

Reaching Mainstream Teachers with Social Issues Education A Primer from the Front Lines

by Wendy Church, PhD

If we're serious about creating social change through education we must think about what it takes to get beyond a minority of teachers and do what it takes to affect the mainstream. Our experience shows that educators will employ social issues-based programming on a widespread basis if it engages students, is easy for teachers to fold into core classroom requirements, and has proven successful with varied levels of student learning.

Some time ago in a moment of wistful clarity, a foundation program officer remarked to me: “I wonder if all of the nonprofits that I’m funding to do environmental education are just reaching the same five teachers.” His foundation is the primary funder of this sort in a large region, helping to support over 200 nonprofits each year.

This remark has preoccupied me for some time. There are approximately 60 million students in the U.S. K-12 education system, and there are few social issues that have reached anything close to critical mass exposure within this system. Certainly there are success stories with individual teachers, or schools, or even districts. But widespread social change will come with widespread education efforts that go beyond reaching a minority of extraordinarily motivated teachers, or the rare theme school. For foundations and nonprofit organizations that are interested in fomenting social change through education, it is critical to figure out how to penetrate our education system on a widespread basis.

Over the last five years our organization, *Facing the Future* (FTF), has surveyed and interviewed thousands of educators and administrators around the country to learn how best to incorporate social issues education into mainstream classrooms. We’ve also launched and grown a global issues and sustainable solutions curricular effort that annually reaches over 1,000,000 K-12 students in all 50 states and around the world. Our curricula are used in urban, rural, and suburban districts and in both public and private institutions, reaching a broad socio-economic spectrum of youth. We’re gearing up to reach 12,500,000 students annually by 2020.

What we’ve learned isn’t terribly complicated, but we think it can spell the difference between widely adopted social issues offerings and those that are destined to reach a small minority of students.

Understand the Reality of Mainstream Classrooms

Imagine you're a 9th grade teacher in a public school. Your first class starts at 7:45 am. You will teach four or five 50-minute sections of 30 to 40 students each. These students range from academically excellent and committed to failing and disruptive. Some students are barely proficient in English, many come into the first period of the day half-asleep. Your last class is often cut short by assemblies, or disrupted as members of the cross country team leave for a meet. You'll hear "Why do I have to learn this?" several times during the day, and will be competing with cell phones, hunger, love triangles, general apathy, and a million other things that occupy the minds and hearts of teenagers.

In this environment you are tasked with creating "aha" moments, communicating a concept, getting students to think critically about a policy or event, or make connections between past and present circumstances, all while ensuring that each lesson you teach meets the appropriate educational standards for your state. Your students' ability to pass a state or national competency test is a major part of your responsibility, as is bridging the achievement gap. Sometime in the evening, after grading homework, you will need to plan and prepare the lessons for the next day.

This scenario is all too real for most teachers and social issues education efforts must take this into account. What realities are most important for adoption of social issues resources? The following is what we've culled from over a decade of experience:

Today, educators' overriding concern is with student achievement in the core subject areas: reading, writing, math, and science. This is true at all levels in the education hierarchy: teacher, principal, coordinator, superintendent. Crucially, achievement has two meanings: (1) mastery of the skill, and (2) mastery as evidenced by high stakes testing. In this environment, the onus is on the social issues content provider to tailor their resources so they feed directly into strengthening reading or writing, math, science, or critical thinking skills as required by national and state achievement tests.

This reality drives how *Facing the Future* (FTF) develops and packages our resources. Prior to developing our new math curriculum we surveyed math teachers all over the country to elicit their needs. They were almost unanimous in wanting a lesson 'hook' to help them interest students in the math concepts. They also wanted un-manipulated, real-world data sets, as well as additional problem sets. We were able to fill each of these requirements by interweaving examples from our social issue—global sustainability.

Next we reviewed commonly used middle school math texts, and found that they are all organized around the same 14 learning concepts. We subsequently organized our text according to these same 14 learning areas; this made it easy for teachers to insert our materials into their teaching sequence. Finally, we mapped the content to specific national and state educational math standards so teachers could feel comfortable substituting them for traditional texts. This was all done within the context of our social issue, providing the students not only with the educational tools they needed but also real learning around global sustainability, our ultimate goal.

Educators’ dance cards are full: something must be dropped for something to be added.

For teachers to adopt your resources, they must believe that they will be immediately more effective, more prepared, or better equipped to deliver on core requirements and the content area under discussion than they are without your resources. This is where the inertia of continuing what they’ve done in the past rubs up against the time commitment and uncertainty of taking on something new.

At FTF, we’ve made ‘plug and play’ our mantra. Teachers welcome our thorough lesson plans and the smooth connection with their current offering. As one happy educator noted *“I love the practical lessons that you can print, prep and teach the next day as if it has been part of your repertoire for years.”* Teachers have told us that they can give our materials to a last-minute substitute teacher to execute during their class period with no qualms. We count that as success.

We suggest all social issue non-profits with an education offering do a quick cost/benefit analysis of your product from a teacher’s viewpoint. The cost should include outlay for the materials and the teacher’s time and effort, as well as the opportunity cost of class time. What mandated skills are you building or reinforcing? Are you providing useful contextual examples? Ready-made lesson plans? Are you offering a turnkey solution, or a content primer that the teacher must digest and reformulate to create a successful ‘aha’ moment for students? The greater the cost, the lower the expected adoption rate. The lower the adoption rate, the less effective and efficient you will be in reaching a mainstream audience.

Student engagement can be the ticket. Distracted students are non-learning students. We recently surveyed over 1,700 K-12 educators nationwide about their use of supplementary curricula; over 50% told us that their main motivation for using supplementary curricula was its “superior ability to engage students.” This provides a wonderful entree for introducing social issues because they are by definition relevant to students’ lives.

But while relevance and authenticity can be keys to engaging students, we’ve found they aren’t sufficient by themselves. Activity-based programming is a spark that can engage students across the board. We build our curricula on this model because teachers routinely report that it demonstrably helps address disparate student learning levels in large classrooms. We choose readings and activities that enable students to grapple with real-life, real-world issues and combine them with opportunities for reflection and syntheses. A complimentary teacher recently noted that *“The hands-on component makes even complex and abstract ideas meaningful to young people.”*

Narrowing the achievement gap matters, ethically and pragmatically. In lay terms, the achievement gap refers to the difference in academic level between students of the same age that often cuts along class or race lines. National surveys conducted by organizations such as the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) show achievement gap to be in the top three concerns for virtually all K-12 public school educators. The achievement gap has both an ethical and a pragmatic consequence: just imagine the difficulties of creating a meaningful lesson plan for a classroom of students whose reading level spans that of 4th to 12th grade. As noted above, activity-based programming and curricula have an excellent track record for engaging all students, as do programs with flexible reading and writing levels.

Be careful also of cultural insensitivities. They tend to inhibit the engagement of whole segments of public school students, from refugees to immigrants to minorities. We scrub our materials of any assumptions based on normative behavior and work hard to vet all problems, stories, and examples so they are inclusive. Teachers are grateful to have materials that help them reach all of their students: *“The students who are in the achievement gap are engaged by the curriculum because it speaks to their truths. The curriculum doesn’t leave anyone out of the picture. All people are represented and an understanding of their lives is incorporated into the lessons.”*

Use seasoned educators to develop and vet your resources. Ask for and incorporate feedback. Nothing is as effective as educators developing plans for other educators. At *Facing the Future* all of our staff have teaching experience, and we rely on a small army of teacher volunteers to classroom-test our offerings before we release them. Our recent collaboration with Scholastic Inc. and Hewlett-Packard Company on our Climate Change curriculum is a case in point.

We set the initial parameters for our two-week unit based on feedback drawn from 600 teachers nationwide. We then worked with teacher focus groups and reference sources to define content. Over 100 editors and field testers from around the world offered to field test the curricula. We selected 30 to pilot test it in their classrooms and incorporated their feedback in the final version of the curriculum. The result? Within the first six months over 3,500 teachers from almost every U.S. state had incorporated the curriculum into their classrooms. As of this writing over 200,000 students have been exposed to climate change via these units.

The public education system operates in a politically charged atmosphere. Be aware that the political schisms in our country mean that your social views at best will be shared by half of the teachers, parents, or administrators involved in educating students. Many teachers work in environments where bringing in social issues education can cause serious problems for them, including anything from irate parents and upset principals to suspension. Successful materials need to be scrupulously politically neutral, fact-based, referenced, and add significant academic value outside of the social message. It helps to have references that span the political spectrum. In the education world, controversy is not your friend. This doesn’t mean that you should shy away from topics that are important, but remember that it doesn’t take many complaining parents- sometimes one will do it- to persuade a busy teacher that using your curriculum is more trouble than it’s worth.

Use the Leverage Points

The sheer size of the education system makes it an attractive venue for social change, but what at first glance appears homogeneous is dauntingly heterogeneous, even when it comes to core subject competency. The education *system* is really not a system at all. In states such as California and Texas, core subject programming decisions are made at the state board level. Then there are states such as Washington in which programming and curricular decisions can be made at the school and even classroom levels. Many states follow national educational standards for math, science, and other subjects; more than half have instead developed their own standards. Finding the leverage points in this ‘system’ isn’t straightforward.

Facing the Future has had success with a bottoms-up approach targeting individual teachers. The idea is to address teachers where it is convenient for them, in their venues. Towards this end we offer professional development seminars at annual state, regional, and national conferences for science, social studies, global issues, math, and other educators. Sessions range from 15 to 100 participants, and follow-up surveys show that upwards of 50% of the teachers integrate our curriculum into their classrooms within six months of attending the workshops. We are also invited by state education groups, districts, and individual schools to provide professional development for their own educators.

The leverage and broad reach of this approach is readily apparent. The average middle and high school teacher in a public school reaches approximately 100 different students each year. Our data show that once teachers adopt supplemental curriculum or programs, they use them for at least four years. The math adds up quickly: one teacher adoption translates into at least 400 students reached.

In addition to conducting workshops we also offer downloadable curriculum units from an easily navigable website. Teachers particularly like our Curriculum Finder, which allows them to quickly find curriculum that matches their classroom's grade level, subject, and topic area.

In addition to the teacher/classroom level, there are also leverage points at the school, district, state, and federal levels:

- **School Level:** Principals often drive the adoption of thematic learning around issues they care about, or that a critical mass of their teachers cares about.
- **District Level:** Similar to principals at schools, district heads can drive learning themes. These appear to occur in two scenarios: the first is in districts where graduation rates are high and the administration has the luxury to think about expanding students' learning beyond the basics. This often occurs in districts with access to significant resources, as adopting district-wide learning themes can be an expensive proposition. The second scenario is where a particular theme is a hot issue in the surrounding community, or where large amounts of charitable funding are available to implement the theme.
 - For both schools and districts it is important to recognize that significant customization of a program may be required for thematic adoption, and most require that their own educators be deeply involved in the development process. This can hinder wider adoption of the program by other districts.
- **State Level:** State-level education organizations such as Washington's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) range in influence and philosophy. They are primarily focused on student achievement in core subjects and graduation rates. But individual states such as New Jersey and Washington sometimes take on specific focus areas (global awareness and environmental sustainability, respectively), in which they may welcome programming and professional development opportunities for teachers.

- **Federal Level:** The federal government sets education guidelines such as No Child Left Behind which generally deal with core competencies and graduation rates. More interestingly for social issues educators, it also creates budget line items that correlate with specific social issues. In the past the government has allotted funding to such non-core academic issues as health and anti-bullying education. This meant that schools and districts had additional funding and therefore an incentive to investigate and incorporate programming around these issues. This has obvious implications for those foundations that fund or organizations who conduct lobbying efforts. Non-lobbying groups can review federal educational budget line items to see if there is educational funding allocated for their issues.
- **Colleges of Education:** A leverage point in education that is often overlooked is colleges of education, where teachers earn their degrees. These programs graduate tens of thousands of teachers each year. In Washington State alone we have 23 teacher colleges graduating thousands of new teachers each year. Inserting social issues programming into these colleges can help create new generations of teachers equipped and motivated to include those issues into their teaching. Note however that these programs are often no more disposed to inserting new themes into their programs than are K-12 schools. This sentiment was captured succinctly by a college of education dean who said to me *“Every single issue group thinks we should integrate their issue into our college. If we did that we wouldn’t have time for anything else.”*

Match the Business Model to the Goals

Reading, writing, science and math may be the foundation of a good education, but an educated citizen’s toolbox must also include critical thinking skills, and the ability to understand at a basic level the interconnected social and economic issues of our time. If the goal is to reach a large percentage of the mainstream youth via education, it is imperative to match the business model with the goals. Whatever program you’re operating or funding, take a look at the total real costs vs. the number of students reached. If this number is in the hundreds or thousands of dollars per student, your program is probably not scalable to mainstream education.

Take an Educator’s Perspective

I participated some time ago in a research study conducted by a corporation interested in redesigning their own philanthropic giving in the environmental education arena. As such I was privy to the final report which contained comments from some environmental advocates. One comment stuck out:

“For Pete’s sake, don’t fund any more curriculum—there is way too much already.”

I tried to reconcile this with the single most frequent comment I’ve heard from teachers who see our curriculum materials for the first time: *“I’ve been looking for something like this for years.”* The common perception in the educator community is that there is too *little* curriculum.

Why the disconnect? I believe the answer is a different perception of what constitutes “curriculum.” Curriculum from a teacher’s perspective includes alignment to educational standards, elements of a lesson plan, student objectives, inquiry and reflection questions, even-

handed treatment, and student engagement. Many educational resources provided by social issues nonprofit organizations don't include these elements. Because of this, they aren't considered curriculum by teachers, thus the disconnect between the perceptions of educators and advocates.

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