



The Right Question Project
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The Right Question Project in Action

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What is The Right Question Project?

The Right Question Project (RQP) is a non-profit organization that develops and makes easily available simple, innovative methods that help all people – no matter their educational, income or literacy level – learn to advocate for themselves and their families and participate in decision-making processes that affect them. RQP is an invaluable resource that enhances the work of hundreds of organizations across the country. We are always learning from how people use our methods to address both individual and community needs. We then tap those lessons to design and teach new methods that can be shared with more people. The lessons from the field also inform RQP's on-going development of innovative ideas about how to make democracy work better for all people, including the concept of *Microdemocracy*, a new starting point for democratic action.

What does RQP Teach? Page 2.



Maritza and other childcare providers are a valuable resource for parents.

“Asking the Right Questions is a Life Tool”: Maritza’s Story

“I thought I had it all down,” Maritza remembers. When she walked into a meeting with her caseworker, she thought she knew exactly what she was going to say. Maritza is a tall young woman with a confident way of speaking and a certain toughness. But, when she started to talk, she realized that the caseworker didn’t understand one thing that she said. “Is this what you’re trying to say? Is this what you’re asking?” the caseworker prodded her over and over. Before she knew it, Maritza had left the meeting, still without any of the information that she needed. “I finally got so frustrated, that I didn’t want to talk to her anymore. So I’d walk away.”

According to Maritza, her experience is not unique. Many parents struggle when they interact with service agencies and schools. They don’t know how to communicate confidently, and they “feel small.”

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Teachers participate in an RQP workshop at the Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum. See story page 3.

RQP in Adult Education

As part of a major three-year initiative to train hundreds of adult educators in Northern New England, RQP produced its first online course for adult educators. This fall and winter, we are providing onsite and online trainings in all three states. RQP presented workshops at Fall Conferences in Maine and New Hampshire, where many participants were excited about teaching their students to formulate their own questions. One Maine teacher who was new to RQP wrote in an evaluation that RQP “opens up a whole world of teaching possibilities.” Teachers with previous experience in RQP trainings observed that RQP’s methods have become even simpler and easier to use. Jane’s Trust is supporting our three-year collaboration with the Adult Education Departments in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont.

The RQP Network: More Than Technology

This fall, **Steve Quatrano**, Director of Technology Strategy, has developed an early version of the technology infrastructure for the RQP Online Network.

But the RQP Network is more than technology; it also consists of materials and people. We have added early drafts of over 100 pages of courseware, resources and stories of how RQP is being used in a variety of applications, but especially **Adult Education**. And we are actively recruiting our first RQP Network Users among Adult Educators in Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire.

Although we are still several months from going live to a wider audience, you can preview the website at <http://www.rightquestion.org/main>.

RQP “opens up a whole world of teaching possibilities.”

What Does RQP Teach?

RQP has developed a deceptively simple educational strategy that has a transformational impact and far-ranging applications. The strategy – both what is taught and how it is taught – quickly and effectively teaches very sophisticated critical thinking skills that help people think and act on their own behalf.

The methods are taught in ways that respect the potential of all people to learn to generate new ideas, figure out challenging problems, acquire and practice new skills and name for themselves the significance of what they learned and how they will use it.

The content – what is taught – is based on two core elements:

- ✓ **a framework for accountable decision-making** that makes it easier for people to identify key decisions and participate effectively in the process for making them
- ✓ **the skill of question formulation** which is often taken for granted and rarely taught even though it is actually a quite complex and powerful critical thinking skill.

Why is this content so important? Well, think about what it means if people cannot readily identify decisions that affect them, nor ask questions about them, nor know how to hold decision-makers accountable. Individuals certainly need to be able to do this; think of a parent advocating on behalf of a child. Democracy absolutely is in need of this; just imagine an engaged citizenry able to ask questions and hold decision-makers accountable.

Questions in the Classroom: RQP in schools

The Coalition of Essential Schools held its annual national conference in Boston this year, and RQP was present in full force, creating a great deal of buzz around students learning to formulate their own questions. Educators from around the country who had participated in RQP workshops at previous conferences came up to us to share how they were using RQP methods in their classrooms and to purchase our new Teacher's Guide for *Teaching Students to Formulate Their Own Questions*. Our original workshop was so oversubscribed that we had to add a second one, which also quickly filled to capacity.

Participant evaluations revealed that teachers learned a "very practical" method that they could "use on Monday," something that could "really open up and breathe some life into [their] teaching" and "give everyone a voice" in the classroom. Teachers were eager to share what they had learned with their students and with colleagues.



Teachers from around the world participate in a RQP workshop at the **Coalition of Essential Schools** Fall Forum in Boston.

RQP in Health Care and Mental Health
Small pilot projects over the past couple of years have demonstrated the potential for using RQP methods to build patients' ability to partner more effectively with health care and mental health professionals. We are excited about the potential in these two areas and plan to develop them further when we can commit more resources to these very important fields.

RQP and Democracy: A Book in Progress

RQP staff made significant progress, amidst all of this activity, on our book about why RQP's methods are so effective for engaging more people in democratic action. In the book, we describe examples of **Microdemocracy** that demonstrate how people can use RQP methods to "act democratically" in their ordinary encounters with public institutions. For the full story, plan on reading the book in 2007! Support is provided by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and private donors.

Other Books of Note

We'd like to recommend two important books published this past year by people we've come to know through their good work.

[At a Loss for Words: How America Is Failing Our Children and What We Can Do about It](#), Betty Bardige, foreword by T. Berry Brazelton, M.D. Temple University Press, \$19.95

For decades, Betty Bardige has been a bold and eloquent advocate for addressing the needs of all children. Her vast knowledge, experience and passion have artfully come together in her new book, [At a Loss for Words](#). It is a powerful, carefully constructed argument that brings to the fore the critical importance of early literacy skills in reducing the achievement gap that begins before three years of age. The book makes a compelling case for investing in early literacy skills and in taking action to ensure sufficient support for quality early childhood programs all across the country.

[Datavise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning](#), edited by Kathryn Parker Boudett, Elizabeth A. City and Richard J. Murnane, Harvard Education Press, \$29.95

Richard Murnane, Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), has led a remarkable effort over the past few years to create a productive exchange of expertise between faculty at HGSE and educators in the Boston Public Schools. This book comes out of that experience. It demonstrates a simple, but extraordinarily important idea: reliable information, or data, about what children are learning and what they are not learning can be used to improve teaching, increase dialogue about various teaching methods and sharpen a classroom, school and district's focus on how to increase student achievement.

Early Childhood



Parent Paule Lahens talks about using her Planning Calendar at her doctor's appointment.

We have developed an exciting new tool for use by early childhood programs. As part of our work with **Associated Early Care and Education Inc.** of Greater Boston, we created a Personal Planning Calendar, *Asking the Right Questions*, that parents can use to both learn RQP methods and to prepare for meetings with their children's teachers, for doctor's appointments and other important events. Parents have used the calendar to strategize on what they want to accomplish, what they need to find out and what they need to do. Parent focus groups conducted by an outside evaluator found evidence that "the Planning Calendar can stand alone to teach the methods."

Continued on next Page

Maritza's Story continued from page 1

"Asking the right questions is a life tool. You need this skill for everything: court, getting a job, even for school."

Maritza knows a lot about the challenges parents face with systems and government services. She hears about them often in her work as an early childhood teacher in a Boston-area childcare center. For many parents, Maritza is a trusted resource as well as an educator. When they come by the center to pick up their children, parents take a few moments out of their day to seek out Maritza to talk with her about their meetings with teachers, caseworkers, and their visits with the doctor. They especially come to Maritza when they have a problem or need help for their child.

When Maritza attended an RQP training at the center where she works, something clicked. She thought back to her experiences with her caseworker, and realized that asking the right questions would have made a huge difference for her, and for many of the parents she sees everyday. "Asking the right questions is a life tool. You need this skill for everything: court, getting a job, and even for school," she says. RQP provided Maritza and other staff at centers across Boston with training and a Planning Calendar they could use to teach parents the methods. The *Asking the Right Questions* Planning Calendar teaches a simple method to formulate questions, and also serves as an appointment book so that parents can be better prepared to advocate for themselves and their children.

Maritza feels that learning how to ask the right questions is so important, that she now uses the Planning Calendar with parents in the few minutes she has with them each day. But, getting parents to see the value of looking at the Planning Calendar is not always easy to do. One parent immediately said "I ain't reading that!" when Maritza showed her the Calendar. "I had to argue with her to make her look at it," Maritza remembers. "I had to take out a block of time, sit down with her, and go through the steps." Now, several months later, the parent uses her Calendar daily, and Maritza provides backup support. Once parents get over their initial reluctance, they are enthusiastic about the new skills they learn.

Looking back, Maritza says, "I thought I had it all down, but I didn't." Many parents are used to "getting the run-around" when dealing with complex systems. Maritza knows all too well the frustrations that parents feel when they are struggling to communicate or aren't being heard. This is what makes RQP skills so valuable to her. "It can help you feel more confident. It can help others take you seriously. And it can help you feel like you are not being labeled, constantly."

Our deepest thanks go out to **Maritza Castillo** for her digital story, "Passing it On," which inspired the story above. To view digital stories created by Maritza and other childcare providers about using RQP, visit www.rightquestion.org/earlychildhood.

Continuing Work with the PODER Institute in Lawrence, MA



Marina Ortiz, the recipient of the Right Question Award, with **RQP Co-Director Luz Santana**.

Since its beginning in 2003, the **PODER Institute** has used RQP methods as a key ingredient in their work to develop new leadership and activism in Lawrence's Hispanic community. The Institute focuses on building participants' skills to take on leadership roles and to implement specific projects.

In March 2005, RQP provided a training to help participants focus on the city budget. Participants used their question formulation skills to interview a panel of decision makers about how the city budget works. They also applied the skills in the production of *The People's Guide to the Lawrence City Budget*, a handbook for the entire community. The handbook breaks down the complexities of city expenditures so that citizens can better understand and advocate for issues important to them.

At the graduation ceremony in September, the Institute presented the "Right Question Project Award" to the leader who used questions most actively and effectively. **RQP Co-Director Luz Santana** was invited to present the award to **Marina Ortiz**.

RQP in Greensboro, North Carolina

The Guilford Education Alliance, a parent advocacy group in North Carolina, provides RQP training to staff from organizations across the community. One trainer taught high school students how to teach their peers to formulate their own questions and identify their priorities. **Anne Cortes** reports:



Students in Greensboro used RQP methods to focus on high school dropout rates.

In August 2005, 50 high school students in Greensboro gathered for a week long camp—Service Learning: Impacting Citizenship. A group of students led their peers through an RQP exercise to pinpoint issues of greatest concern about high school drop out rates. The results of this session were posted on the student blog, incorporated into a community presentation, and will be the foundation for the planning process for a youth education advocacy initiative.

Early Childhood continued from page 4

We found that, although the Planning Calendar worked for many parents, others were less likely to read printed material, a recurring problem among low-literacy parents. That's why the training we provided to early childhood teachers was so important. They are vital resources for the parents, and can guide and encourage their use of the Planning Calendar.

We encourage you to go to www.rightquestion.org/earlychildhood to view digital stories developed and told by parents and staff from Associated Centers. Special thanks go out to **Natasha Freidus** of *Creative Narrations* for her great work in helping staff members produce their own digital stories, and to the staff and parents of Associated. We are grateful to private donors and an Anonymous Foundation for supporting our work in early childhood.

Voter Education

A year after a tumultuous presidential race, new evidence has emerged that our innovative non-partisan voter education initiative, **Better Questions, Better Decisions (BQBD)** offers a promising new model for both engaging new voters and building their capacity to think critically about the decisions that affect them. **BQBD** offered statewide trainings for adult educators in New Hampshire and Arizona. These adult educators taught RQP's voter education curriculum to low-income adults enrolled in adult literacy, GED, and ESOL classes. View digital stories written and produced by voters at www.rightquestion.org/betterdecisions.

Learning to Focus on Decisions

The changes in student participants in both states were immediate and lasting. At the Pima College Adult Education Center in Tucson, students reflected in a recent newsletter on what they had learned:

We make decisions every day, but now we feel more comfortable and more confident that we can make better decisions. When we ask the right questions, gather information, and realize that it's important to vote, we are better informed to make the right decisions. Some of us didn't vote [before] because we didn't understand the importance of voting, but now we do.

From Voter Education to GED

Ten months after the election, an adult educator in New Hampshire told us a story about a student who had been in one of our workshops before the election last year. This student was a very passive learner who rarely participated in class. But, according to her teacher, something happened to her during the workshop. "She participated

"Now we feel more comfortable and more confident that we can make better decisions."



Participants in an RQP voter education workshop in Arizona.

in ways that really surprised us," her teacher told us. "It carried over past the workshop. She just became a much more active learner. Two months later, she had her GED!"

93% of Participants "More Prepared" to Vote!

An evaluation done by a graduate student in Robert Putnam's seminar at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University supports these stories and others like them. It found examples of "strong success" in both New Hampshire and Arizona, "particularly in strengthening critical thinking skills." One group of students in Arizona was asked to gauge their feelings about voting before and after the workshop, and almost all described the workshop experience as making them "more prepared" (93%) and "more interested" (87%) in voting.

RQP in St. Paul, Minnesota

Trainers in St. Paul have been teaching RQP methods to parents from diverse backgrounds who used what they learned to have a say in the citywide search for a superintendent. **Roxy Foster** of the Council for Civic Parent Leadership (CCPL) reports:

On September 19, the St. Paul Network of Education Action Teams (NEAT) hosted a public conversation about the St. Paul Superintendent Search. Representatives from 19 area schools were present. Using RQP methods, parents and community members asked their own questions about what the new Superintendent needs to know about St. Paul schools and the community.

CCPL will also be conducting RQP trainings in Spanish, Hmong, and English in a partnership with the St. Paul Schools this coming school year. They also will be translating RQP materials into Hmong and Somali.

How Do RQP Methods Reach People?

RQP staff create written materials, offer trainings and provide technical assistance to help partner organizations integrate the teaching of RQP methods into their on-going work. RQP is also developing an online “community of practice” to encourage peer-to-peer exchange about how best to teach the methods to more people.

What happens when people learn RQP methods? Page 7.



From left: (standing) Steve Quatrano, Ron Walker, Dan Rothstein, Luz Santana, David Guberman, (seated) Agnes Bain, Rick Weissbourd, Macky Buck

From all of us at RQP, we send our best wishes for a full recovery from breast cancer to our intrepid colleague and masterful adult educator, **Patricia Nelson.**

RQP Staff

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Dan Rothstein	
Steve Quatrano	Director of Technology Strategy
Patricia Nelson	Training Associate
Beccah Golubock Watson	Program Associate

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Profile: Lavada Berger RQP Intern

Freshman, Harvard College

Hometown: Newark, New Jersey

“While here at the Right Question Project, I’ve realized just how important the structure of a question is, and how to utilize questions to identify group priorities. My roommate Leslie and I are employing the RQP method to develop a plan for a new student-run organization, Inner-City Students at Harvard.”

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From Self-Advocacy to Democratic Participation –

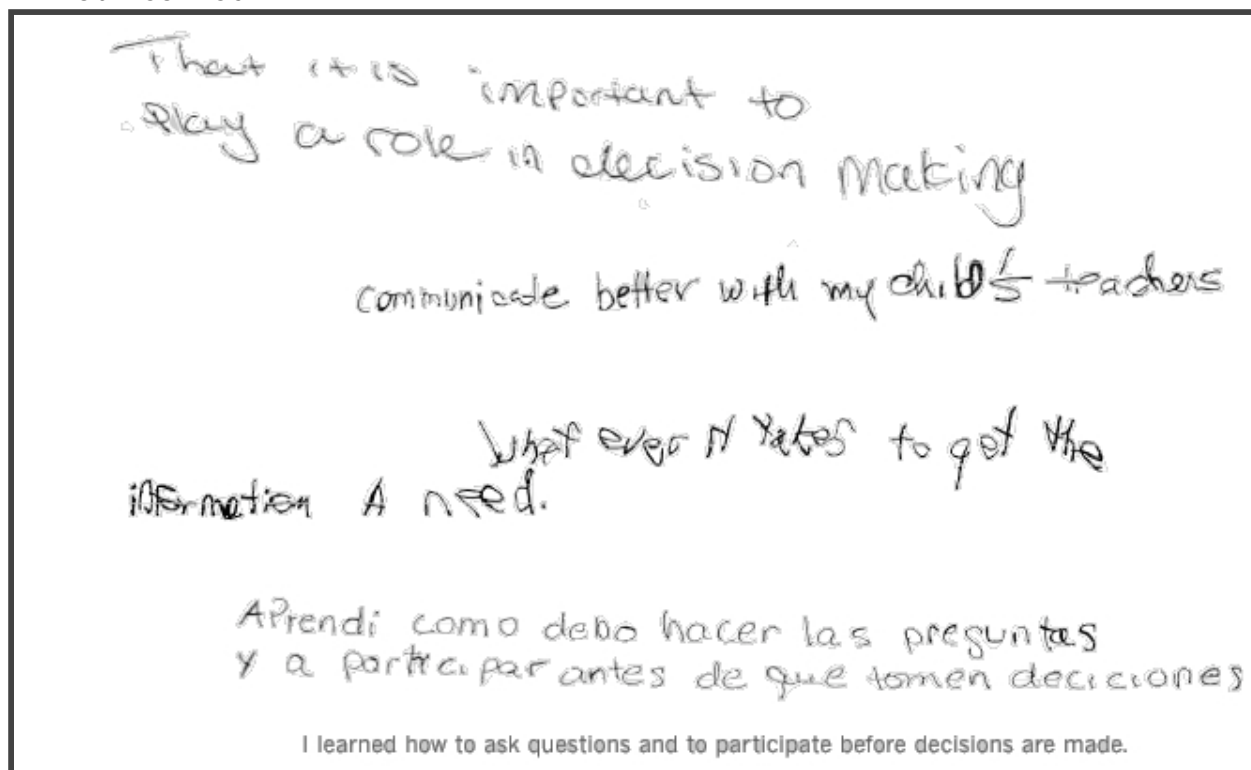
What Happens When People Learn RQP methods?

In communities around the country, RQP methods have helped **parents** get more involved in their children's education, **patients** to partner with their **health care providers**, **public housing residents** to take a role in local decision-making, **adult literacy students** to secure better job training opportunities, and **non-voters** to discover for the first time the value of voting. Evaluations show that people who learn RQP methods become more confident and take more effective action.

Taking action individually has also been a catalyst for individuals to join with others to produce changes on the neighborhood, municipal, state, and national levels. For example, women in a housing project in New Hampshire effectively challenged the state child welfare department to include parents in decision-making processes that affect them; Mexican immigrant parents in New Mexico who had never set foot inside their children's schools, mobilized to successfully advocate for a violence prevention program and hold the city council accountable for allocating resources; and a group of welfare recipients in rural California designed their own plans for exiting the welfare system, made their voices heard in decision-making processes at the local welfare office, and lobbied their influential Congressman for changes in federal legislation.

To view a video about RQP's work, see "Voices from the Field," by Natasha Freidus at www.creativenarrations.net/site/vid.html.

"What I learned..."



RQP

a catalyst for Microdemocracy

helping people help themselves

expanding democratic participation

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