



The
Right Question Project
Good Questions > Better Decisions > A Stronger Democracy

An Introduction to The Right Question Project Strategy

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2464 Massachusetts Avenue, Suite 314, Cambridge MA 02140
617-492-1900 www.rightquestion.org

The Right Question Project Strategy

Leads to people who:

- advocate for themselves
- navigate complex systems
- participate in decisions that affect them
- become more self-sufficient
- partner with service-providers and public officials
- act as citizens able to expect and require accountable decision-making
- help make democracy work better

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What do people learn from the Right Question Project?

The Right Question Project (RQP) educational strategy teaches deceptively simple skills that are essential both for effective self-advocacy and democratic action. Based on 15 years of work all across the United States, as well as in Canada, South Africa, Central America and Eastern Europe, RQP has seen that learning to formulate questions and focus effectively on decisions has a transformational effect. People who have rarely spoken up for themselves or their families before feel far more confident in their ability to act on their own behalf and take far more effective action. RQP's singular achievement has been to simplify the teaching of what are actually very sophisticated skills so that all people, no matter their educational or literacy level, can:

◆ Formulate Their Own Questions

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| ▪ Produce their own questions |
| ▪ Improve their questions |
| ▪ Strategize on how to use their questions |

◆ Expect and require accountable decision-making by using three specific criteria

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| ▪ Legitimate Reasons for Making the Decision |
| ▪ Transparent Decision-Making Process |
| ▪ Opportunity to Participate in the Decision-Making Process |

Microdemocracy:

RQP has seen that people begin to take effective action on a “micro” level when they learn to focus on key decisions that affect them, ask questions about the decisions and expect and require accountable decision-making. RQP calls that action “**Microdemocracy**” and defines it as *individuals using essential democratic skills to participate in decisions made in their ordinary encounters with public institutions*. Microdemocracy can occur anywhere in the public sector where decisions are made that affect people, including their children’s schools, the welfare office, the job training program, the housing authority and the Medicaid-funded health service. Those encounters, which too often are the endpoint of interaction with decisions in the public arena, could become new starting points for democratic action. RQP’s argument for Microdemocracy is similar in some respects to *microcredit*; make a small but strategic investment in people with limited resources and see how much they can accomplish.

How does the RQP strategy work?

What is learned?	Who Takes Action?	How?	What changes?
<p>The Skill of Question Formulation</p> <p>and</p> <p>A Framework for Accountable Decision-Making</p> <p>and</p> <p>both are applied to a specific issue</p>	<p>An Individual Takes Action</p> <p>A parent in California is upset that she did not know of a sudden change in her son’s Individual Education Plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Requests meeting with the principal, strategizes for meeting and defuses her own anger ▪ Focuses her questions on the decisions made by the principal. ▪ Principal acknowledges mistake in decision-making process and agrees to include her in future decisions. 	<p><i>People:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel more confident about their ability to take action • Have new expectations for accountable decision-making • Advocate, navigate complex systems, participate in decision-making processes and hold decision-makers accountable • Model an “accountability from below” strategy. <p><i>Institutions and Systems:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change culture, practices and policies due to citizens <i>taking action</i> <p><i>Communities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are strengthened by higher expectations by and of traditionally disengaged people, the participation of new voices, and a new sense of personal and political efficacy.
	<p>Several Women in One Community Take Action</p> <p>Women in the same community in New Hampshire are facing similar conflicts with the local welfare office</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mothers feel badly treated by welfare workers. ▪ They identify problems, prepare questions in notebook, take notes and ask workers to initialize their responses. ▪ Use strategy to successfully counter common criticisms that they “didn’t send in or fill out the right forms.” 	
	<p>People Come Together to Take Collective Action</p> <p>Parents in small New Mexico town address crisis of violence in schools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents formulate questions to prioritize concerns and develop a common plan ▪ Advocate for plan in meetings with school district ▪ Secure new programs and commitments to include parents in decision-making 	

The RQP strategy travels easily. RQP staff provide training, technical assistance, guides and self-teaching materials along with an online support network. Organizations, agencies and programs around the country and beyond use RQP’s resources to teach the skills to the people with whom they work. RQP is widely respected for its innovative methods and has received funding from major foundations for work in various areas - the Packard Foundation (health care), the Wallace Funds (parent involvement in education), the Boston Foundation (active citizenship), Jane’s Trust (adult literacy), and The Rockefeller Brothers Fund for efforts to document and introduce the idea of Microdemocracy to a wider audience.

Staff of Partner Programs describe the value of RQP as:	Partner Programs teach RQP in different ways	Using RQP Produces Changes in the Way Programs Do Their Work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ a simple but powerful strategy that can be taught in different settings and formats ◆ a process that can be easily adapted to the needs of the organization and the people with whom they work ◆ a method that builds upon the strengths of the staff and their desire to foster independence and self-sufficiency ◆ a shortcut to build people’s capacity to take action and act democratically ◆ an effective way to strengthen the participation of traditionally disengaged people in collective action efforts 	<p>A Head Start Family Worker in NY, as part of her case management services, teaches RQP to parents in one-on-one situations to help them prepare for their individual encounters with teachers, public officials and health care providers</p> <p>The Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa shared RQP with residents of a Shelter for Battered Women in Johannesburg. The women felt that just one RQP workshop helped them develop better plans to help themselves than eight months of previous efforts.</p> <p>A Network of 26 Community-based collaboratives in Northern California uses curriculum and products developed by RQP to teach the strategy in one-on-one sessions and in workshops. RQP is adapted to help people to take action in many ways from individual advocacy at public agencies all the way to collective action to shape policymaking at the State Capital.</p> <p>A family support program in NH uses RQP as part of their group and classroom activities. Mothers in one housing project are concerned about the increasing number of investigations conducted by the Division of Children, Youth and Families. Program staff teach mothers to use RQP to name their concerns, strategize and take action. The women successfully organize, advocate, and partner with state agency leadership to effect change in state policy.</p>	<p><i>Staff in Partner Programs and Organizations make sharing RQP a priority in their daily work. They adapt aspects of the RQP educational strategy as a method to more effectively:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ build people’s capacity to have a voice in the decisions that affect them and participate in policy making ◆ help people take action individually and collectively ◆ develop new leaders among traditionally disengaged people <p><i>Programs use RQP to change the way they provide services or simply sharpen their focus on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ building skills to help people advocate for themselves, navigate systems and participate in decision making ◆ supporting people as they advocate for themselves

Leadership: Co-Director **Luz Santana** is a former welfare recipient who earned a Master's Degree, served as an MIT Community Fellow and is now internationally recognized for her design and facilitation of participatory educational experiences. Co-Director **Dan Rothstein** is an experienced community organizer and adult educator, a former Fulbright Scholar and National Academy of Education Spencer fellow. He received his doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The RQP National Advisory Board: **Robert Coles**, Writer; **Craig Kennedy**, President of the German Marshall Fund; **Bill Kovach**, Chair, Committee of Concerned Journalists; **Wendy Puriefoy**, President of The Public Education Network; and Professors **Archon Fung**, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; **Martha Minow**, Harvard Law School; and **Kay L. Schlozman**, Boston College.

Voices from the Field:

Now, when I go to meetings where people are making decisions that really affect my family, I don't have to just sit there, not knowing what to say. I think about what I want to know and what I need to know and then I ask the question. What a difference! - *Resident of the Big Island of Hawaii, one of many laid-off sugar cane plantation workers who used RQP to participate in decision-making processes affecting them.*

I didn't know I could ask questions at the school. But, by asking questions, I was able to get my son the services he needs. - *Homeless shelter resident in Massachusetts who learned to advocate for her hearing impaired son and secured an Individual Education Plan that met his needs.*

RQP provides the methodology for imparting advocacy skills to parents. - *NH Department of Health and Human Services Fact Sheet, March 2000*

I want our parents to be asking questions about their children's learning. I want them to hold us accountable. We'll benefit and so will their kids. - **Theresa Jensen**, *Principal, Engelhard Elementary School, Louisville, KY.*

The prospect that more poor parents could fend for their kids, and then leap to the big questions, thus broadening the whole town's policy debate, is tantalizing. Mere fantasy? I invite skeptics to check out, as I did...the parent empowerment work of Theresa Jensen [and The Right Question Project] - **Bob Garrett**, Columnist, *The Louisville(KY) Courier-Journal*, August 24, 1997.

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Results from a NIMH-funded study demonstrate RQP's "potential to increase self-reported patient activation, retention, and attendance in mental health care for minority populations." "Evaluation of a Patient Activation and Empowerment Intervention in Mental Health Care," Alegria, Margarita, Ph.D, et al. *Medical Care*, V.46, no.3, March 2008.

The Right Question Project sets about helping people learn how to help themselves, making possible the vital process of converting residents into effective citizens. - **Bill Kovach**, *Chair, Committee for Concerned Journalists.*

We live in a democratic society and it is possible for us, for all of us, for everyone to have some influence but it's a matter of just getting involved...[RQP] is a way for people to represent themselves, and to deal with government agencies, and to be able to achieve something. - *Immigrant Social Service Provider and Aide to a Member of Parliament, Toronto.*