an approach informed by how Nebraska citizens viewed statewide standards.

In general, such efforts have done more than Connecticut's to bring public engagement to bear on specific, overarching state policy issues. Connecticut, meanwhile, has done much more to help numerous local communities organize for ongoing, productive dialogue and action to improve their schools.

Despite this tendency for statewide efforts to focus either on specific state policy issues or local community-building and organizing, it is certainly conceivable that a well-designed initiative could encompass both sets of goals—although it would also certainly be an expensive, ambitious and time-consuming proposition. It thus becomes a matter of priorities and resources as to how to balance these two dimensions of statewide public engagement.

A Natural Laboratory for Research in Public Engagement

This case study only scratches the surface of the public engagement research potential that the Connecticut Community Conversations project offers. Scores of communities in a single state have now engaged in this work, presenting opportunities to compare them with each other and with non-participating communities, to shed light on any number of questions. The results could prove enlightening and useful not only for Connecticut, but for those interested in statewide public engagement elsewhere, and for theory-building in the field.

Among the areas that could be studied in this natural laboratory are the following:

Policy impacts

How have Community Conversations affected local policy? Are there generalizations that can be made about the nature of these impacts? What differentiates those communities where there have been policy impacts from others where policy has not been affected?

Individual impacts

Do community dialogues increase the political efficacy or style of participants? Does participation by policymakers lead them to change *their* views on the possibilities and potential for public participation?

Associational life

What impacts, if any, occur for organizations that act as sponsors and organizers of civic dialogues? Does it change their capacity, practices, culture, relationship with other organizations, or effectiveness in the policy arena? Beyond impacts on existing organizations, what new entities are created through the process and what are they like?

Political culture, practices and norms

Do the above impacts add up to significant changes in a community's political practices, culture or "social capital"?

How can forum follow-up most effectively be supported?

A natural corollary to the above lines of inquiry is how to help communities that engage in community dialogue make the most out of the process. Some local organizers feel that more help at the forum follow-up stage might be warranted from statewide organizers.

> For me there was a need for getting to the next step [i.e., help following up on forums]. I'm not sure what is needed, but I was at a loss in deciding where to go next.
>
> *Greenwich Organizer*

This is, of course, a big question for all who promote dialogue: how it can best connect to action and change. The research questions posed above imply there are myriad ways in which good public dialogue can have impacts, many of them subtle, such as strengthening the sense of political efficacy of individual participants. This suggests that big, obvious policy impacts—which can sometimes, but clearly not always, result from public dialogue—are not the only measures by which they need be judged.

That being said, it is worth examining the potential of public dialogue having significant policy impacts. To do so, it will be useful to look at the challenges of doing so.

1. *Successful forum conveners are not always successful community actors.*
   One reason it is difficult to make the jump from dialogue to concrete policy impacts is that dialogues work best when they are hosted by a coalition of diverse, local organizations. As we saw in our case examples, such coalitions are more likely to draw the large, cross-section of a community that is essential to the community conversation. Unfortunately, as these tend by nature to be ad hoc partnerships, they do not necessarily have the lasting power and infrastructure for long-term follow-up. The result is that some possibilities for exploiting the ideas and energy produced through the

forums can fall through the cracks of the improvised, organizational structures that helped create the forums in the first place.

One answer is to encourage local coalitions to choose their partners precisely with this challenge in mind. For example, if the school system is one partner among the organizers, there are always ways in which at least some follow-up is easy to do—e.g., by clarifying information on school policy or by devoting a board meeting to a forum's results. If one of the community partners has some resources—e.g., a local business or community foundation—they can obviously help sustain the initiative and support concrete follow-up to effect change consistent with the dialogue.

Additionally, those who provide technical assistance and training to local sites can make sure local sites know that the challenge isn't just to foster a better conversation, but to work to connect that process with policy and collective action—and help them plan for it. Over the years, LWV organizers have increasingly done exactly that. They have also worked with Graustein to create a new category of "alumni grants"—small grants to support follow-up work that flows from Community Conversations. Despite these efforts, Sonja Ahuja of the League notes, "Although we are more involved than ever before [in helping sites follow-up on their forums] they need more support than we can offer. I cannot over-emphasize enough how new and different this work is for most people."

2. *Bridging the Divide Between the Forum Experience and the "Real World."*
If one obstacle to action is the ad hoc nature of the coalitions that tend to be the best conveners of the process, another has to do with the nature of the dialogue itself and the kinds of expectations it creates. These sessions tend to create a kind of ideal environment, one which elicits a hopefulness that is inevitably disappointed in the "real world." And this disappointment, if not handled well, can lead to an understandable yet unnecessary loss of momentum for action and change.

To create constructive dialogue, to "change the conversation" for the better, you have to aim to create a set of ideal conditions. These conditions diminish existing power dynamics, create a safe place to think and talk, expose people to a range of possibilities,

help them become aware of their assumptions, ensure that they have enough time to reflect, provide accurate information, etc.

These conditions lead to a satisfying and productive exchange, the discovery of common ground, the clarification of disagreements (usually less than had been expected), and agreement on general directions for action that most are willing to stand behind. Moreover, people are energized; they do not want to leave and often their conversations spill onto the streets. As an older man said at the conclusion of an interracial and interfaith community conversation in Crown Heights (Brooklyn), "We should have done this years ago."

Unfortunately for forum participants, the "real world" did not have the benefit of their experience, and is locked into the same set of power dynamics and habitual ruts of thought and behavior that had been the case before our 100 or so citizens came together to talk and reflect. The clash of the collective wisdom and spirit of cooperation that emerges from a forum with the reality "out there" can be, in a very real sense, a drag. That is, a sense of hope and momentum is created, which then runs headlong into business as usual, with disappointment as the result. And this is a delicate point: Can we harness and leverage the ideas and enthusiasms created by dialogue out in the world in the face of this inevitable disappointment? Planning for small, quick tangible victories along the way to grand goals is surely part of the answer to maintaining momentum. Beyond this, it takes strong and savvy leadership on many levels to get the most out of deliberative forums—yet another arena for study suggested by Connecticut's experiment in democratic dialogue.

Appendix 1: Overview of Connecticut Forums to Date

Single Towns	Conversation Topic(s)	Attendance
Ashford	Purposes of Education	61
Beacon Falls	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	78
Branford	Purposes of Education	106
	Early Care and Education	50
Bridgeport	Academic Standards	150
	26 additional school conversations	1000
Bristol	Early Childhood, 1	60
	Early Childhood, 2	60
Brookfield	Purposes of Education	130
Brooklyn	Early Child Care and Education	tbd
Chaplin	Early Child Care and Education	tbd
Colebrook	Creating a Formula for Success	80
Danbury	After-school care/out of school care	58
	Parental involvement	89
	Early Childhood	90
	School Safety	85
Enfield	Parental Involvement	81
East Hartford	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	80
	Early Care and Education	tbd
East Haddam	Parental Involvement	50
Granby	Finding a Balance (School Funding)	120
Greenwich	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	70
Hamden	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	100
Hartford	Early Childhood	30
	Purposes of Education	37
	Helping All Students Succeed/Diverse Society	100+
	Gay and Lesbian Issues	27
	Purposes of Education	50
Lebanon	Purposes of Education	76
Ledyard	School Safety	65
Manchester	Sheff vs. O'Neill	100
	School Drop-Out Prevention	100
Milford	Academic Standards,	131
	Respect for Home, School, Community	100
Monroe	Academic Standards	55
Naugatuck	Early Care and Education	40
New Britain	Academic Standards	78
	Child Care	36
New Haven	Child Care	42
	Purposes of Education	125
	Early Care and Education	tbd
New Hartford	School Funding	84
New Fairfield	Purposes of Education	86

Norwalk	School Safety	70
	School Safety	70
	School Funding	40
	Academic Standards and Expectations	100
	Early Childhood	98
North Haven	Helping All Children Succeed	64
Norwich	Parent and Community Involvement	62
	Early Care and Education	60
Old Saybrook	School Safety	87
Pawcatuck	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	75
Plainfield	Academic Standards	125
	Early Care and Education	40
Plymouth	Purposes of Education	125
Putnam	Parental Involvement	175
Salem	Purposes of Education	42
Shelton	Early Care and Education	40
Southington	Early Care and Education	tbd
Stamford	Academic Standards	80
	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	55
	Student Empowerment	47
Stonington	Child Care	50
Thomaston	Parental Involvement	60
Thompson	Early Childhood	25
Tolland	Child Care	80
Torrington	Early Childhood	60
Wallingford	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	45
	Childcare	85
Waterbury	Educational Standards and Expectations	140
Wethersfield	Early Care and Education	tbd
West Hartford	Early Care and Education	100
Windham	Early Care and Education	tbd
Wilton	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	65
Windsor	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	100
Winsted	Helping All Children Succeed/Diverse Society	86
	Parental Involvement in Our Schools	77

Regional Town Conversations	**Conversation Topics**	**Attendance**
Healthy Valley Ansonia, Beacon Falls, Derby, Seymour, Shelton, Oxford	Academic Standards	125
Ashford, Willington	Purpose of Education	98
Bethany, Orange, Woodbridge	Purposes of Education	98

Bridgeport, Trumbull, Stratford, Fairfield	Student Violence: Why?	175
Danbury, Brookfield, Ridgefield	Purposes of Education	120
Bristol, Plainville	Child Care	80
EASTCONN Chaplin, Hampton, Scotland	Academic Standards	80
Project LEARN East Haddam, East Lyme Groton, Ledyard, Lyme, Mystic, New London, Old Lyme, Old Saybrook, Norwich, Higganum, Killingworth	Academic Standards Racial Isolation Early Care and Education School Safety Future of Education	455
Hamden, New Haven West Haven	Academic Standards	65
Connecticut Valley Council	School Safety	20
National Council for Community and Justice (Northern CT)	Helping All Students Succeed/Diverse Society	100
Hamden, New Haven, West Haven	Academic Standards	65
NCCJ	Helping All Children Succeed	100

**Appendix 2: Interview Notes with Key
Community Conversation Organizers in Nine Sites**

In late 2003, interviews were conducted for this study with organizers from nine Connecticut Community Conversations sites. Among them were leaders from a variety of community-based organizations and agencies, school board members and superintendents. Slightly excerpted versions of their remarks are included here, presented alphabetically by site.

Colebrook Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
This being a one-school district and town, there was a strong need to become united again, as there was increasing distance growing between those living in Colebrook with kids in the school—we called those the "ownership" people, and those with no kids in school—we called the "disownership" people. As the test scores fell, the distance between the two increased. In learning about the conversation format, we saw it as a vehicle to assist us in unifying the town again, using test scores as the topic for discussion: "Improving the plan for student success."

Who has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
The Colebrook Board of Education, the Town Selectmen, the Lions Club and private citizens were involved.

What forums have you convened?
October 2002 was the first and only conversation to date. "Improving the Plan for Student Success" was our topic. However, it should be understood that this was our attempt to put a positive spin on the Public Agenda topic, "Creating a Formula for Success in Low-Performing Schools."

Did you stick with or improvise on the Public Agenda model?
 Yes. We stuck with the format—dinner, video, moderators, recorders and all.

Did your experiences meet your expectations, or not?
This conversation has met our expectations (and more) in the following ways: There are many more people involved in the town's work and the school concerns than before—since the conversation, there has been created a wave of concern in this town and we are riding the wave. While not attributed to the conversation, the test scores in one school have gone up. People are not so distant now.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
Getting individuals to join us for this conversation. While we had 80 people attend – 5% of our town, it was not attained without a lot of hard work.

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What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
The impact has been great. As a matter of fact, we are having a follow-up meeting to this conversation where the five committees which grew out of the recommendations of the first conversation, and we are expecting even more people. People are now becoming more involved.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
The organizing committee members, and the fact that tasks committee members are continuing to meet – even after 16 plus months. These people are keeping the life in it and townspeople are starting to believe in one another again.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
All pluses, no minuses: We could not have done without Graustein money, as we are indeed a small town; and the LWV women were always there and were just wonderful – helped to keep us focused.

What's the one thing that you would recommend to improve the support that communities get from the League and Graustein to do this work?
The one thing I'd recommend is that there be some smaller (easier) grants for smaller towns like Colebrook to assist us with the follow-up. We are having a hard time just trying to raise money for stamps to do the mailing for the follow-up meeting scheduled for 29 February 2004.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
The single most interesting thing that I can recall at this time is how, going into the small groups, determined the participants were about not letting "these strangers tell them when to talk and when not to talk." However, once they were in the rooms and learned the structure of the process, heard the ground rules and learned that the moderators had been "trained to do this work," they quickly deferred to the moderators' lead.

Granby Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
We took on this project to bring Granby's citizens together to discuss the challenges facing our town. We are at a crossroads with services, schools and increased taxes.

Who has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
Citizens for a Better Granby, Granby Public Schools, Granby Town Officials (as observers)

What forums have you convened?
February 1, 2003, was the first conversation. We have had only one. "Finding a Balance" was our topic. This was an attempt to allow participants to find a balance between

maintaining adequate town services and educational programs and the willingness and ability to pay.

Did you stick with or improvise on the Public Agenda model?
We pretty much stuck to the design – it's a good process and it worked for us. However, we changed the topic, wrote our script and made our own video. We felt we needed a script to suit our needs.

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
We felt the process was what we needed, but we tweaked it for our special needs. Even so, we got from it what we wanted; it brought together people of the community to discuss some issues that had been discussed between individuals, but never in a group setting. This process allowed us to discuss these issues constructively. Many people, expressing some of the same community concerns, never before realized how closed they were in their thinking. Plus, this was an opportunity for the town leaders to hear the voice of the people and feel they supported their actions.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
Trying to get a topic that was acceptable to the committee and what we needed.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
Again, people are expressing themselves in a way that is new to this community. And the town leaders are listening.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
Having townspeople and the organizing committee come together in a joint effort to hear from a larger segment of the community.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
The Graustein Fund and the LWV were great. The LWV consultants were just excellent in assisting us to design our script and adapt it to the Public Agenda format. There are no down sides.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
Seeing the town leaders witness a process that's truly effective in garnering information from the townspeople. And they listened. Plus, people complained that there was not enough time.

Greenwich Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
I'd heard a lot about community conversations through connections with the Greenwich LWV and there had been no such conversations in Greenwich. Thus, when the Connecticut

LWV RFP was posted, it intrigued me. Plus, there were two Greenwich schools that were not performing well and this offered an opportunity to discuss educational issues.

Who has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
Other than Jewish Family Services, the Greenwich LWV was the other organization involved.

What forums have you convened?
Our conversation was in January 2000. We had only one conversation. "Helping all Students to Succeed in a Diverse Society" was the topic.

Did you stick with or improvise on the Public Agenda model?
Yes, it was required of the grant. Plus, we did not know enough about the process to change the format.

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
It did bring out a cross-section of the community who are not "the regulars." The conversation was a microcosm of what Greenwich was all about—the haves and have-nots. But the conversation did not get enough buy-in [from the decision-makers]. The recommendations from the conversation were made to the BOE.

Still, participants were very positive about the conversation.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
There was too much work for the two of us who served as coordinators; the PTA members on the committee were working for the power brokers of the city.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
I don't know [about the long term impacts]; however, the conversation showed participants where the PTA of these [two failing] schools stood. It showed how the PTA members were in denial of what was going on at the school/in the district. And since that time, those PTA members have been voted out of office.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
The most important keys have been inviting those who don't attend such events; these people were probably the ones who changed the face of the PTAs. And the moderators did an excellent job.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
That the Graustein Memorial Fund furnished funds was indeed a strength. The LWV providing the [Public Agenda] model and the training was another strength. I can't think of any weaknesses.

What's the one thing that you would recommend to improve the support that communities get from the League and Graustein to do this work?

For me, there was a need for getting to the next step. I am not sure what is needed, but I was at a loss in deciding "where to go next." Even so, I have no concrete recommendations.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
The single most interesting story, as a result of the conversation and participants seeing/hearing the PTA members acting as keepers of the status quo, was hearing that these people had been voted out of office and new PTA members had been elected.

Project LEARN (Southeast Region) Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
Our organization, as the regional education service center, has worked on behalf of multiple districts and single districts over the life of the community conversations. Our role as coordinator of the conversation fits with our role in the region and our mission of providing leadership for the educational community.

Who else has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
In all cases, many community-based organizations and community members were involved in all the planning of all the conversations. It is important to note that we have assisted the communities of East Haddam, Norwich, Ledyard, New London, Old Saybrook, and now Groton in their conversations. The communities of East Haddam, Groton, Ledyard, and New London have utilized the "philosophy, format, and concept" of the Community Conversation for discussions within their community that were outside the Public Agenda/League of Women Voters/Graustein project. These additional conversations and their success can be directly attributed to the success the communities had with their "funded" conversations first. Success breeds success. The communities found that large conversations can be useful tools and can be managed and that community members appreciate the opportunity.

What forums have you convened?
[Our first forums were in] East Haddam, Ledyard, and New London—four conversations were hosted. Over the years, there have been about ten. Topics covered include Academic Expectations, Racial Isolation, Early Childhood, Safe Schools, Future of Education.

Have you stuck with or improvised on the Public Agenda model?
We have utilized the same framework.

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
Originally, we were skeptical of the format and all the work involved, but in the end found all the content and format invaluable.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
Budget, and making sure a spectrum of the community was invited and attended.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
In two school districts this community conversation has become the "way." Under the superintendent's direction they hold a conversation about every other year—the topics vary.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
LEARN's involvement and the superintendent's leadership

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
Dollars, training, and information in the binders are great strengths. The personal support from staff is extremely helpful, and sometimes is overkill. I have heard comments about "being hounded."

What's the one thing that you would recommend to improve the support that communities get from the League and Graustein to do this work?
I am not sure; we have so many resources here at LEARN that we were fine with the level of support given to us.

Stamford Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
It was part of the mayor's mission to reach out to other community organizations for the purpose of discussing youth and childcare issues—starting with the community conversation on "Helping All Students to Succeed in a Diverse Society."

Who has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
Stamford Youth Services and other youth services agencies, University of Connecticut, CTE, Yerdrow Center, faith-based churches/agencies, the BOE, etc.

What forums have you convened?
Beginning in Spring of 2001, we have had three conversations. Our topics have been, "Helping All Students to Succeed in a Diverse Society," "Child Care," and a modification of the "Helping All Students to Succeed in a Diverse Society," designed for students.

Did you stick with or improvise on the Public Agenda model?
For two conversations, we used the same [Public Agenda] model in which we trained, because it works. However, we modified the model for the conversation with students. The model works – it's a springboard for getting people talking—so why change it?

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
It did what we expected and more. While it generated highly interesting conversations among a diverse group of participants, it also had a number of smaller, spin-off conversations within the community. The spin-off conversations were the surprise. It seems to go on and on.

PUBLIC AGENDA

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
The greatest challenge was getting the planning committee to agree on a common topic and whom to invite. Plus, there was the crunch of time getting things organized, too little time to fully discuss the different issues during the conversation, as well as coming to consensus.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
A sense of connectiveness has started in this community, as evidenced by the second and third conversations. Young people are now seeing adults as caring and committed.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
The passion of the participants seems to be the key to success.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
There was tremendous support from the LWV – they (Nancy Polk And Sonja Ahuja) were always there when needed; GMF made a huge commitment. However, there is a great need for more money in operating this effort.

What's the one thing that you would recommend to improve the support that communities get from the League and Graustein to do this work?
More money, of course. But the thing that's needed most is the opportunity for the moderators to practice more – practice what they have learned. There doesn't seem to be enough time for the moderators to practice before they are in the midst of the conversation.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
During one conversation, a participant argued that the structure of conversation was too rigid and would not allow him to discuss what he thought was important. He expressed his disgust and left. Surprisingly enough, this action and his storming out caused the rest of the participants to become more cohesive. While the structure of the conversation is "rigid," it works just fine.

Stonington Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
I was one of the partners in the process – a concerned citizen trying to spur a renewed interest in child care in the area.

Who has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
Happy Heart Child Care Center, county [political] representatives from both sides of the Connecticut/Rhode Island border, Thames Valley Council for Community Action (TVCCA), YMCA (from across the border in Westerly, RI), Mystic Community Center and several county agencies.

What forums have you convened?
The first community conversation was in 1999…there have been five conversations.

All have been about "Child Care."

Did you stick with or improvise on the Public Agenda model?
We stuck with the model and the community conversation model presented by the LWV. I've participated in a number of these conversations – those using other formats – and have found that this model is the most efficient of them all. Participants don't go searching for the purpose for being there.

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
It helped me support the organization I represented. You see, child care was folding in the area, but was reinstated as a result of this community conversation.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
The biggest challenge for me was to not take control – which is my normal way of doing business. I allowed the community conversation to take its own path. It was very hard for me to be part of the umbrella, rather than be part of the handle. Even so, it was the right thing to do, because others took the lead and began to see the value of child care for this area. But, being a take-charge person, it was hard.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
These community conversations revived the child care in the area. Happy Hearts Child Care was reopened. The community continues to reassess itself for the need, as well as continue to keep the community abreast of the awareness of the need, as well.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
That there were varying, involved partners in this process helped to spread the awareness of the need for child care in the area.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
[On the plus side,] the training process, design and the materials empowered people and were all pluses.

[On the negative side,] during the organizing meetings, too many community partners didn't know why they were there, i.e., while the reasons were explained in the first meeting, subsequent meetings brought new members and the original meaning was not explained again.

What's the one thing that you would recommend to improve the support that communities get from the League and Graustein to do this work?
In the series of meetings with the partners, the conveners should always restate the goal, mission, and reasons for the conversation.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
This conversation proved that when there was a need, regardless of political borders, that need would be filled. Participants in the Stonington community conversation were both from Connecticut and the border town of Westerly, RI. Therefore, when the need for the child-care center could not be fulfilled, the neighboring YMCA of Westerly, RI, filled the void.

Wallingford Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
The RFP, the Discovery Grant [another Graustein initiative] and the charge from the Mayor's Office coincided. From there we invited others to participate in setting up this effort. Plus, we wanted to bring to the table a cross-section of people to discuss some of the issues that were brought up in an earlier conversation – not a Public Agenda-type conversation.

Who has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
The Mayor's Office, Town Councilmen, The Superintendent's Office, Coalition for Unity, the Social Services Departments, The Discovery Grant, the School System and the Youth and Family Services were involved.

What forums have you convened?
We had one conversation in March 2003. We are now in the process of having the second one. Our topic was "Helping All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society."

Did you stick with or improvise on the Public Agenda model?
We pretty much stuck with the model in which we were trained.

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
The original expectation was to bring to the table a cross-section of participants in the conversation, as well as the city's decision makers. That expectation was met.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
The biggest challenge was getting people to the table who don't regularly attend. We are thinking of inviting a representative from these groups to our initial planning sessions during our next conversation, as well as businesses and other groups. Another challenge is time and manpower – time to get the message out and manpower to do all that needs doing.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
Our success can be seen in the fact that this conversation has raised the levels of awareness in the community and with the decision makers, i.e., the BOE and the Mayor's Office. While no policy actions have taken place or budget line-item changes, there is much conversation about addressing the challenges presented by the achievement gaps.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
Having larger numbers of people talking about education issues – community people and the decision makers, as stated earlier.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
The technical assistance provided by the women from the LWV has been outstanding!
There could have been a little more flexibility, would be the downside. While the Graustein funds were not enough to support this effort, we were able to raise the funds we needed. The LWV and the Graustein Fund's support…overall, were great.

What's the one thing that you would recommend to improve the support that communities get from the League and Graustein to do this work?
Having these conversations with a bit more lead time. Having a little more flexibility in the process and a little more time to practice.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
The most interesting story here is that there were so many people who turned out on a week-day evening and in this working community. The other success story is that the level of conversation regarding education in this community is still going on almost a year later.

West Hartford Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
[The opportunity] immediately following a community conversation the city had had on "Race" (conducted through Democracy Works). It was also something that the city and the board of education wanted to do.

Who else has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
The Discovery Grant Project Coordinator, the West Hartford Board of Education, the City Council, the school system

What forums have you convened?
Beginning in November 2002, we've had two forums. "Early Care and Education" was the first and there was a follow-up on the same topic.

Did you stick with or improvise on the Public Agenda model?
Stuck to the format we were trained in, because it made sense.

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
It helped us to clarify our own goals and it garnered support from the community at large and from the West Hartford Board of Education. Our board approved a four-year goal for four year-olds.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
Making sure that all levels of West Hartford's socio-economic strata were represented, as well as all the different language-groups were represented. Adequate representation was our biggest challenge.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
As we went forward in organizing this work, we found that, while hard work, it was a collaborative effort that involved many community people. It also involved the Mayor's Office and other City Policy Makers.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
The key to our success is attributed in most part to having a paid person – the Discovery Grant Coordinator, Paula Stabnick – and people who work well on the steering committee. Also making sure that the steering committee represents the people you want to attend.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
The support that we have received from the LWV has been phenomenal – sometime there was too much support. I (Karen List) was the point person in the District's Central, and Paula Stabnick at the Discovery Grant Office and Sonja Ahuja with the LWV were all just great. As far as the Graustein Memorial Fund is concerned, it was just wonderful to have provided the grant money that allowed these efforts to result in community conversations.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
We didn't expect the West Hartford Board of Education to have adopted the goal of Early Childhood Education so quickly – a four-year plan for initiating an educational program for all four year-olds. We also didn't expect that all of the [community conversations] would be made so quickly. Finally, there was a woman who has been attending all manner of meetings for a long time who came up to me and said, "This is the best meeting I've attended in this city."

Wilton Organizer
Why did your organization and/or your community take this project on?
We felt that the community was ready for this kind of discussion about issues that concerned our students. While this is a very affluent town, it has one of the highest incidents of drug and alcohol use by young people in the state. We needed to discuss issues that concerned our kids.

Who has been involved in the organizing efforts for this work?
Originally, it was the Wilton Education Foundation and the Wilton League of Women Voters (LWV). That was three years ago. Now it's the Wilton High School students [and the Wilton BOE].

What forums have you convened?
The first conversation was three years ago. We have had three – two following the regular format (sans dinners and videos), and one student panel moderated by a local psychologist. The first topic was a variation on the stock topic, "Helping All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society." The second was an out growth of the first: "Are Wilton's Youth Under Too Much

Pressure?" And the third was a panel discussion where students addressed the same question: "Are Wilton's Youth Under Too Much Pressure?"

Have you stuck with or improvised on the Public Agenda model?
We stuck to the moderator-led discussions, but slightly changed the topic as stated earlier. We also omitted the dinner and had no video as discussion starters. It was felt by the planning committee members that participants knew why they were there and wanted to get right into the discussion and forgo the dinner.

In what ways has this work met or not met with your original expectations?
This work met all our expectations and the conversation format was superb. We had no idea that the conversation would produce such positive results, i.e., starting school at a later time than the regularly scheduled high-school starting; having students address their concerns in a constructive forum and the school leadership listen and make changes, such as no longer listing honor students in the local newspaper, which students saw as sending a signal that those not listed were less worthy. The community is now taking a long, hard look at itself and its youth – and just received a grant from the United Way for a 20:20, a positive youth development effort. And the good things continue, even the development of a new plan for a fourth conversation. Stay tuned.

What was your biggest challenge as community organizers of this work?
Our biggest challenge was deciding on a topic that was right for Wilton, because none of the ones that were prepared at the time—three years ago—were right for us.

What impacts (if any) has this work had in your community?
The impact that stand out for me are: 1) Having the school starting time changed; 2) Establishing a precedent for student input to the town leaders; and 3) Finding a format that is great for this town to have manageable dialogue.

What have been the most important keys to any success you have had?
The moderated dialogue and the coming to "Common Ground" are the keys to the successful conversation. And the town being ready for this kind of conversation with the LWV, Graustein, and the Wilton Education Foundation leading the way, and the school system and town's willingness to participate. Those were the keys to this success.

What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the support you've received from the League and Graustein to do this work?
The Graustein's grant and the LWV's materials, training of moderators/recorders and ongoing technical assistance were just great. We have extremely high praise for Sonja Ahuja and Nancy Polk of the LWV. There were no downsides.

What's the one thing that you would recommend to improve the support that communities get from the League and Graustein to do this work?
More and varied topics for towns like Wilton would be my one recommendation for improvement.

What has been the single most interesting story connected to the community conversation work?
The single most interesting story would be that of the scheduling change. One of the major action recommendations from the first conversation was to make the school starting time later in the day. The school administration courteously listens, but needs more than this recommendation to make such a change. In an attempt to see if this was a "real" concern, the LWV conducted a nine-month study and returned with the data supporting the desire for a change in the school starting time. Now that Wilton has a later starting time, many of the major news outlets are featuring Wilton's story.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from research interviews conducted for this paper during late 2003 and early 2004.

[2] The study referenced is *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education* by John Immerwahr (Public Agenda, 1994).

[3] Much of Public Agenda's early work in this arena occurred in partnership with the Institute of Educational Leadership beginning in 1995. The model, which came to be known as *Public Conversations About the Public's Schools* and is now referred to by Public Agenda as *Citizen Choicework ,* was tested and refined through a national demonstration in ten sites in 1996 and 1997. It has since been applied (and continuously refined) in scores of communities around the nation—the Connecticut case being a prime example.

[4] *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* by Daniel Yankelovich (Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 166-167.

[5] The other titles are: "School Safety," "Helping All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society," "Neighborhood Schools and Diversity," "Child Care," "Creating a Formula for Success in Low-Performing Schools," and "Making Standards Work for All Students." In addition to these discussion modules created by Public Agenda, the Connecticut LWV has created "Readiness for Elementary School Success" and "Creating Family Learning."

[6] The nine sites studied for this paper were recommended by statewide organizers as a good cross-section of participating sites, reflective of the diversity of Connecticut's participating communities. For a listing of all Connecticut's community conversation sites and the forums each has held, see Appendix 1. For notes from the interviews with the nine site organizers, see Appendix 2.