

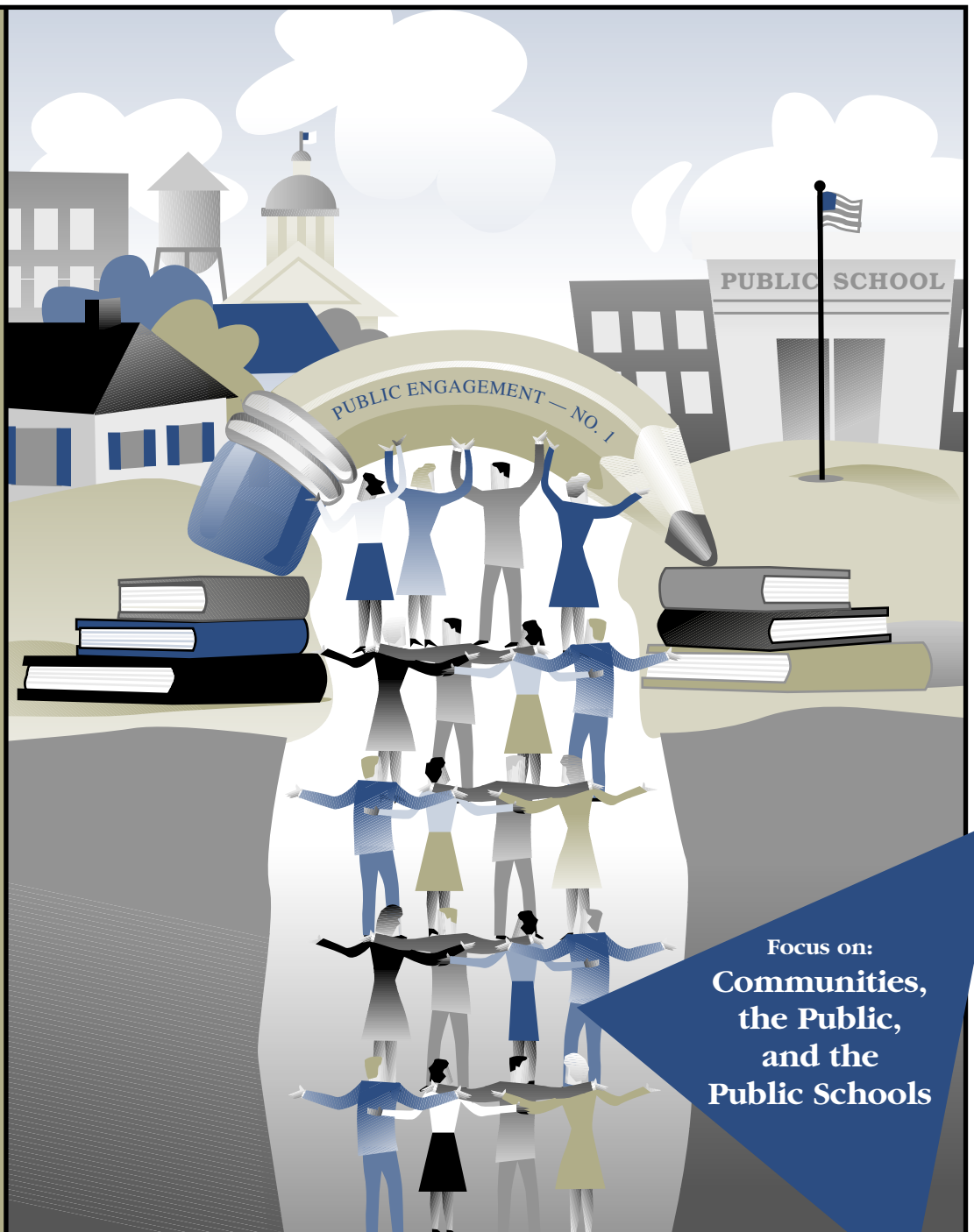
# CONNECTIONS

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

# The Relationship of Citizens to Their Schools — Emerging KF Research

by *Connie Gabagan*

While studying rural schools, Kettering researchers came upon one man who said, “We are an ‘us’ in Amesville ... everything we do is tied to the school system.” He spoke of the local schools with the pride of ownership people felt when schools were built with hand-hewn boards by neighbors who had done the felling of the trees for the boards. His voice revealed the confidence that comes from hands-on involvement in a close-knit community.

Far too commonly today, however, communities do not attach this sense of pride to their schools. Kettering sees this loss of pride as important, and asks why it has occurred. What intervening factors have weakened the historic relationship between the public and the public schools?

In Kettering’s view, schools, being integral parts of the community, reflect the character of the community: that is, the nature of local relationships and values. Further, in any given community the relationship between citizens and their schools reflects a broader circumstance. That relationship is symptomatic of the connections existing between the community and all the institutions that serve it.

In Kettering research, one question we ask people is whether they would describe the local school to a visitor as “their” school or “the” school? The response provides a shortcut answer to whether the community feels it owns its schools. What we hear back is a mixture of pride and exasperation, and not always where those responses might be expected.

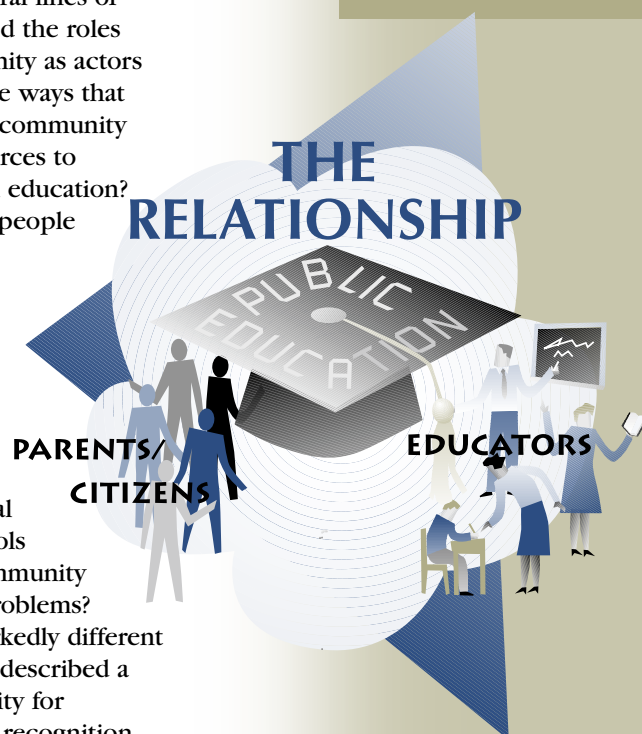
One strong piece of the public’s response is, increasingly, people view their relationship to the schools in “consumer” terms. This was the finding, for instance, of a 1999 study by Doble Research Associates.

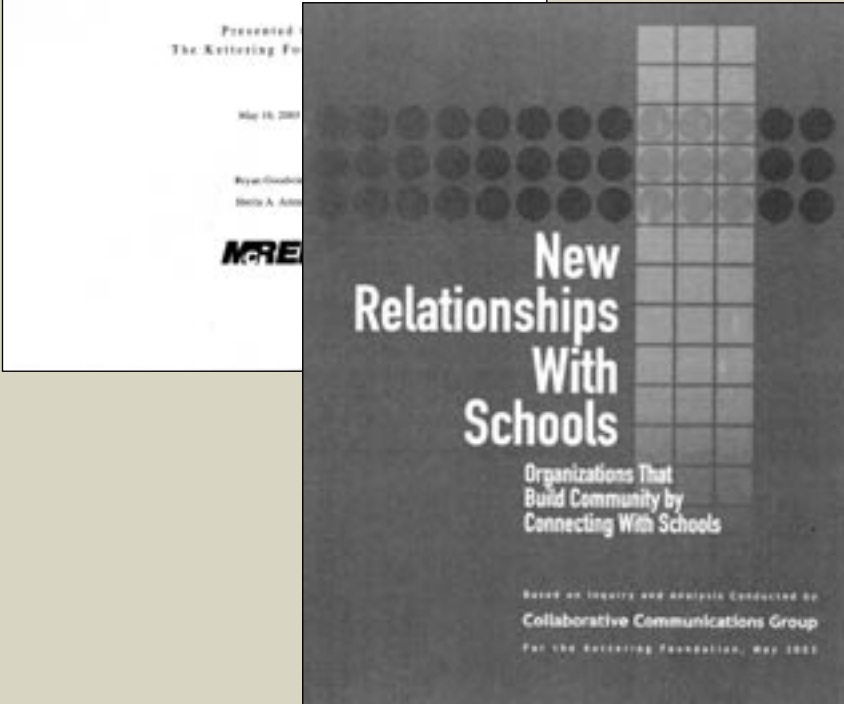
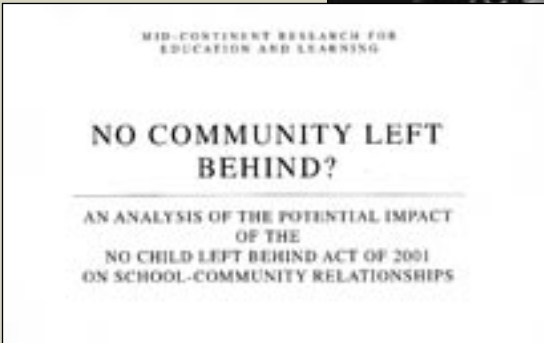
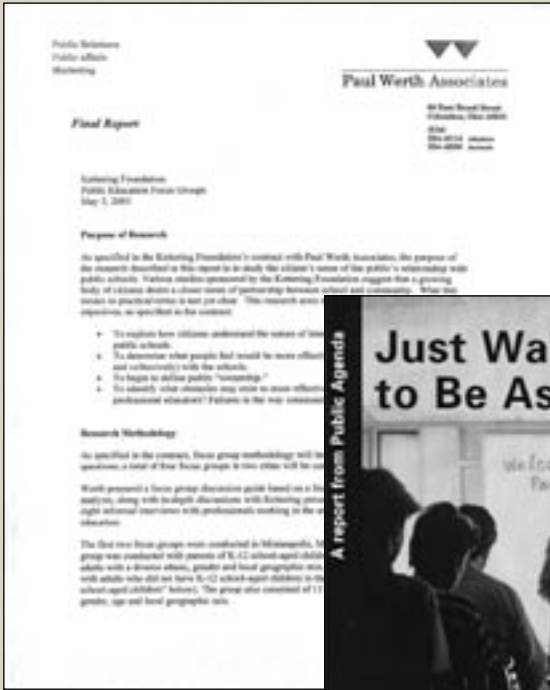
Although “consumer” represents a variety of viewpoints, the term has become a standard in our research. Consumers make demands of institutions and expect services in return. They have no role to play other than oversight of the transaction. Part of the reason members of the community adopt this perspective may be that they have difficulty imagining any other way of relating. Some people told researchers that schools seem to expect them to play that role; many felt confined by it. Others felt comfortable as consumers, stating it was the school’s responsibility to educate and theirs to judge the success of the final product.

We need to know more about how citizens view, and talk about, the relationships they currently have with the public schools, and have asked Paul Werth Associates to interview residents of two large cities about the nature of their interactions with the public schools. The research had two general lines of questions. The first explored the roles of citizens and the community as actors in education. Do people see ways that they themselves, and their community collectively, could be resources to complement the schools in education? The second explored how people see the roles (if any) of the schools as resources in dealing with community issues that spill over into the schools. Are there issues that communities struggle with, where people see the public schools as a potential resource? How might schools be effectively linked to community efforts to deal with such problems?

The cities reflected markedly different attitudes. In one, residents described a shared sense of responsibility for educating youth, including recognition

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of community issues that affect the schools. In the other, people's focus was narrower: they spoke mainly of being advocates for their own children. This second group anticipated no further connection between themselves and local schools, once their own children had graduated. The researchers noted another revealing difference. While the latter city is seen as having "better" schools by conventional measures, people interviewed in the first city were more content with their community's education efforts and less inclined to focus blame on the schools.

Some educators have taken these findings as support for exploring how "public engagement" can be a challenge for the *whole* of the community rather than solely for the schools to meet. More educators have come to recognize that the success of their work depends on the active support of parents and other community actors. They note that the social motivation for learning — the norms and expectations for student performance supporting or undermining the actions of the schools — are shaped and enforced outside the schools. Community-based civic and business institutions can also provide experiences and context for learning, and can thus be resources to complement school efforts. To the extent complementary support in the community is absent, the efforts of professionals in schools will be weakened. Even worse, where communities have turned their resources against the schools, the efforts of professionals can be thwarted. Finally, there is the recognition that schools are increasingly buffeted by community-based problems, but these problems spill over into the schools — problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, violent crime, and other forms of antisocial behavior. The symptoms show up in the schools, but are located and need to be dealt with in the communities. Thus Charles Irish, who as a superintendent used public processes to engage citizens in decision making, has said, "Our job as a school district is to work to re-create the connection. If we don't, we're going to lose our public."

There are, however, barriers to improved engagement. Education professionals often speak in favor of engaging the public, but do not act accordingly. In a 2001 survey by Public Agenda, *Just Waiting to Be Asked?* 83 percent of super-



intendents said public engagement should involve more than open houses and similar volunteer activities for the schools. Yet, 62 percent of those superintendents reported that their most recent meeting with community members had been held to explain and enlist support for just such school initiatives. Thus, for many school level professionals, engagement remains a one-way street: the public exists to be recruited to assist on tasks and agendas set by the schools.

Current legislation also presents challenges to improving the relationship between the public and the public schools. In a report to Kettering entitled “No Community Left Behind?” (May 2003) the regional educational lab known as McREL looked at the potential impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on school-community relationships. NCLB includes provisions requiring parental and community involvement in the schools, and could be an opportunity to increase meaningful dialogues about community purposes of and aspirations for local schools. Those who seek to improve the relationship may want to begin by openly sorting out a community interpretation of meaningful involvement.

McREL has observed that community organizing is increasingly the method chosen for public engagement with the schools. A similar finding was made by researchers from the Collaborative Communications Group in a report for Kettering, *New Relationships with Schools: Organizations That Build Community By Connecting With Schools* (March 2003). According to the report, community organizing is particularly likely to be undertaken in “disinvested communities where previous efforts have not served residents well.” The research asked: What new relationships with schools are created by organizations and their constituents as they go about the work of improving their communities?

The initial report on community organizing efforts mapped the field and made observations, but further work is needed to understand the impact of community organizing on democratic practices. According to McREL, people trained in organizing are “building the skills and confidence to take on school challenges without waiting to be asked or acting within proscribed forms.” Such organizing has the potential not only to influence schools, but to increase the capacity of

individuals to act effectively in concert with others, and thus create or support democratic practices within communities. And those may be the first steps toward building a public for public schools.

Differently envisioned, public engagement could be *public-building*. A challenge for us now is to understand how communities can themselves develop the ability to examine their own disconnect between the public and the public schools. Such experiments may reveal possibilities for new means of engagement. How do communities come to a shared understanding of how they relate as a community? How might this insight affect people’s sense of themselves as responsible actors for education?

We want to learn how communities can come to recognize their interdependence in educating young people. The public’s relationship to the public schools is among the most important things that people come to Kettering to understand better. Every community would like to be able to say, “WE are an US.” Now we look to you to help us imagine: What would be a useful way to begin the dialogue and who might we work with to learn more?

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