



A Citizen Deliberation on Colorado Graduation Rates

October 20, 2007

Rocky Mountain PBS Studios, Denver, Colorado

Preliminary Report, completed January 23, 2008

Overview of the *By the People* Project

This preliminary report is a brief explanation and summary of the *By the People* deliberative polling event held on October 20, 2007 at Rocky Mountain PBS studios in Denver, Colorado. For more information, including all the statistical information, extended discussions of the results and findings, and updates concerning followup, visit the websites of Regis University's Institute on the Common Good (www.icgregis.org) or Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation (www.cpd.colostate.edu). A preliminary report is currently posted, and an extended report should be posted by the end of January.

The *By the People* event was part of a nationwide deliberation project sponsored by MacNeil-Lehrer Productions. *By the People*'s goal is to bring the views of informed, "ordinary" citizens to a national discussion on the important issues of the day. Since its launch in 2002, BTP has supported well over 200 Citizen Deliberations around the country and more than 100 national and local PBS broadcasts. In October and November of 2007, citizens in eleven communities around the country gathered to discuss citizenship rights and government responsibilities as they relate to healthcare, education, immigration, transportation, housing, and the environment. All locations hosted conversations about citizenship in the 21st century, and then each location focused on a particular policy issue. The focus issue for the Denver event was improving high school graduation rates in Colorado. The Denver event was sponsored by Regis University's Institute on the Common Good, Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation, the Colorado Civic Canopy, and Rocky Mountain PBS.

Participants in the Denver Event

An independent research firm was charged with identifying a random sample of 200 Colorado residents who agreed to attend the event, with the assumption that 100 of those would actually attend. 726 Colorado residents completed the telephone survey, and 200 of them were asked and agreed to attend the event on October 20th. Those that attended were to be paid a stipend of \$75 for their time. As expected, roughly 100 of the 200 who agreed to attend ended up participating in the event.

The purpose of the random sample was to develop an audience that included a diversity of perspectives. Whereas the 200 who agreed to participate were generally statistically representative of Colorado, we had less control over who actually attended that day. Ninety-seven Colorado residents attended the all-day event. A variety of demographic information was collected, including their education level, age group, political affiliation, ideology, ethnicity, gender, and where their children

were education (public, private, home, etc.). In most cases, the demographics exhibited a broad diversity of perspectives. The final group was slanted, however, toward the Democratic Party, with 48% identifying as Democrats, 13% as Republicans, 27% Independent, and 12% other. In addition, the group contained a higher percentage of Latinos and African-Americans, more consistent with a metro-area demographic.

The demographic information also shows that we were successful in getting “beyond the usual suspects” in terms of this audience. Of those that attended, 45% had not initiated contact with an elected official in the past year, and 52% had not attended a meeting of any local government board. In other words, many of the participants were Coloradans that do not normally attend public events such as these.

The Process

A week prior to the event, participants were mailed copies of four page national and local “backgrounders” as reading material. The national backgrounder focused on the responsibilities of citizenship, and the local backgrounder on Colorado graduation rates. Both backgrounders were written in an impartial manner to provide a range of opinions concerning the issues, and are available online at the partner websites. Before arrival at the Rocky Mountain PBS studios on the morning of October 20th, the participants were randomly assigned to one of 11 breakout groups. Each group was facilitated by a trained moderator from the Institute on the Common Good or the CSU Center for Public Deliberation. Each group also was assigned a notetaker to capture themes from their discussions. Participants were first asked to complete a multiple choice survey. They were then ushered to the main studio, where the event’s organizers welcomed them and explained the process. A video concerning the national *By the People* event was shown, followed by an address about citizenship and the importance of education by Colorado Governor Bill Ritter.

Participants then returned to their small groups, and spent the rest of the morning in moderated discussions. Those discussions began with questions concerning citizenship, and ended with a focus on graduation rates. Each group walked through four approaches designed to improve graduation rates: 1) diversifying the focus and relevance of education, 2) developing and supporting high-quality teaching, 3) promoting the community schools model, 4) closing the achievement gap. The groups then broke for lunch, and attended an expert panel discussion where questions from the various groups were addressed. After the panel, participants returned to their small groups for extended discussion of the local topic. At the end of the day, participants completed a “post” survey, which included many of the same questions asked in the earlier survey. Upon completing their survey, they were presented with their stipends, and the event concluded.

Results and Findings

Two primary forms of data were captured at the event: the surveys that were completed at the beginning and the end of the day, and notes from the small group discussions. This section examines some of the key findings identified from both sets of data. All the data from the surveys are available online at the partner websites.

Key Themes

- **Participants focused above all on the need for strong social or family support systems.** Of the various perceived causes of low graduation rates—including race, class, inadequate schools,

and state policy—participants focused on the “lack of a strong social or family support system.” At the beginning of the day, 56% of the participants choose this option, and that number increased to 63% by the end of the day. Of the other potential answers to the primary cause of dropping out, “economic differences” stayed steady at 18%, “inadequate schools” decreased from 15% to 11% during the day, “state policy” decreased from 9% to 7%, and “racial background” decreased from 1% to 0%. This is perhaps the most interesting finding from the day, and one that will spark follow-up efforts by the organizers. Overall, during the day, more participants came to believe the lack of support systems was a critical part of the problem, whereas answers focused on the role of teachers, schools, and funding all decreased in relative importance. These results thus point to the need to recognize that the problem of low graduation rates clearly goes beyond what the schools have control over.

- **Participants believed the primary goal of Colorado’s education system should first be to develop skills for the 21st century workforce, then citizenship, and lastly college preparation.** In answering a question at the end of the day, focused on the primary goal for Colorado’s education system, a majority (58%) chose skills for the 21st Century workforce, 29% chose citizenship, and 12% chose preparing for college. There was not much change during the day, as the answers during the morning survey were similar (54%, 35%, and 11%, respectively). There was a strong belief, however, that some form of post secondary education was important (vocational training, professional schools, associates degrees, etc.).
- **Participants were willing to pay more for education, particularly to support good teachers.** Participants were asked how much they would be willing to pay in taxes to help schools improve. 27% of the respondents chose \$250 to \$500 more a year, which was the highest and most popular option. Another 22% chose from \$100 to \$250. Only 17% chose no additional taxes. Examining the individual discussion, it seemed clear that many participants felt the need to more adequately reward teachers. More than one participant, for example, specifically mentioned increasing teacher salaries while decreasing funds for administrators.
- **Participants understood the importance of good teachers, but were reluctant to blame teachers for the problems.** A majority of the participants did agree with the statement that “improving the quality of teaching” was the most important factor to education success (34% agreeing strongly and 21% agreeing), but in other questions where teaching was one option among others, participants tended to choose other options. 30% choose “develop and support high-quality teaching” as what legislators and school administrators should focus upon when compared to the other four approaches discussed. That number also decreased from 36% at the beginning of the day. In the small group discussions, many comments were made supporting teachers and the difficult job expected of them. Participants struggled with the issue of how to reward high quality teaching while also addressing the issue of poor quality teaching.
- **Participants believed that focusing on high school reform was too late to improve graduation rates.** Several participants, typically with agreement from their groups, explained that dropout rates could not be adequately addressed simply through changes at the high school level. A strong connection to education must be made earlier, and in particular many explained that parents must play a key role in the early years establishing the importance of education.

- **Participants were unsure of increased community involvement in school.** One of the primary options discussed was focused on promoting a “community schools” model, which involved significantly increasing the partnerships schools have in their community and utilizing school facilities for more community events. In discussions, participants were split on this approach. Some were positive, others negative, and still others liked the approach in theory but believed it was too idealistic. In the survey, for the question asking which approach they favored, “promote a community schools model” increased from 9% to 17%. It thus remained a minority option, but almost doubled in popularity.
- **Participants believed that more should be expected of citizens, but were also cognizant that many citizens are more pressed for time than ever.** During the initial group discussions, participants focused on some national issues that were discussed by participants in all eleven cities. When discussing the responsibilities of citizenship, many participants specifically argued that people need to be more involved and engaged, and that they should be asked by policy makers to do more.
- **Participants were split on the value of mandatory standardized testing.** Interestingly, opinions on standardized testing became more moderate during the day. In the morning survey, 25% of respondents disagreed strongly that testing was an effective tool, and 13% agreed strongly. At the end of the day, only 11% disagreed strongly, and only 7% agreed strongly.
- **Participants strongly supported the idea that the event was worthwhile and informative.** 93% of the participants indicated the event was valuable (34%) or very valuable (59%). Not a single participant chose the option labeling the event as “a waste of time.” 55% agreed that the event produced new ideas for them, 80% agreed the deliberations were fair and balanced, and 80% agreed that “citizen deliberation is an effective tool for the formation of public policy.” Participants particularly enjoyed the small group discussions (92% valuable or very valuable), while they were less favorable toward the briefing documents (75% valuable or very valuable) or the panel discussion (47% valuable or very valuable). In a number of the small group discussions, participants expressed frustration with the expert panel, in particular because they were perceived to be dodging questions or playing politics.

Follow up

Event organizers are currently completing the full report, which will be posted online and sent to key legislators and others involved with state education policy. Participants will also be encouraged to present the report to their local school boards for consideration. A number of follow-up forums are also currently being considered in order to tap into additional key audiences (such as legislators and students themselves), and to focus on key themes (such as how to positively impact social support systems). Follow up activities will be announced and reported on the partner websites (www.icgregis.org and www.cpd.colostate.edu).

If you have questions concerning this preliminary report, feel free to contact Martín Carcasson, Director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation, at cpd@colostate.edu or 970-206-0393 or Paul Alexander at the Regis University Institute on the Common Good, at icg@regis.edu or 303-458-4967.