



JOINING THE CONVERSATION → 2005 Education Backgrounder



In addition to education, Deliberation Week participants considered national healthcare issues including the rising cost of healthcare and the uninsured in America. Read the [discussion guide](#) for these conversations.

By the People's education backgrounder served as the basis for a national opening conversation during each of the 16 [Deliberation Week](#) events.

Our [teacher resources](#) include lesson plans for conversations on a number of education issues.

By the People Backgrounder: National Education Issues

This discussion guide served as a jumping-off point for our fall 2005 Deliberation Week conversations. Most participants in By the People education forums received a copy of this backgrounder from their event hosts. Even if you do not attend one of our discussions, we invite you to read on, learn more about these education issues, and think about how you can join or start a conversation in your area.

What is the Nature of the Education Challenge Facing the Nation?

As a nation, we have always prided ourselves on offering quality education to all, yet many would say we have fallen short. A 2003 study by the Program for International Student Assessment, which measured the ability of 15-year-olds to solve math problems, ranked the United States 24th out of 29 wealthy industrialized countries. And American confidence in public schools has declined steadily since the 1970s.

Education is also a major factor in our country's competitiveness. Many U.S. corporate executives charge that we are not successfully educating a workforce for a globalized world and have called for the overhaul of our education system.

Education Issues on the Table

Right now, the national discussion on education—the discussion driven by lawmakers in Washington, D.C., and state capitals, and by media and decision-makers-- centers on two issues: 1) standards, and 2) providing equal educational opportunities for all. The standards debate includes discussion about testing and the recent, national *No Child Left Behind* legislation. The discussion about equal educational opportunities includes consideration of vouchers and charter schools, as well as targeting resources to boost ailing public schools or students who are falling behind.

Running through these debates is a question about the responsibility that parents, local/state government, and federal government should have. Another common thread in the discussion is the question of how we are preparing our students for work in a globalized world, and the impact this will have on our nation's economic competitiveness.

School Standards and Tests for the 21st Century

Some say the federal government should take the lead in holding schools accountable for students' educational success. They maintain that well-defined standards and testing, like those in the recent *No Child Left Behind* legislation, are the best way to create and teach a quality curriculum. Only through the application of nationally uniform standards, they believe, will educational equity across race and income levels be achieved.

Supporters of this approach think schools work best when teachers and students know what is expected of them and society has a way to measure how well those expectations are being met. Schools that lag behind are given clear guidelines for improvement.

Critics of this approach think it focuses too much on teaching to the test. As a result, schools may drop or de-emphasize subjects that aren't on the test, like art, music, foreign languages, and creative writing. As a result, they say, overall learning may suffer.

Critics also worry that under this approach local control is sacrificed to state and national governments. Many believe that local communities, including parents and school officials, should decide on their own what to teach-- and whether and how to test-- their local student body. Others think government might offer suggestions or guidelines, but should not tell local communities how to run their schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act

Signed into law in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act is viewed as the most sweeping federal education bill in more than 40 years. The law is based on four main principles:

- 1) States must develop their own academic achievement standards and benchmarks, to which the federal government will hold them accountable. A number of tests are already or will soon be federally required, including ones for reading, math and science at various points in grades 3-12.
- 2) Failing schools are designated as such, and parents may transfer a student out of a low-achieving or unsafe school to another public school.
- 3) States can transfer federal dollars between different grant programs to improve school progress.
- 4) Education programs must be based on NCLB-sanctioned scientifically-based research.

Supporters of the law say it reforms a failing education system. As evidence the law is working, supporters point to a recent study that shows black and Hispanic students are catching up with their white counterparts in reading and math at the elementary-school level. But critics say many of the gains could have come from changes made before the law was put in place. They further note that the law is bureaucratic and squelches creativity in favor of teaching to the tests. Critics, including state and local governments, also argue that it is too expensive to maintain without additional funding.

Equal Educational Opportunity for All

While we take pride in our commitment to offering education to all, we struggle with how to cope with troubled schools and the "education gap" that, while closing slightly according to recent studies, continues to separate the achievements of minority and white students.

Some say the best way to deal with these problems is to give children in underperforming public schools—schools that are often in poorer districts, populated by minority students—new schooling options, including the chance to get

vouchers to attend private schools or the choice to go to charter schools.

Supporters call this approach "school choice," and think our school system should operate like our economic market and allow consumers to hold public schools accountable. They believe that choice, not additional funding for public schools, is the answer to our education problem. They point out that while real per pupil education spending increased by 42% on average between 1981 and 2001, test scores remained stagnant.

They also believe that public schools that cannot attract and keep students do not deserve public money. Instead, they propose vouchers and magnet or charter schools, which they say will give parents more control over their children's education by providing options while forcing substandard public schools to improve.

Critics of this approach say vouchers and charter schools make the overall improvement of public education more difficult by draining valuable resources from our core public school system, which they suggest is the most important institution for educating most students. They believe we should focus on targeting funding to improve our most troubled public schools by reducing teacher/student ratios, providing targeted tutoring, boosting teacher pay to increase teacher quality, and improving facilities, from basic systems to the science and computer labs needed to train tomorrow's workers.

These critics also note that the poorest children do not always benefit from the current school choice options, as vouchers often do not cover the full cost of attending private schools. There are still others who think we should find a way to do both things at the same time: 1) allocate more money to underperforming schools and 2) provide educational choices for families, including vouchers and charter schools, even if this means raising taxes or finding other sources of revenue.

Charter Schools and Vouchers

Charter schools are publicly-funded schools that function independently of local school districts and are exempt from certain state regulations, as long as they meet state standards for student achievement. Supporters say they are positive alternatives to failing public schools. Critics say they have shown mixed results and take away mainstream public school's funding and best students. They also note that these schools can operate on a "for profit" basis and have incentive to minimize costs at the expense of quality.

School vouchers give parents the public money that would be spent on their child's education at a public school and allow them to apply this money toward tuition at a private school. Supporters say they create competition between schools that will force public schools to improve. Critics complain that, like charter schools, vouchers drain money and good students from the public system. Critics also say vouchers don't always provide enough money for students to pay for private schools, don't address special needs or transportation, and allow families to use public money to attend religious schools.

Many employers say that high school graduates have fair or poor abilities in core skills-- math, writing, spelling and grammar-- and that a high school diploma does not guarantee "the basics."

Increasingly, well-paying jobs require basic science knowledge and engineering skills, but the numbers of students earning degrees in those fields has fallen. And while companies used to hire foreign-born workers to make up the difference, since September 11, 2001, the government has made it more difficult for these foreigners to enter the U.S. to study and work. According to the U.S. State Department, the number of work permits issued to foreign-born workers dropped 20% in 2001 from the previous year.

Many business executives have been calling for the overhaul of our education system, noting that we have one of the highest high school and college dropout rates in the industrialized world, and arguing that the choices we make to educate the next generation will contribute to our nation's prosperity.

Discussion Questions:

- What should be the responsibility of individuals, local/state government, and federal government in our education system?
- Which of these or other education challenges is the most important to you? Why?
- Are the decision-makers in Washington and elsewhere talking about the education issues that matter to you?
- How can the public more effectively be a part of the conversation about these challenges?

Additional Reading:

If you are interested in learning more about these issues, we recommend considering the following transcripts and reports from the Online NewsHour.

Online NewsHour: No Child Left Behind

August 30, 2005 -- [College Prep](#) As new standardized test scores are revealed, are students prepared for college?

August 24, 2005 -- [School Rules](#) Connecticut on Monday sued the U.S. government over the No Child Left Behind law, saying the Department of Education has not supplied the necessary funds to implement the programs.

May 5, 2005 -- [Free Tutoring](#) John Merrow looks at how the No Child Left Behind law is affecting the growing number of free tutoring programs for students around the country.

April 26, 2005 -- [Breaking the Pattern](#) Spencer Michels examines efforts to lower Hispanic dropout rates in schools around the country.

April 14, 2005 -- [Utah's No Child Left Behind Act](#) Educators in Utah have devised a

new plan to improve school performance, one they say overrides the Bush administration's "flawed" No Child Left Behind Act.

April 7, 2005 -- **Newsmaker: Margaret Spellings** Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings discusses some forthcoming revisions to the education law No Child Left Behind.

August 18, 2004 -- **Charter Schools** The American Federation of Teachers released an analysis this week of a Department of Education study, which found that fourth-grade students in public schools are more proficient in reading and math than their counterparts in privately run charter schools. Gwen Ifill speaks with Bella Rosenberg, special adviser to the president of the American Federation of Teachers, and Department of Education Undersecretary Nina Rees.

July 19, 2004 -- **Underfunded Schools** Decreased funding has caused many public schools across the nation to struggle to stay afloat. Spencer Michels reports on the detrimental effect budget cutbacks have on schools located in lower income areas in California.

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