

GUIDE FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS

The study kit is intended as a resource for local League study committees, to help presenters and facilitators knowledgeably answer questions that may arise during discussion, in a framework focused on reaching consensus. There is more detailed information than you will want to present.

There are more questions about public education than we can address in the limited time available to us. The state study committee has focused the study materials on issues that fall within the scope of the study and on changes that have occurred within the past 20 years.

A prime responsibility of the facilitator and the study committee will be to keep the discussion focused on the consensus questions and avoid distracting asides, however interesting they may be.

Because public education is a large and complicated subject, your presentation should be carefully planned. If you are holding two meetings, it is suggested that you present the background and take consensus on Finance in one meeting and cover the other material in the second meeting. For those Leagues that customarily present a workshop followed by a consensus session as a day-long event, the following formats have been found to work well:

- Present background information in the morning and consensus in the afternoon
- Present school finance in the morning, including consensus, and the rest after lunch.

However you plan your consensus meeting(s), be prepared to devote a significant amount of time to school finance.

Trying to put all of the background and explanations in one meeting and consensus in another is tempting, but can lead to several problems:

- Some members will attend one meeting and not the other
- Those who attend the first meeting and not the second will receive good information but will not be able to participate in the consensus
- Those who attend only the second meeting will not have the depth of background to follow the discussion.

Getting to Consensus

Almost everyone is an expert on public education because of their experiences, either personal (they attended school) or through their children, grandchildren or friends. Each will have interesting stories to share. Many showing great interest in this topic are teachers, retired teachers, current and past school board members, and other educational activists. While their insights are valuable, it is the responsibility of the facilitator(s) to keep the group focused on the consensus questions. The following are suggestions to help achieve this goal.

Before the consensus meeting committee members should:

- **Understand the ingredients of an effective meeting**
 - There is a common focus on content.
 - There is a common focus on process.
 - The discussion leader or facilitator maintains an open and balanced conversational flow.
 - Someone is responsible for protecting individuals from personal attack.
 - Everyone’s role and responsibility is clearly defined and agreed upon.

- **Assign specific tasks to committee members; decide**
 - how much time to allot to each element of the discussion
 - who will present each part
 - who will facilitate the consensus portion of the meeting if different from the presenters
 - who will be recorder.

- **Decide how to present the study material**

Break the presentation into manageable chunks that lay people can understand. A variety of voices and presentation styles helps people stay focused. Be prepared to answer questions for clarification along the way. The material is complicated in some sections and you will want to check for understanding.

- **Schedule a practice session prior to the presentation/consensus meeting**

Schedule a practice session for discussion leaders, recorders, and consensus facilitators. It is helpful to have a board member attend the session to help with both timing and balance between background and group discussion. The recorder should come away with a clear idea of what to look for and record, including added questions and opinions from the group about topics not covered by the consensus questions.

- **Make sure committee members are familiar with the current education position**

This is a position update. Discussion leaders should be familiar with the current Education position. It can be found in both the Study Guide and this Leader’s Guide, as well as in the *LWVC Action Policies and Positions* publication and online at www.lwvc.org. Additional copies should be made available at the meeting (the position fits easily on one double-sided page).

At the Meeting

- **Explain the ground rules, meeting structure**

The discussion leader should explain the meeting ground rules at the beginning—how the meeting will be structured, and how much time will be devoted to each section. If you are having just one meeting, one-third to one-half of the time should be devoted to Finance.
- **Review the difference between voting and consensus**

Explain the difference between a majority vote and consensus as the sense of the meeting. This can be done by the discussion leader or by a senior League member or board member. The time needed for this will depend on the experience of the members participating.
- **The role of the discussion leader/facilitator is to make sure**
 - meeting ground rules are understood up front
 - everyone has a copy of the agenda and knows what to expect
 - everyone understands his/her role in the meeting
 - everyone stays on track until the group has accomplished what it set out to do.
- **Define the recorder's role**
 - If using a flip chart for recording group memory, define and describe the recorder's role so all participants have a clear and mutual understanding of both his/her role and purpose
 - commit the group's discussion to writing, usually on a flip chart
 - record the answers to consensus questions
 - record topics that attract strong attention and any other relevant issues raised.

The fullness of the recorder's account plays a critical role in helping the state study committee determine points of consensus. It also provides the kind of background information that can be used by future state boards to more fully understand the member agreement behind adopted positions.

- **Review the current education position**

Early in the meeting review the current position being updated. More information on this can be found on pages 5-6 of this Leader's Guide.
- **Ask the group's help in keeping on topic**

People will usually cooperate if they understand why you must ask them to keep their comments focused.
- **Make sure everyone understands the material as it is presented**

Encourage people to ask questions when they don't understand something. Asking for raised hands can help assure everyone's opinion is included
- **How to handle "breaking news"**

When the education update was adopted in May 2003, delegates could not know how quickly some of the issues in the study would gain visibility on the public agenda. Decisions affecting some of the consensus questions are being made as we go to press. Others will be made during the window between printing and consensus. If one of these issues is of particular interest to your community, it is probably wise to discuss the latest information up front before starting that section. We encourage

you to contact the LWVC study committee chair with any questions. Local study committees will be advised of any late breaking decisions that effect any portion of the study materials.

- **If you have a “talkative group” . . .**
If your group likes to talk, or has a lot of opinions, it may be useful to enlist a timekeeper to assist the discussion leader.
- **The importance of the end-of-the-meeting review**
Allow 10-15 minutes at the end of the meeting for the recorder to review his/her notes and reaffirm the sense of the meeting. This is also a chance to check names for late arrivals and make everyone feels included.

After the Meeting

- **Schedule a committee debriefing**
Schedule a meeting of your committee to debrief as soon as possible after the general or unit meetings, while the full discussion is still fresh in their minds. It will facilitate the debrief if the recorder(s) is able to quickly write up her/his notes and e-mail them to the committee.
- **Prepare the written consensus report**
Using the report form in this Leader’s Guide, prepare the written record of your consensus meeting. If you prefer to use an electronic copy, go to the League Web site and download it.
- **Submit your written report to your board of directors for approval.**
- **Send the approved consensus report to the LWVCEF study committee.**
Directions for sending in the consensus report are on the first page of the report form.
- **Remember, consensus results are due to the state committee by January 15, 2005.**