

National Civic Index for Quality Public Education

Categories—Text Only Version

Created by Public Education Network (PEN)

This text version of the Public Education Network's National Civic Index for Quality Public Education Categories has been created for those who do not have access to a high-speed Internet connection, find this format easier to read, or want an easy reference or facilitation tool. There are slight modifications in the formatting of this version since it is not a web-based product; however, it contains the same content as the online version.

National Civic Index Categories

To create the **National Civic Index for Quality Public Education**, Public Education Network conducted nation-wide public opinion polls over 6 years and worked with over 30 national experts from university and research organizations.

Based on these polls, the public identified 10 community-based conditions necessary to support quality public schools. Without the presence of these conditions, it is virtually impossible to ensure that every child and youth has a quality public education.

We call these conditions **Categories**.

Educational Leadership of Locally Elected Officials at every level of government is critical to ensure that every child and youth attends quality public schools. While public education is still the responsibility of local communities, the influence of state and federal laws also has a direct impact on the schools.

Therefore, the leadership actions of our elected officials need to reflect the community's educational priorities. The community can help to focus these efforts by

- creating opportunities for the public to share their viewpoints on educational issues with the locally elected officials and
- insisting that officials report to the public on their efforts to foster quality public education.

When the community actively engages with elected officials to promote quality schools, they create a stronger foundation for public education.

Commitment to the Values of Tolerance and Inclusiveness is a keystone in ensuring that every child and youth in the community has a quality education. We hear leaders use the phrase “closing of the achievement gap” when they talk about this commitment. But, what does this mean to you and me, to the children and youth in our community?

This means we make sure that culture, language, physical disability, or any other difference does not create a barrier to learning. Parents and families and the community can support this effort by creating structures and processes that encourage the following:

- providing time for different groups to interact and exchange dreams, beliefs, and plans
- honoring the hopes and dreams of all who join the effort
- exploring the differences in culture, classes, race, economics, and education
- eliminating blocks to participation immediately
- establishing multiple levels of action for each effort
- acknowledging differences and similarities openly
- demonstrating caring and support for one another
- communicating in one-on-one situations as much as possible

When communities make these actions a priority and commonplace practice, they can create a community-wide voice that provokes the conditions to support a quality public education for each and every child and youth in the community.

Active Parents typically come to mind when we look at efforts to support education from the wider community. There are four roles parents and family members commonly take on to support quality public schools, starting with their own child as the focus, and branching out to school, district, and beyond:

1. They support their own child's learning by communicating with their child's classroom teacher, overseeing their child's homework and class projects, and volunteering in their child's classroom.
2. They volunteer to work on school-wide activities such as fundraising events or sporting and cultural events.
3. They are involved on school-based improvement teams, advisory committees, or other initiatives that help to frame school- or district-wide decisions that support quality public schools.
4. They advocate for improvement efforts with the school board or other local government agencies to ensure that every child and youth attends a quality public school.

Each role can have a positive impact on local schools and build the conditions necessary for quality public schools. However, parents and families have an even stronger impact on these conditions when they assume several or all of these roles.

In fact, in the public polling conducted by the Public Education Network, active engagement of parents and family members to support public education ranks as the most significant condition of high performing schools. For as parents and family members take on roles that directly affect student learning through 1) setting shared goals, 2) raising awareness of important educational concerns, 3) learning more about the

structures and performance of local schools, or 4) fostering public discussion of key issues, their efforts have a greater impact on the education of children and youth in the community.

Strong Civic Organizations have a critical role to play in supporting and reforming public education. With their variety of resources, networks, and expertise, they are able to create pathways for information exchange, relationship-building, and leadership development in and out of schools. For example, groups such as Local Education Funds (LEFs) are able to support public education by

- serving as intermediaries in community-wide planning,
- directing attention to key issues, and
- establishing connections across different groups.

Using strategies like these, community organizations can build school-community partnerships that involve parents, family members, other community groups, and educators in supporting quality public education.

Moreover, the conditions identified in the Civic Index naturally align to the qualities we would find in Strong Civic Organizations. Civic organizations will find that using the tools provided to measure the conditions necessary for supporting public education through the National Civic Index Poll may also help them shape the work of their organizations.

Utilization of School Performance Data to Improve School Quality is a vital tool in supporting public education. We assume school staff are the only ones who need to review school performance data, but they are not. Collecting, analyzing, and using student performance data should always drive community-wide decisions and actions related to education. Parents, family members, community members, local officials, media groups, and others interested in supporting schools need a clear picture of what is and is not happening in schools before they can effectively support quality public education.

However, if we expect the community to engage in using data, we need to ensure that data reports are

- accessible and easy to understand by the community at large,
- translated into other languages as dictated by community needs, and
- visually meaningful to the community.

Youth Involvement is an emerging area of concern and need for our nation. We often hear that our youth aren't involved. In truth, they are less knowledgeable about political news and the actions of civic government. In comparing by age group participation, youth voters have a significantly lower turnout rate. However, these facts do not provide the total picture of our youth.

Looking at youth involvement from their perspective—when educational issues are raised, we seldom ask our youth to participate in exploring these issues or for their viewpoints. Is it any surprise that they are not engaged?

There are communities that actively reach out to youth: Their efforts address the social, physical, health, and mental needs of youth and provide assistance to them in planning for the future. When communities make these efforts a priority, we see more youth involved in service learning and as volunteers than at any time in recent history. These activities demonstrate how youth involvement can support the conditions that impact public education.

It is the community that creates the structures that promote the following efforts that foster youth involvement:

- reach out to youth and engage them in activities to demonstrate the function and value of our political and governmental systems
- include youth in decision-making teams and efforts that directly impact their lives—educationally, socially, physically, and mentally
- provide real-life experiences for youth that prepare them for their future roles as citizens and advocates for public education
- provide access to information and assistance to youth and their families in planning for education after graduation
- engage youth in a variety of volunteer activities to broaden their understanding of the community, the needs of the community, and the ways in which they can support the community

When communities engage youth in community events that foster service learning, political activism, civic education, and youth transition to public life, they address the needs of the present generation of youth and also strengthen civic involvement for generations to come.

Partnerships with Higher Education provide communities with a wide range of resources to support public education that often go unnoticed. Higher education-public school partnerships commonly provide joint credit classes and promote advanced coursework for all students. However, community organizations also join with higher education to provide new resources for public education.

For example, colleges and universities partner with community organizations to

- offer college credit classes in high-need locations;
- provide job shadowing experiences;
- open their campuses for events to promote the value of post high school education;
- provide facility space for programs and events that serve the needs of the greater community; and
- provide expertise in a wide range of topic areas; and
- offer other services to the community.

Through these partnerships, higher education institutions are able to share a wealth of human and facility resources in support of public education.

Knowledge of and Voting for School Boards is another pathway for the public, community organizations, businesses, and other groups to influence what happens in public education. School boards directly and indirectly affect the quality of student learning through negotiating teacher contracts, approving budgets, addressing facilities issues, establishing or changing curriculums, setting academic standards, choosing textbooks, deciding on funding sources, and hiring superintendents. These actions are the backbone of any educational system.

On election, each board member commits to representing the community's views about quality public schools. However, the community also plays an important role in the school board process—holding the board accountable for decisions and actions that reflect the views and needs of the community. The community does this by

- increasing their awareness of the actions and decisions made by board members,
- reaching out to board members and sharing their perspectives on important issues, and
- expressing their views openly and ardently.

When communities reach out to boards and increase board members' awareness of community priorities, they foster the conditions that are necessary to support public education.

An Active Business Community is another resource that is often underutilized in public education. Typically, our first image of business involvement in education is fundraising. In reality, the business community can support public education in other ways that have a significant impact on student lives.

When businesses have a culture that recognizes the importance of supporting public education,

- they allow employees time off to participate in school activities.
- they offer knowledge, skills, and services as a resource to districts, schools, and students.
- they provide materials, volunteers, work experience opportunities, and “real world” experiences to schools and students.
- they align their support for public education to the educational goals of the community.

However, schools are also a resource for business. Businesses may locate or relocate based on a community's educational resources: Will the quality of the schools help them recruit the best employees? Do the public schools and higher education facilities create a pool of employees who can meet their needs? The businesses and schools in the

community have unique relationships that foster the conditions necessary for quality public schools.

Media Coverage in a democratic society is expected to raise public awareness and inform the public about important social issues. For educational issues, there are two expectations for the media.

First, they provide timely information to the public on critical educational events and concerns.

Second, they serve as a watchdog to hold officials and institutions publicly accountable for their actions related to public education.

Coverage can take the form of paper, broadcast, or electronic tools, as well as other media streams. No matter the format, the media is often the public's only source of information on key educational issues including released data on school-, district-, and statewide performance.

However, both the public and the media share responsibility for promoting this condition in the community. The public's expectation for timely and accurate information on public education encourages the media to fulfill its role. At the same time, the media is responsible to be objective and thorough in reporting.

Media coverage should provide

- a balanced view of public schools,
- useful data about the performance of public schools,
- accessible information for all members of the community, and
- thoughtful analysis of educational issues.