

A Town Meeting on Health Care

Introduction:

A simulated town meeting can be an effective and engaging strategy for cultivating democratic discourse in a classroom setting. The New England town meeting is often used to present students with an example of a pure democracy in which citizens made decisions through face-to-face deliberation about matters of concern to all citizens. While pure democracy in this classic sense has all but disappeared as a basis for political decisions in contemporary society, there are many real world opportunities for citizens to attend meetings, exchange ideas, and, in the process, set and shape the public agenda.

This lesson employs a simulated town meeting based on the deliberation model of the National Issues Forum and using their Issue Brief: *Coping with the Cost of Health Care: How Do We Pay for What We Need?* The lesson also incorporates a look at the presidential candidates' positions on reform of the health care system, but attempts to keep students' minds open to various approaches by not addressing the candidates' views until after students have discussed the issue.

Objectives: At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe the problems related to access to health care in the United States.
- Analyze the advantages and disadvantages of three approaches to improving access to health care in the United States.
- Compare the approaches to health care reform taken by the two presidential candidates.

Materials and Preparation: Students will need copies of the National Issues Forum Issue Brief: *Coping with the Cost of Health Care: How Do We Pay for What We Need?* (download at http://www.nifi.org/discussion_guides/guides.aspx?catID=12). They will also need copies of the comparison of Senator Barack Obama's and Senator John McCain's positions on health care available from the Kaiser Family Foundation (<http://www.health08.org/>; note that this site has a great deal of material on health care reform). You will need to make transparencies from the masters provided.

If you think it would be suitable for your class, you may assign roles for students to take during the town meeting. For example, students might represent an uninsured family, family with insurance provided by the employer, family paying a high price for a private insurance policy, family using Medicaid, small business owner, manager of a

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large business, labor union leader, insurance industry, health care provider, drug company, Barack Obama supporters, John McCain supporters, etc.

Procedure:

1. Project Transparency 1 and ask students to provide answers to the title question based on the information provided. (*Answers will vary; some possible answers include many people do not have health insurance, which may lead to their receiving inferior care or going bankrupt; costs of health care are very high and getting higher; despite the high costs, Americans may not be getting the highest quality care.*)
2. Ask students if they have seen any campaign ads on television or the Internet or in print media about these problems related to health care in the United States. Did they understand what the candidates were advocating? For example, if a candidate says he or she is for a “single-payer system” do they understand what that means? Explain that in this lesson they will have the opportunity to learn about three general approaches being advocated for reforming the health care system. These three approaches are:
 - Reduce the Chance of Financial Ruin—this approach requires Americans to have health insurance (much like they are required to have car insurance), requires employers to provide health insurance to their employees and offers supports to help people who do not have employer-provided insurance available.
 - Restrain Out-of-Control Costs—this approach would involve such actions as limiting what can be charged for insurance, requiring insurers to accept all people who apply for coverage, using the government’s power to set prices for medical services and drugs, and limiting malpractice awards.
 - Provide Coverage as a Right—this approach would implement a government-funded insurance plan that would cover all Americans.
3. Pass out the Issue Brief: *Coping with the Cost of Health Care: How Do We Pay for What We Need?* Explain that the brief will provide information for the class to use in a town meeting. Describe the historic role of the town meeting as a setting in which citizens of a community made decisions through face-to-face deliberation about matters of concern to all citizens. While pure democracy in this classic sense has all but disappeared as a basis for political decisions in contemporary society, there are many real world opportunities for citizens to attend meetings, exchange ideas, and, in the process, set and shape the public agenda. In fact, in 2007, a Blue Ribbon Commission for Health Care Reform held 14 community meetings around Colorado to gather citizen input on health care reform.

Project Transparency 2 and go over the purpose and techniques of the town meeting.

4. Allow students time to read the Issue Brief. Having students read the entire brief is preferable, but to save time, you may have one-third of the students read about each option.
5. Begin the town meeting by setting ground rules. If you already have ground rules or norms for discussions in your classroom, they can be applied to the town meeting. If you do not, ask students: What rules do we need to have a discussion that will help us move toward a decision on this difficult issue, a decision that all of our class members can feel they had a part in achieving? Lead a brainstorm, posting students' ideas. Work through the list, helping students decide on a list of about five norms or rules. Ideas that you may wish to ensure are included:
 - Share the floor—don't dominate and do invite others in.
 - Listen to learn and understand.
 - Speak to each other, not to the facilitator.
 - Be respectful.
6. Facilitate the town meeting, using the questions below to guide the discussion and to transition the group from step to step in the process outlined on Transparency 2. You may occasionally need to ask additional questions to keep the conversation on track or to remind participants to stick with the option under discussion. Posting the pros, cons, and trade-offs may be useful, as may taking straw polls of the group in the later stages of the discussion.

Know the Facts:

- How should we define the problem? That is, what are the critical facts about this problem?
- How do these facts affect your response to the problem?

Understand the Pros and Cons of Each Approach:

- What would be the positive consequences of Approach 1 (2, 3)?
- What arguments can you make against Approach 1 (2, 3)?
- What are the trade-offs we must consider in discussing Approach 1 (2, 3)?

Consider Deeper Motivations:

- What personal values influence your thinking on this issue? For example, if you believe in small government, how does that affect your thinking? If you believe in equality for all, how does that affect your thinking?

Weigh the Views of Others and Identify Conflicts:

- Given the analysis we have completed so far, what option is most appealing to you?
- What do you see as the tension between the options?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?

Seek Common Ground:

- On what do we agree?
 - What trade-offs are we willing or unwilling to accept?
 - What is the group's favored choice? What could be done to minimize any negative consequences of this approach?
7. When the discussion is over, ask the students to reflect on the discussion, considering how their thinking has changed, what they did well both individually and as a group, how satisfied they are with the outcome of the discussion, and what students might do to act upon the class discussion.
 8. Suggest that one follow-up to the discussion is to consider how the candidates for public office stand on the issue. Distribute the comparison of Senator Obama's and Senator McCain's views and ask students to read the summaries. How do the two candidates seem to define the problem? To which of the three approaches is each candidate's position closest? What are the pros and cons of the two candidates' approaches?
 9. To conclude the lesson, assign students to write a letter to one of the two presidential candidates explaining why he/she agrees or disagrees with the candidate's plan for health care reform.

Extension/Enrichment:

A former editor of *Health* magazine has developed an interesting way to show the candidates' views on various health-related issues. Called the PoliGraph, the tool also allows users to place their positions on the graphs. The Washington Post provides PoliGraphs for six health-related issues: health care reform, the uninsured, drug prices, prevention, technology, and stem cells. Each graph is essentially a two by two matrix, with one axis showing how important the issue is to the candidate and the other reflecting whether the candidate thinks the problem should be solved through government action or market forces. Links are provided to statements on the issues by the two candidates. Students may enjoy comparing their views with the candidates' in this graphic format; they might also develop a similar tool for analyzing views on other issues. See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/08/AR2008020803443.html>.

Encourage students to investigate the reform efforts now underway to reform health care in Colorado. The Blue Ribbon Commission for Health Care Reform, created by the legislature in 2006, issued an extensive set of recommendations in January 2008. The recommendations can be accessed from <http://www.colorado.gov/208commission/>. Students could review the findings, compare them with the plan favored by the class, and then contact candidates for legislative seats to ascertain whether they support the Commission's recommendations. Do the candidates' positions seem to differ along party lines? If so, why do students think the parties have different positions on this issue? If not, what accounts for the differences?

What's the Problem?

- **47 million people in the United States do not have health insurance. In Colorado, the number is 792,000, nearly one-fifth of the state's population.**
- **Health insurance premiums have risen 4 times faster than wages over the past 6 years.**
- **Health-care spending in the United States is \$2 trillion per year. That is \$6,401 per person. That is more than is spent on food each year.**
- **More than half of all personal bankruptcies are caused by medical bills.**
- **Despite spending more per person than other developed nations, the United States ranks 29th in the world in life expectancy.**
- **The quality of health care varies according to where you live and how able you are to pay.**

Transparency 2

A Town Meeting on Health Care

What is the purpose of the town meeting?

The purpose of the town meeting is to move toward a decision on a difficult issue.

How do we achieve that purpose?

We achieve the purpose by engaging in a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- Know the FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- Understand the PROS and CONS of each approach—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- Get beyond our initial positions to deeper motivations—the everyday values that influence our choices.
- Weigh carefully the views of others, appreciating the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable and identifying conflicts that must be worked through.
- Seek common ground.

Adapted from *Coping with the Cost of Health Care: How Do We Pay for What We Need? National Issues Forum: A Guide to Forums* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, March 2008).