

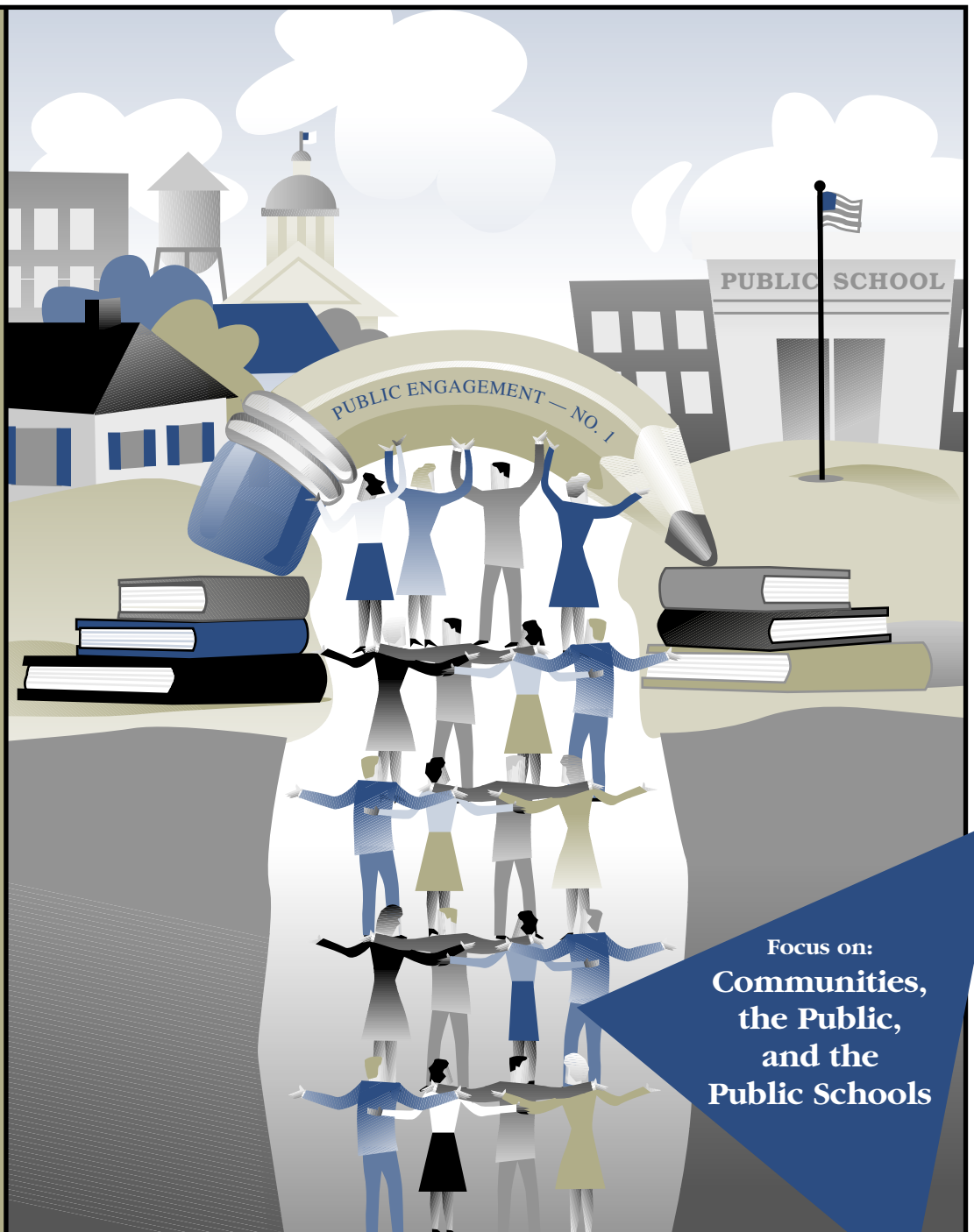
CONNECTIONS

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

Overview

by David Mathews

Usually I write an overview that summarizes the options the foundation is considering for future research. The subject of this *Connections* is Kettering's study of the relationship between the public and the public schools. The findings from past research, which were reported in *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* are clear enough: too many people have decided the schools aren't theirs. Now we are investigating what can be done to counter this perception. In this article, I'll present a new hypothesis

that has grown out of recent research. We need to investigate a public-centered, public-building type of public engagement. The

foundation welcomes educational organizations and associations as well as civic groups that have a self-interest in experimenting with this form of engagement.

In the last three years, Kettering has looked at the relationship the public had with the first schools, their current relationship, and the relationship people wish they had. Some of the results have been published in *Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools?* a book on the role that communities played when public education was in its infancy.

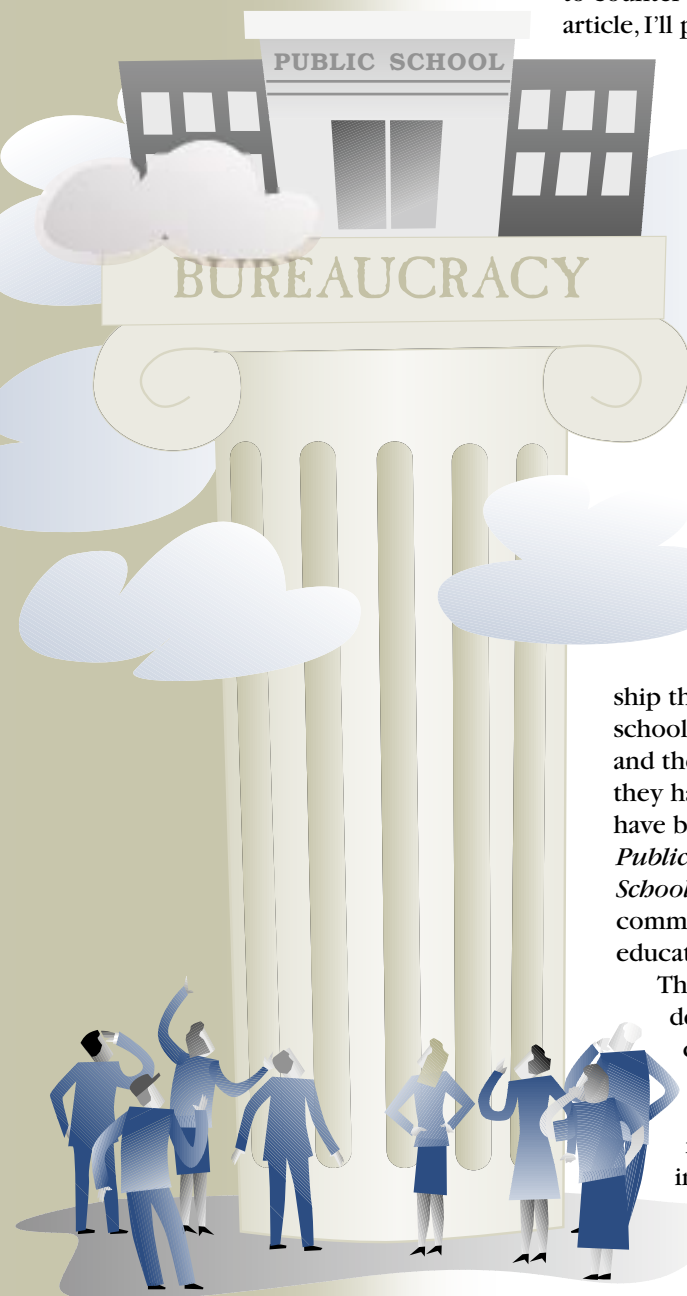
The first schools were often deeply embedded in their communities because many were the product of collective decision making and action. These institutions were authentic, familiar, and organic; in fact, they were the

community in another form. As such, they were linked to the social, economic, and political networks that communities turned to when anything important needed to be done.

One of the most striking implications from the newest research at Kettering is that people may no longer see the schools as community institutions. Rather, they consider them to be government agencies or bureaucracies like a district office of the Social Security Administration. Bureaucracies may be helpful, but they are seldom familiar. Schools may be important to a community, but they are not a product of its efforts. They may be listed in the telephone book without being embedded in the local civic infrastructure, which was characteristic of the first schools.

Whether or not schools are actually bureaucracies, they certainly suffer from many of the problems that beset them. As is true of bureaucracies, the complexity, number, and degree of detail in school policies and procedures make them less accessible to the unorganized citizenry than the organized. And, fairly or not, schools, like bureaucracies, are criticized for being mechanistic, rule-bound, and unresponsive. Both institutions face questions about their accountability and legitimacy.

Read the following description of the plight of modern bureaucracies and consider whether the same thing is happening to school systems. Brian Cook, a student of public administration, has observed, "an increasingly vicious circle has emerged in which anxiety about control and accountability ... has led to more extensive, more complex controls, which in turn have increased the bureaucratic distance between administrators and the public they are expected to serve. This distance then raises new worries about control and accountability and brings about the introduction of another layer of controls." Cook goes on to argue that the net result has been just the opposite of what was intended; namely, administrative effectiveness in serving the public has been undermined.

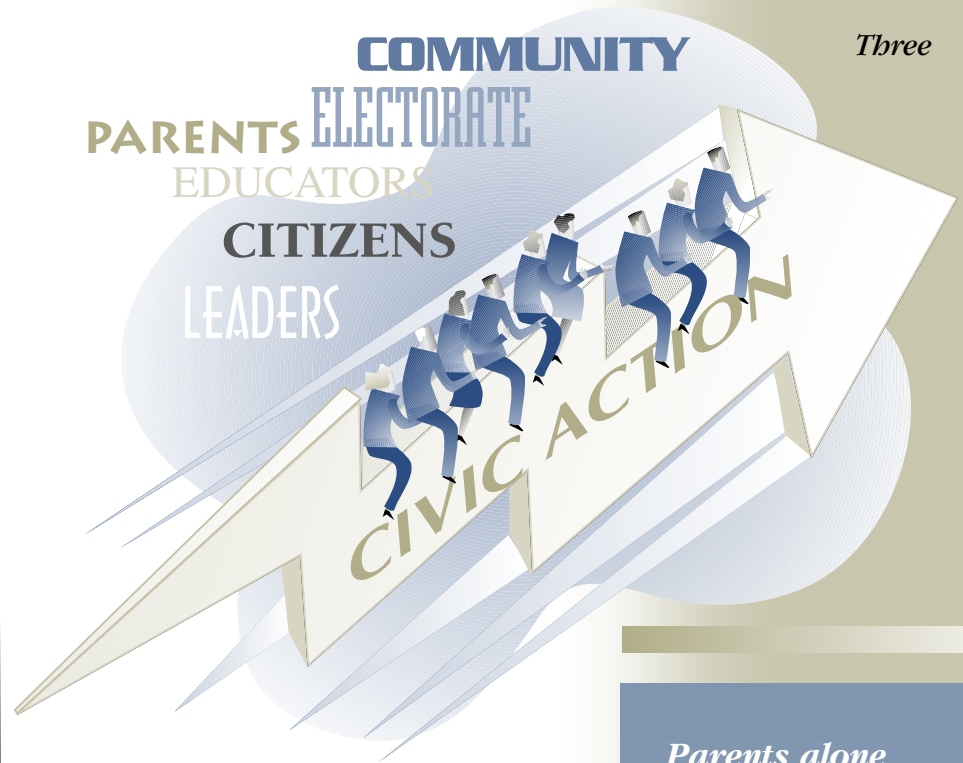


Public schools suffer from another limitation characteristic of bureaucracies, which are good at maintaining the routines and uniformity that promote efficiency but are not as well suited to combating what scholars call “wicked” problems. These are problems that are exceptionally complex in the sense that their nature is obscure, they arise from multiple sources, and they resist technical or professional solutions. (Persistent poverty in times of general prosperity is a typical example.) Consequently, as school systems lose their organic qualities and take on bureaucratic characteristics, they become less able to deal with wicked problems, which are surely implicated in issues like the achievement gap.

Given the similarities between schools and bureaucracies, one objective of public engagement should be to recapture or strengthen the communitylike characteristics of schools and relocate them in broader social, economic, and political networks. But who is capable of doing this, particularly in light of the forces that make schools adopt bureaucratic defenses? Can schools simply ignore all external pressures, from federal and state regulations to the threat of lawsuits in an increasingly litigious society? If relief has to come from the public, as surely some of it must, what is the public that needs to be engaged? Stakeholders? Interest groups? The electorate at large?

Different answers to these questions are evident in the wide variety of efforts by administrators, boards, and civic organizations to forge stronger ties between schools and communities. Motives for these initiatives include crises, such as a failed tax levy, and more fundamental concerns, such as the worry that schools have become too detached from communities and other educational institutions.

Even those who are convinced that communities have nothing to offer the schools except financial support, usually acknowledge that communities can be a source of negative influences on young people. These outside forces can be so powerful, James Traub argues in the *New York Times Magazine*, that schools alone can’t possibly offset their “trajectories,” which are established long before youngsters arrive in classrooms. Traub believes that communities are important because conditions surrounding schools, not just conditions within schools, have a decisive effect on whether children learn.



Combating negative influences and cultivating positive ones are just one of the reasons that public engagement is on the agenda of many educational and civic organizations. Yet Don Davies, who has long been an advocate of community involvement, worries that the rhetoric of “partnerships” and of drawing on the “whole village” is often just that — rhetoric. Whether or not that is the case, engagement campaigns have markedly different notions of the public they want to involve.

Here is a way of understanding the public that grows out of Kettering research and suggests still another way to go about public engagement. I have called it public-centered engagement.

If the objective of engagement is to position the schools in community life so they can draw on many kinds of support, and if the engagement requires a citizenry having both a sense of responsibility and the power to reach its objectives, then those tasks define “the public” that has to be engaged. This means parents alone aren’t enough. Key leaders aren’t enough. Even the electorate is not enough. A community has to have a citizenry drawn from all its sectors that can make the collective decisions needed to take effective, ongoing civic action. The public, from this perspective, is a dynamic body politic rather than a passive audience, market, or group of stakeholders. It is more like electricity than a light bulb. The public is constituted by the practices that make

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up the work of citizens, which includes one of the most essential — collective decision making.

Consider the implications of this view of the public for engagement. What has to be engaged is not so much a body of people (parents, business leaders, civic advocates) as a dynamic set of interactions or civic practices. (I'll elaborate shortly.)

The challenges public-centered engagement has to face don't come as much from outright opposition as from what appear to be competing strategies that have worthy, but very different, objectives. For instance, educators are attracted to school-centered engagement. They want the community to get behind their institutions and are often frustrated by a seeming lack of public interest in the issues educators like to discuss. Yet what seem to be two disparate frames of reference — one school-centered and the other public-centered — may not be as different as they seem. I remember a conversation with a school board member who had just become a district attorney. His board dutifully invited citizens to meet on issues such as discipline in the classroom. Absent a crisis, however, only a few parents showed up. On the other hand, as a district attorney, he found meetings about juvenile crime would draw overflow crowds. Are classroom discipline and juvenile crime really different issues? Despite differences in their severity and location, they are closely related. So why was the community more attentive to one than the other? Perhaps it had to do with the way the two problems were named. The word "discipline" probably suggested a problem the schools should solve. Consequently, only a few citizens felt obligated to do more than find out what the educators were doing to solve their problem. But when antisocial behavior spread to the sidewalks and people's homes, it became everyone's issue.

Citizens, particularly parents, are also distracted by the appeal of engagement based on the principles of consumerism. Schools are treated like TV repair shops, which encourages parents to say, "I brought my children in at 8 A.M., and I want them 'fixed' by 3 P.M. If they aren't, it is the educators' fault." People don't necessarily think that being a consumer is the best kind of relationship to have with the schools, yet it works, and some schools seem to encourage it. Consumer-

ism, however, invites individual action (often complaints), not collective public action. Parents are more likely to talk about *their* children than all children. Acting like a shopper may prompt better service for those making a "purchase," but it doesn't lead to public ownership and responsibility, nor does it strengthen the practices that make for a democratic public. Furthermore, it redefines the public schools as just another type of utility providing personal services, such as a supply of gas for a fee, paid in the case of schools with tax dollars.

Finally, there are indications in the research that reform legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, may divert attention away from public-centered engagement, even though that is surely unintentional. After all, the legislation grew out of an effort to give the public more control over the schools and, presumably, to create closer ties between schools and the citizenry. The strategy behind the law seems to be to make schools more accountable by publicizing standardized test scores so citizens can judge their performance. Although most people believe in high expectations for children, favor tests, and appreciate having more information about schools, they seem to have a broader notion of what makes for accountability. They may be looking for a relationship with schools that allows them an actual account of what is happening in classrooms — a face-to-face description that is responsive to all they want in the education of children, including qualities of mind and traits of character, as well as levels of academic performance.

Preliminary Kettering research also suggests that, deep down, citizens know they and their communities are accountable for providing a good education, not just teachers and administrators. (Notice that I said "education" rather than "schooling." Citizens think about the two differently. Although they may assume they can do little to change schools, they may see other possibilities for contributing to the education of youngsters.)

As some are quick to point out, the public I am talking about may or may not exist in a given geographic location. The "electricity," the political interactions, may or may not be "on." Furthermore, if the public does form, citizens may be more interested in whether the schools are "with them" in their work than

Deep down, citizens know they and their communities are accountable for providing a good education....

whether they are “with” the schools in meeting educators’ demands for increased support. This attitude obviously complicates the work of public engagement.

The first and primary challenge in the kind of engagement I am proposing is public-building. People have to engage one another as citizens of a community before there can be a public capable of engaging the schools. Individuals form a public by practicing the practices that allow them to make collective decisions, which are the basis for collective action. These practices are the civic dynamics I mentioned earlier. Public-making activities include:

- ◆ naming problems in community terms (rather than in professional or technical terms);
- ◆ framing issues for collective decision making;
- ◆ deliberating as a public to decide on a course of action;
- ◆ generating the political will to undertake a range of civic actions; and
- ◆ developing a habit of shared reflection to keep up the momentum needed to deal with the wicked problems.

These aren’t techniques to be used on the citizens of a community; they are practices to be used by citizens. Each is only one component of public work, and they must be done together to have any impact.

There isn’t anything extraordinary about these practices. Nearly every day, an individual or organization in a community issues a statement saying, “the problem we are dealing with is _____.” Fill in the blank. That is naming. Someone else says, “we can either do ‘x’ or ‘y.’” That is creating a framework for decision making. Then some group makes a decision or refuses to make a decision (which is actually a decision by default). The crucial question is, who does all of these things? How much are citizens involved? The challenge is to make the naming, framing, deciding, and all the practices public. And that is what makes public engagement possible.

Public-centered engagement is not only possible but also relatively simple to begin. Recall the relative lack of community interest in a classroom issue like discipline as compared to interest

NAMING PROBLEMS



in a communitywide problem like juvenile violence. Building a responsible public can start merely by renaming problems traditionally left for the schools to solve so that they are seen in their true light as community problems. This starts, as well, to reconnect schools and communities. If problems like school discipline are rooted in neighborhoods, then obviously citizens have to join forces and act. Schools can’t be expected to act alone.

What about the role of educators in public-making practices? How do they engage a dynamic set of activities? Brian Cook, the scholar I mentioned earlier, has a suggestion for public administrators that might be applicable to superintendents, principals, and teachers. He urges public administrators to enter public deliberations, not just on issues they are concerned about, but on issues the public at large worries about.

Educators might be well served by starting with issues that are community-based but school-related.

Collective decision making is at the heart of democratic politics. It helps create the public, and it puts the public back into the public's business.

Young people who grow up at risk from social pathologies is one. Replacing lost jobs and devising a new formula for economic development is another. These are only two of many topics that beg for serious public deliberation because they affect nearly all segments of the population, either directly or indirectly. And while not solely classroom issues, most have implications for educating institutions.

Deliberation is a natural act and doesn't require any special expertise. People deliberate over personal issues all the time, usually with friends, family, and those whose opinions they respect. Public deliberation expands the number and character of the participation but doesn't change the process. Public deliberation is making collective choices about the best way to respond to these common problems. It is neither a general discussion nor a debate. It is the work of weighing the costs and benefits of major options for action, which is usually more than two. A town meeting or forum may focus the deliberations, but only to model the choice work. The bulk of the careful weighing has to go on wherever citizens gather — from local diners to civic clubs. The results come in over time from multiple sources. Total agreement on one specific action is rare not only because opinions vary, but also because there is seldom one action that will solve a complex problem. What can emerge is a sense of direction and the identification of common purposes. A community can learn what its citizens will and won't do to solve a problem. Most important of all, a more reflective and shared judgment emerges from first opinions. Something like a public voice, in contrast to a cacophony of particular special interest pleadings, becomes audible.

Even though I believe there are advantages to starting deliberations with community issues, I would not rule out professional topics. The American Bar Association (ABA) has responded to criticisms of the legal profession's role in the judicial system by preparing an issue book for public deliberations. Having previously attempted to "inform" the citizenry through a public relations campaign intended to create a better image of the profession, the ABA decided to go directly to the public. Their issue book presents a range of options for improving the judicial system, including some options that I imagine appeal more to nonlawyers

than lawyers. It is quite a remarkable, even courageous, strategy. There are other examples. The Catholic community has sponsored forums on abortions using a National Issues Forums guide. It, too, presented options other than the ones the Church favored. Perhaps, in time, one of the professional associations in public education will prepare issue books to engage some of the criticisms directed at educators.

I don't want to give the impression that I think public deliberation is some kind of cure-all for professions or communities. Its benefits, like those of going to a gym, only come in time. And there isn't any guarantee that the public will come to the "right" conclusion. Furthermore, collective decision making is just one of the practices in public work. At best, it enlarges the understanding of the nature of a problem, which can draw on more than the "usual suspects" to take the actions that should follow deliberation.

The case for building engagement around public deliberation is that collective decision making is at the heart of democratic politics. It helps create the public, and it puts the public back into the public's business. The practical payoff for the educators who take Brian Cook's advice and enter the dialogue on the community's terms is that they can reaffirm the mission of their schools as truly public institutions and not merely utilities providing personal services. Engaging public practices also draws schools back into local networks that are rich in the resources needed to combat the undesirable but inevitable forces of social pathology and economic depredation. And schools that are informed by public practices are more likely to retain the nonbureaucratic characteristics of community institutions.

The time could be right for engaging citizens on educational issues. I don't believe that Americans, whatever their frustrations and criticisms, want to go to war with teachers, administrators, and school boards. Most citizens are open to the call to reason together. If we can find some public school groups that will team up with community organizations, then we might be able to pursue a line of research that has significant practical value, not to mention value in preserving the tradition of self-government.

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