



By the People

America in the World

This discussion guide is intended to serve as a jumping-off point for our upcoming conversation. Please remember that the discussion is not a test of facts, but rather an informal dialogue about your perspectives on the issues.

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES (Rochester Issues)

The education gap drives the debate on school performance in Upstate New York and Rochester in particular.

And, just as it is across the nation, the answer many land on to improve underperforming districts is school choice. In the Upstate areas of New York, school choice has come primarily with charter schools. New York State bought into the charter school idea five years ago.

Charters are issued for a period of up to five years – so many of the first wave of schools have begun to come up for renewal. That included two of the four charter schools in Rochester.

And the results were mixed. In June, two charter schools in Rochester that were regulated by the state’s University System, were closed because of poor performance. And yet, one new charter school has opened in the Rochester area. Proponents say that the charter school effort remains a work in progress and that choice will help city districts like Rochester.

Meanwhile, local school districts (like Rochester) are instituting a choice program within the district. It’s called “managed choice” and allows parents of elementary school children some ability to choose from a variety of schools within the district. Opponents say that the idea will crush the neighborhood school concept and mean a flight from poorer-performing schools.

Another approach worth considering is the belief by some that redirecting, increasing, or targeting money to schools will provide a more equitable educational experience.

Around the nation there have been a number of lawsuits that challenge legislators for failing to adequately fund poorer school district. One challenge sparked a decision by the New York State Court of Appeals (the highest court) that New York City school children are not receiving the constitutionally-mandated opportunity for a sound basic education.

That decision has forced state lawmakers to look at massively increasing funds to New York City... and to consider increases to other big city school districts (like Rochester’s). But the legislature and the governor have put off that decision – and opponents say that more money will never solve the education disparity.

The opposite view is that school districts spend too much on teacher salaries and on administration – and must redirect existing funds.

Finally, there is the approach that says the way to bring up the standards of lower performing districts is to enforce better school behavior. Some offer proposals to increase the enforcement of truancy rules and regulations, such as in Rochester where the city police and the district once had a truancy enforcement program.

That effort disappeared because of budget cuts – and has become a campaign issue in the local elections. Others say school uniforms and dress codes are the way to ensure that students are going to behave.

Opponents argue that these policies are a distraction. They are a poor way to directly deal with the problems of the district. And they point to these actions as dealing with symptoms and not the root problem.

ROCHESTER CITY SCHOOLS “MANAGED CHOICE” PROGRAM

In 2004, the Rochester City School District adopted a policy called “managed choice” that would allow parents to select which elementary school their child would attend. It would replace the current system that automatically sends a child to the closest elementary school.

With the managed choice policy... Rochester city schools are divided into three zones... Northeast – Northwest – and South. Parents are asked to choose three schools within the zone they live in and rank them. A lottery system determines which of their three chosen schools their child attends.

The new policy sets neighborhood school boundaries to families within a half-mile radius of the school...and 70 percent of those families are guaranteed a spot for their child. The policy has created some controversy because it does not include an absolute guarantee that kids can attend their neighborhood school if parents choose that. A grassroots group formed to push for a neighborhood school guarantee.

USING THE COURTS IN N.Y. TO REDISTRIBUTE SCHOOL AID

Some in New York have argued that the formula for allocating state money to local school districts is outdated and unfair. Activist organizations have sued New York for what they call a fairer formula. The largest of these cases involved the “Campaign for Fiscal Equity” organization, which sued the state years ago, asserting New York City schools aren't getting their fair share of education funding from the state.

The organization cites the provision in the state Constitution that says students are entitled to a "sound, basic education" in New York. They have won in the courts and appeals have gone up to the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals.

But the governor and state legislative leaders have not implemented a change in the formula and Gov. George Pataki is now appealing the highest courts ruling. CFE believes reforms to the education funding system should be implemented statewide. There are students in all areas of the state - urban, rural, and suburban - who are not receiving the opportunity for a sound basic education that they deserve. But political leaders believe the courts have overstepped their boundaries in this ruling, saying that only the legislative process can allocate budget money.

ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY (Rochester Issues)

Some believe that having uniform, objective testing – or standardized tests - will help put accountability into the education system and give parents an idea of progress made by their own children and the schools they attend.

Following along with the changes in the No Child Left Behind legislation, the top exams in New York State – the New York’s Regents exams - have been expanded in the last few years. They now require students to pass five exams in math, English, American history, global studies and science (biology, chemistry, earth science or physics) to graduate. State tests also are given in fourth and eighth grade.

Opponents criticize the Regents exam because it forces teachers to “teach to the test.” One local school district in suburban Rochester, the Fairport Central School District, decided in 2004 that it will no longer factor Regents exams into a student’s

final grade. The tests used to count as 20 percent of the final course average. Now the exam scores will only appear on a student’s transcripts. The superintendent of Fairport, William Cala, is an outspoken critic of mandated testing, and has worked to craft an alternative diploma that doesn’t include the Regents testing.

There are others who argue that the best means for having accountability is to make sure local communities are involved. Some communities in New York (New York City) have put the schools under the direct control of the mayor. And now there are political leaders in Rochester want to do the same.

Opponents say that would just politicize the schools. And, they say, by removing the power from elected school boards, management would drift further away from the people.

THE REGENTS EXAMS IN NEW YORK STATE

The Regents are a set of standardized tests given to high school students in New York State. The exams are designed and administered under the authority of the Regents of the State University of New York system (which is where the name comes from). Students in must pass five Regents Exams – Comprehensive English, Math A, Global History and Geography, U.S. History and Geography and one of any number of science subjects. They must pass with a score of 65 or better in order to receive a Regents school diploma. If a student scores an 85 or better, they are judged to have achieved mastery level.

If a student has an average of 90 or higher on all Regents exams taken, a Regents diploma with distinction is awarded. Most Regents examinations are offered every January, June and August. Some organizations have taken a stand against the Regents test as a standard, such as “Time out for Testing”. And in the state there are 28 smaller high schools that have opted out of some of the Regents tests. The New York Performance Standards Consortium represents these schools. Just this year, the State Legislature approved a compromise that will allow these alternative high schools to use other methods of assessing student performance. Among these alternative public high schools is the School without Walls in Rochester.

The first half of this backgrounder, on national education issues, was prepared for *By the People* by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. The section on local issues was prepared by WXXI Public Broadcasting Council, Rochester, NY. Primary funding for the local preparation of this backgrounder came from Rochester Area Community Foundation. Additional funding came from Rochester Institute of Technology.