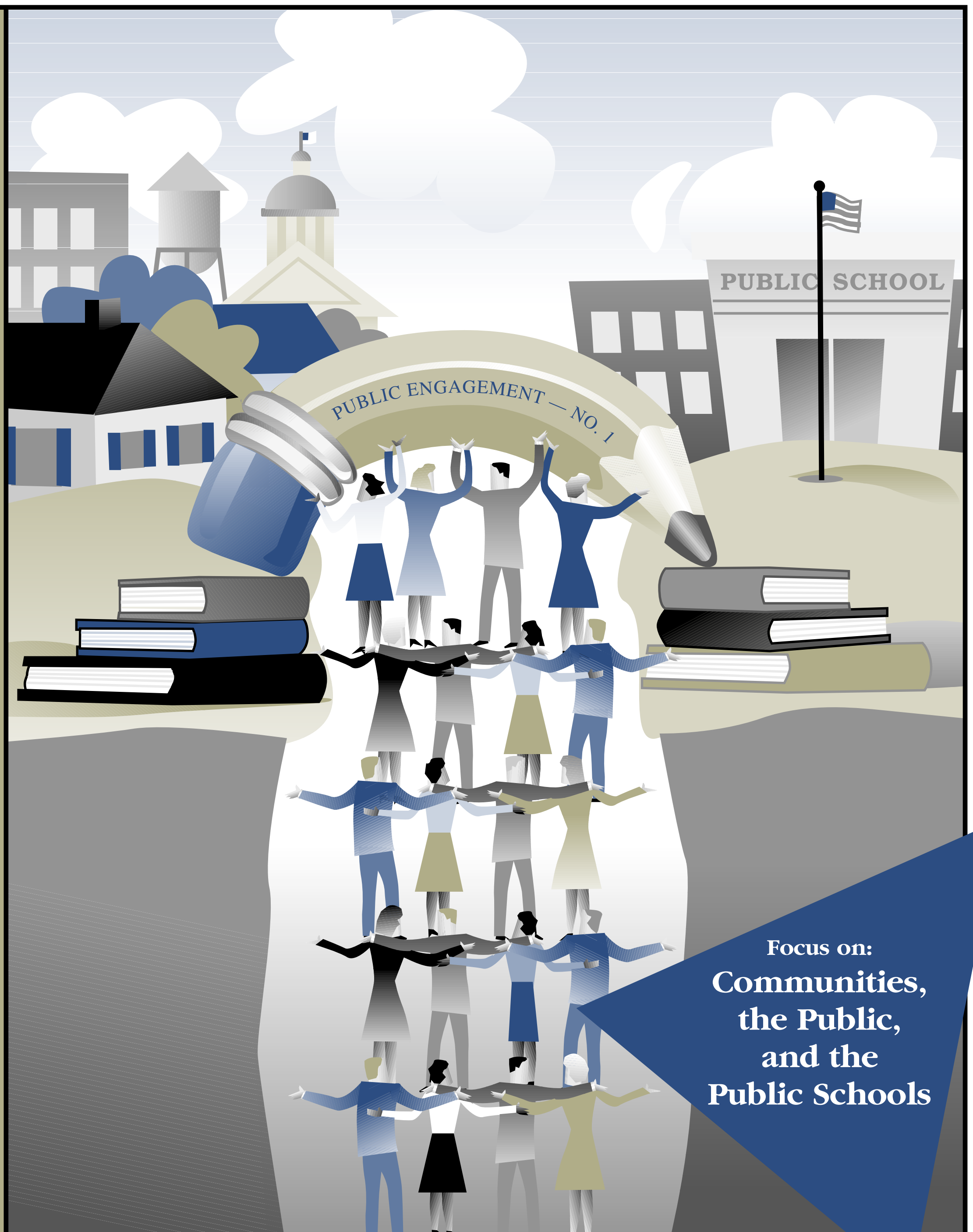
Kettering Foundation

CONNECTIONS

VOLUME XIV ISSUE 2 April 2004

- Overview .... page 2
- The Relationship of Citizens to Their Schools — Emerging KF Research .... page 7
- From Partners to Owners .... page 10
- Accountability, National Standards, and the Public .... page 13
- Where the Public Stands on Standards-based Education .... page 16
- Public Schools and the Practices of Engaged Communities .... page 18
- The Effects of How an Issue Is Framed: The Example of Accountability .... page 22
- Organizations Attempting New Ways of Working with the Public .... page 25
- The Holmes Partnership .... page 27
- Books Worth Reading .... page 29



Focus on:
Communities, the Public, and the Public Schools

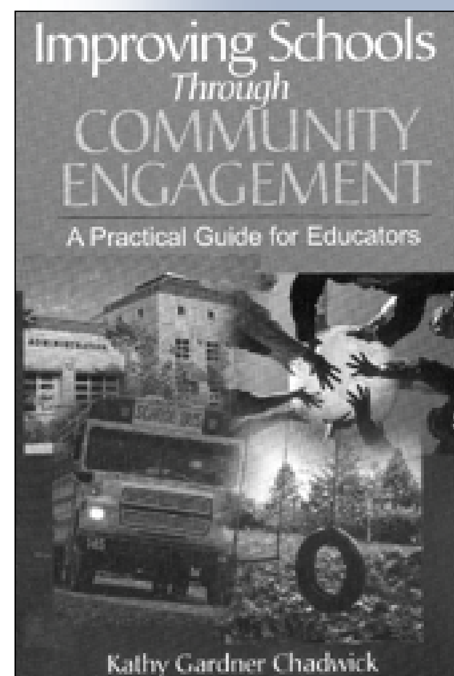
Books Worth Reading

Improving Schools Through Community Engagement: A Practical Guide for Educators

by Kathy Gardner Chadwick
California: Corwin Press, 2004
Paperback $22.95 ISBN 0-7619-3821-4

This is an interesting and very readable book that utilizes some of the core language and ideas of the Kettering Foundation with respect to framing issues, community engagement, and the relationship between schools and the public.

Kathy Gardner Chadwick is the chair of Business and Economics at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Interestingly, although her book is proffered as a practical guide for educators, she does not have an education background. Her interest in community engagement is rooted in her background in marketing and her passion for education. Actively involved in her own community's public schools, she believes that "community engagement can address many of the challenges facing today's educators as they work to help students achieve at a higher level." Chadwick's book is written from the perspective of an informed, concerned parent and member of the public. She therefore has a vested interest in creating public conversations that reflect the concerns various constituent groups within a community have on questions of school improvement.



Her book juxtaposes the increasing impact of poverty, homelessness, violence, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy on public schools with the increasing federal, state, and local mandates for greater accountability from those schools. She connects the above-mentioned social problems to diminished parental and community involvement with schools in particular and with the community at large. She utilizes the work of Robert Putnam, Joyce Epstein, and Benjamin Barber and others to construct a conceptual framework for Americans as "less engaged with their public institutions than they were 50 years ago." Contemporary society, she argues, is marked by a malaise rooted in a lack of civic-mindedness. She presents the question: "Could this disengaged public become a driving force in creating a brighter future for public schools?" The book draws from a broad and deep range of current educational and research literature to support initiatives and strategies for engaging the community on issues often wrongly considered germane to the schools alone.

Chadwick defines community engagement as an activity marked by collaboration and struggle: process rather than product. Her heuristic use of Himmelman's (1994) continuum of "Networking, Coordinating, Cooperating, and Collaborating" is effective and helpful in critically underscoring that community engagement "involves much more than the traditional one-way flow from schools to the public." Through that continuum, Chadwick clarifies things for the reader before moving on to the other components of community engagement, such as identifying constituent groups; developing varied perspectives of those constituent groups; and outlining strategies for involvement and action.

I find it perplexing that, given Chadwick's concern with school improvement through community engagement, she focuses so strongly on schools as the dominant setting. For example, Chadwick acknowledges that "K-12 school administrators, school board members, and teachers are the primary audience for this book, but community leaders and citizens who are *interested* [my emphasis] in improving student achievement through community engagement will also find the book to be useful." This creates the impression, pervasive in the book, that if schools get it right, the community can

become the persuaded populace. As David Mathews (1996) points out in *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* treating the community as audience is at odds with what constitutes an "engaged public." By focusing on the schools, Chadwick makes it too easy to fall into the trap of assuming a quid pro quo relationship with the public. Creating solutions that both communities and schools are able to support depends on a public conversation guided by the question and not the answer. As Mathews (1996) notes, "participants must avoid the temptation to rush to answers and action before an adequate foundation of trust and common understanding is in place." The schools should not be looked to for answers. The communities should not be looked to for answers. What must be pursued are common understandings between the two. If we do not endeavor to create such an understanding, communities and schools will continue to become increasingly disconnected from the students whose lives and learning are at stake.

— Marian Glancy

Hard Choices, Easy Answers

by R. Michael Alvarez and John Brehm
Princeton University Press, 2002
069109635X

This book takes a step forward in academic thought about polling. The authors deepen our understanding of how people respond to survey questions and introduce a useful vocabulary about people's thinking.

Uncertainty, Ambivalence, and Equivocation

Pollsters have long observed wildly unpredictable or "volatile" answers to given questions about political issues, answers that should presumably be fairly consistent among groups of people with similar interests and values. Alvarez and Brehm review existing explanations for "the apparent muddle-headedness of American opinion." Prominent scholars have regarded volatility in survey responses as a symptom of citizen ignorance, a tendency to give "top-of-the-head" random responses. This view assumes that if citizens had more information, they would give more predictable, consistent responses.

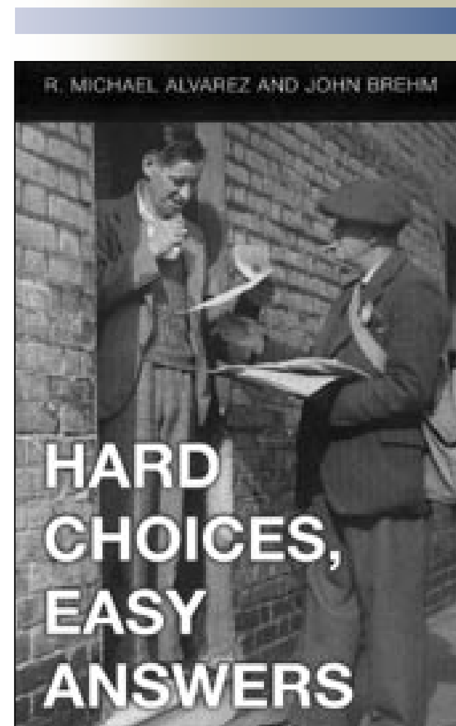
Alvarez and Brehm treat volatility as a factor to be explained rather than a problem with citizens' competence, and they offer three explanations. The first, *uncertainty,* does indeed fit with what recent theory expects: here, more information does help translate values into policy choices. But the book offers alternative explanations for volatile survey responses. One is that such volatility may reflect conflicting core values. Alvarez and Brehm call this *ambivalence,* which means strong forces pulling in opposite directions, not apathy. The concept evokes the "tensions between things held valuable" in Kettering Foundation literature. Another alternative, *equivocation* ("speaking with two voices"), occurs when people see no conflict between multiple values and arrive at issue opinions with lower volatility, even when those values seem logically contradictory. Equivocation can make it difficult to describe the path from values to issue choices, since the relationship is complex.

Ambivalence is the most interesting of these conditions, since more information about an issue may actually *increase* volatility by revealing the relevance of conflicting values. For example, citizens take predictable positions for and against legal abortion when rape or the health of the mother are justifications. But opinion about legal abortion for "any reason" is much more volatile, especially for the substantial group who hold conflicting religious and feminist values relevant to the abortion issue. Under ambivalence, additional information increases rather than lessens the tension, as more educated respondents have less consistent opinions on legalizing abortion for any reason.

The book complements the idea, proposed by former Kettering Foundation board member Daniel Yankelovich, that public opinion moves through stages. Yankelovich points out that "vehemence does not mean settled views" (*Fortune* magazine interview, October 5, 1992). He describes a torturous seven-stage evolution that proceeds from initial awareness through wishful thinking, to grappling with pros and cons, to intellectual positions and finally to responsible moral judgment. Reflecting Alvarez and Brehm's categories, Yankelovich's stages might be describing movement from uncertainty (little awareness) through equivocation (wishing away tensions) to ambivalence (grappling with pros and cons) to a real public judgment.

Implications for representation and deliberation

One of Alvarez and Brehm's central concerns is that volatility makes it difficult for political representatives to interpret the thinking of their constituents. Because volatility is not random, it is not reasonable to assume that a simple figure describes the average position of individual citizens. So a member of Congress cannot reliably infer that "55 percent support for option X" translates into real support for that option unless the relative volatility of that percentage is also known. Worse, changes in total figures over time ("support for option X dropped from 55 percent to 42 percent") are not necessarily linked with the underlying patterns of volatility; what looks like uncertainty in the totals may actually be ambivalence on the part of individuals.



This quandary faced by officials opens a connection to Kettering Foundation research on public-government relationships. More sophisticated polling methods might certainly help officials. But public deliberation stands out as a preferable means for giving representatives insight into reasons for the volatility of public thinking, by allowing citizens to interpret their thoughts together in settings representatives can attend.

We know that deliberation is not a direct or certain route to a majority or consensus decision, but intervening stages and alternate outcomes of deliberation need names and descriptions. Uncertainty, ambivalence, and equivocation are Alvarez and Brehm's names for individuals' thinking processes, but they might also describe group deliberation. Under *uncertainty,* deliberation will produce a decision only if new information can be acquired. *Ambivalence* occurs when people face conflicting values or expectations, precisely as is often described in National Issues Forums and other deliberative settings. At this stage, more information and discussion can actually increase tensions and make choosing an option more difficult. Ambivalent deliberators are indecisive — but when value tension is high, decisiveness may not be a virtue. When deliberation produces *equivocation,* people may agree on their decision, but the reasons behind their choice conflict in ways that complicate communicating their thinking.

Deliberating groups might refer to the following list to understand where they are in their own thinking and what to communicate to public officials:

1. Certainty: we know what we think and why.
2. Uncertainty: we need more information to make a decision.
3. Ambivalence: we think we have enough information, but our values conflict and make this a very hard decision.
4. Equivocation: we can make a decision, but we have differing, perhaps conflicting, reasons for choosing that we may need to resolve.

Alvarez and Brehm's contribution helps rehabilitate the public as a source of political wisdom and may point the way to a richer conversation between theories of polling and deliberation.

—Neil Carlson

The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is an operating foundation — not a grant-giving foundation — rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to "the problems behind the problems." The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now — the study of what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required for strengthening public life. Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a $250 million endowment.

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