

## **PUBLIC AGENDA**

Contact:

Claudia Feurey ext. 35  
Michael Remaley ext. 13  
(212) 686-6610



### **For Immediate Release**

#### **Transforming Education and Public Life in Bridgeport, CT**

New York, NY – After losing much of its manufacturing and industrial base, Bridgeport, CT confronted the problems of many old industrial cities - high unemployment, a shrinking tax base, crime and other problems.

But what has set Bridgeport apart from cities with similar histories is its uncommonly rich civic life. According to a new case study by Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE), “When it comes time to solve community problems or make and implement policy, the institutions, organizations and individuals of Bridgeport defy business as usual through a remarkably inclusive and deliberative citizen-centered approach to problem solving.”

*Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, CT*, by Will Friedman, Alison Kadlec and Lara Birnback, outlines how public engagement has become an integral part of the city’s civic life. It shows how citizen engagement has extended beyond education, the issue around which it began, to other areas and has had an important impact on how decisions are generally made. According to the study, public problems are often viewed as the responsibility of experts. But in Bridgeport, citizens are increasingly viewed as important partners in problem solving.

*Transforming Public Life* illustrates how public engagement in education was launched through a series of Public Agenda's Community Conversations, conducted in cooperation with the Bridgeport Public Education Fund, the Institute for Educational Leadership, the Connecticut-based William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund and the Connecticut League of Women Voters.

The Bridgeport Public Education Fund has played a particularly strong role in creating more citizen involvement in education and the study explores the role played by the organization as public engagement became increasingly embedded. Specifically, the report shows how the Fund evolved from the role of “deliberative entrepreneur” (bringing new forms of public engagement to the community) to that of “deliberative maven” (supporting emerging entrepreneurs who seek to bring new forms of public engagement to new issues and sectors). The Fund is now an advisor to many groups and individuals.

While cause and effect are always hard to trace, there are links between Bridgeport’s emerging culture of problem solving, decision making and increasing student success.

Much remains to be done in the public schools, but five Bridgeport schools have recently been removed from the list of poor-performing schools under federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. For the past two years, the City of Bridgeport has been one of the five finalists in the Broad Foundation Prize for Urban Education, which honors urban districts demonstrating the greatest overall improvements in achievement, especially among poor and minority students.

Bridgeport, the case study notes, shows how public engagement can lead to specific, concrete changes in policy and institutional practices. “Local leaders describe an unusual level of collaboration among organizations and service providers in the city in large part because most now share the language of public engagement and have the capacity to carry it out with some regularity.”

Notably, the Bridgeport business community bought into the process and has become committed to being more involved in improving education. The study reports that not only has business become more active in school improvement, it has begun to participate in engagement efforts in other areas.

According to CAPE Director Will Friedman, “Many communities throughout the country would benefit from studying and considering adopting some of the engagement measures that have served Bridgeport so well. The process of change may seem slow, but it is resulting in cultural changes and new policies and practices that appear likely to benefit the community. Long-term experience shows that it is much more difficult to sustain solutions without public support.”

The report is available on line at [PublicAgenda.org](http://PublicAgenda.org). Click on the “Public Engagement” button on the home page.

**Public Agenda's** mission is to help Americans explore and understand critical issues. Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization dedicated to nonpartisan public policy research. Founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich, the social scientist and author, Public Agenda is well respected for its influential public opinion surveys and balanced citizen education materials. Its mission is to inject the public’s voice into crucial policy debates. Public Agenda seeks to inform leaders about the public’s views and to engage citizens in discussing complex policy issues.

Public Agenda’s **Center for Advances in Public Engagement** researches, develops and disseminates new insights and practices to build the field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics.

**Visit [PublicAgenda.org](http://PublicAgenda.org).** Twice nominated for the prestigious Webby award, [PublicAgenda.org](http://PublicAgenda.org) is recommended by Newsweek, Fox News, MSNBC.com and is a USA Today “Hot Site” and a Yahoo! “Web Pick.” Time Magazine.com named [PublicAgenda.org](http://PublicAgenda.org) one of the “50 Coolest Websites” and *Library Journal* has praised the site as one of the best sources on the web.

#### **Public Agenda**

6 East 39<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10016  
T (212) 686-6610 F (212) 889-3461

1100 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 1090  
Washington, DC 20005  
T (202) 292-1020 F (202) 775-8885