

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

A How-To Guide to Community Forums on Testing

Community meetings or town halls are a great way to educate, network and organize around testing issues. Panels of speakers can inform the community about high-stakes testing and its consequences and inspire people to take action. Forums also provide opportunities to promote authentic assessment and related school reforms. Organizers can identify and collect contact information of people willing to participate in further campaigns and actions.

The good news is that a successful forum can be planned and executed by a just a handful of people. Forums can be large or small. Smaller events, like house parties, are a great way to educate friends and neighbors and create a safe space for people to share stories and concerns. Larger events can be held in a public library meeting room, school auditorium, town hall meeting space or other public venue. They can include parents, teachers, students and other members of the community, including public officials. You can also persuade your school board to consider endorsing the [National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing](#) and therefore solicit testimony about assessment.

Effective forums both educate and stimulate an exchange of ideas. Participants come with their own knowledge, experiences, values, and concerns about public education and assessment. For example, some parents may have strong ideas about the impact of testing on their own children and what they expect their children to get out of a public school education. Others may simply be looking for information and have more questions than answers about how testing is being used in schools.

District, state and federal testing policies are complex and change frequently, so forums can provide participants with vital, accurate and clear information about testing policies, their genesis and how local testing issues fit into the larger state and national context.

This process of educating the community, connecting individual concerns to a larger political context and showing people that they are not alone in their concerns can be tremendously empowering. It can inspire confidence in the participants that, working together, they can build enough political strength to fight for and win positive changes.

Before planning a forum or discussion group, think about whom you are trying to reach, what you want them to know, and what actions you would encourage them to take.

Here are some steps:

- **Decide who you want to reach out to and include in the audience.** The natural participants in a forum on testing include teachers, parents, students, school board members, legislators and other public officials. School committee members, local teachers union leaders, local and state legislators and other elected officials can be invited to listen to the community's concerns and questions about testing.

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- **Find a location.** Again, a small gathering can take place in an organizer's living room or at a coffee shop or restaurant. For a larger events, look into reserving a public space such as a library or town hall meeting room, a school auditorium, cafeteria or library. Consider other spaces, like a community youth or senior center or meeting spaces at religious centers, churches, synagogues or mosques.
- **Invite people to give presentations and personal testimony.** Identify people in the community or surrounding areas with knowledge about tests, test misuse, and educationally sound assessment. Include educators, parents, students and local advocates or academics with expertise in assessment policy. Personal testimony from teachers who are facing destructive testing policies or parents who are concerned about negative impact on their children can be powerful. High school students, like teachers, deal with the consequences of high-stakes testing every day and can be among the most eloquent speakers on the issue.
- **Prepare a detailed agenda.** Allocate a specific amount of time for each agenda item. In general, keep the forum to an hour and a half at most. (If you need more time, consider holding a series of events, such as one focusing on high-quality assessment). Make sure to have a good and well-prepared facilitator or chairperson.
 - Welcome and introductions (if this is a small group). You might ask people why they came to the forum. With a large group, ask a few people to say why they are here. Review the agenda and goals for the session.
 - Short presentations about the issue (could include a short video).
 - Facilitated discussion, with questions to answer. In a large gathering, you could break into smaller groups, each with a facilitator and note taker.
 - Call to action: write letters to members of congress or the city council, circulate petitions, turn out people for a demonstration or other public action, or support parent opt-outs or teacher boycotts
- **Prepare materials and have them on hand.** FairTest is always creating new resources, toolkits, and fact sheets you can use to educate and engage participants and they can take home. You may want to use a fact sheet, article, or short video to spark a lively discussion. Make sure you have sign-in sheets, either paper or electronic, to get participants names and contact information, especially email addresses, so you can follow up and invite them to participate in actions going forward.
- **Invite people.** Receiving a personal invite to an event makes people more likely to come. One way to ensure good attendance is to assign well-known individuals a role during the presentation. That way, they will be sure to come and may bring others along with them. You might start with written or e-mail invitations followed by phone calls. For large forums, use posters, fliers, website posts, Facebook and Twitter. List the event in school newsletters and local newspapers or radio. If you live in a diverse community, be sure to reach out to different segments of the community. Find people to translate flyers and other information into commonly spoken languages. Think about ways to build the most diverse and representative audience possible by reaching out to local groups representing ethnic and language minority groups. Think about providing food, child care or translations.
- **Follow up.** Create an email list and thank people for coming. Encourage them to be part of a local or regional groups working on these issues. If there are no existing groups, the names and contacts you collect at the event can be the beginning of a local testing reform organization. Let people know how they can stay involved and can get friends, family members, fellow congregants and co-workers engaged.

For more detailed information, see these additional resources:

- Upper Hudson Peace Action's [brief, bulleted guide to holding a town meeting](#).
- FairTest's [media guide and tool kit](#).