

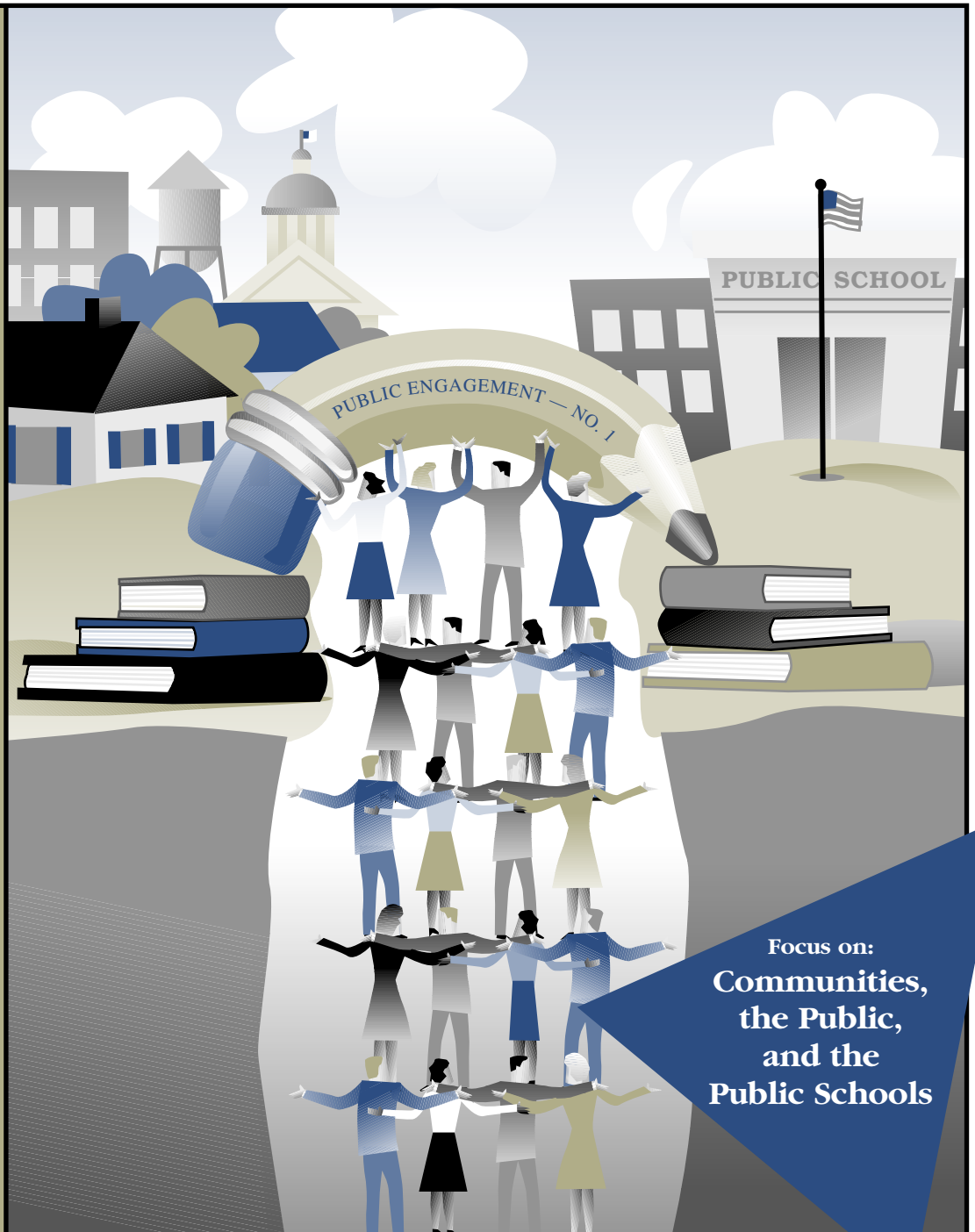
# CONNECTIONS

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**

# From Partners to Owners

by Michael Briand

*What distinguishes partners ... is their grasp that the schools are part of the community. For partners, the well-being of the community and the well-being of the schools are inseparable.*

Throughout America, public schools face challenges. Many find it difficult to meet these challenges on their own; they need help from people outside the school system or the school. For example, to fulfill today's higher expectations for teacher performance and student achievement, schools are looking to parents, businesses, and community organizations to provide forms of support and assistance that the schools alone can't supply. Public education has entered the age of partnerships.

The idea of a "partner" is a familiar one. There are business partners, partners in law firms and medical practices, and partners in a marriage. The notion of a partnership seems straightforward. Within public education, however, partnership is still a new concept. Not surprisingly, school partnerships currently take a variety of forms.

Some partnerships appear more promising than others in helping schools meet the challenges confronting them. Only one, though, offers the potential to solve what might be the toughest problem confronting public schools today: the widespread feeling among ordinary citizens that they no longer "own" the schools that once belonged to them.

*"What works for me is being on a first-name basis with teachers."* That's how one parent recently characterized the kind of relationship she wants to have with her local schools. Most

parents have always valued this kind of relationship, of course; it is one way they can be sure teachers are attending to their children's

needs. Many parents want a school environment, or "culture," that permits and encourages them to develop informal, personal relationships with school staff. That's

why many say the ideal relationship is one in which "parents are welcomed

into the schools, not seen as unwelcome visitors," and it's why they describe that relationship using words like "openness," "access," and "communication."

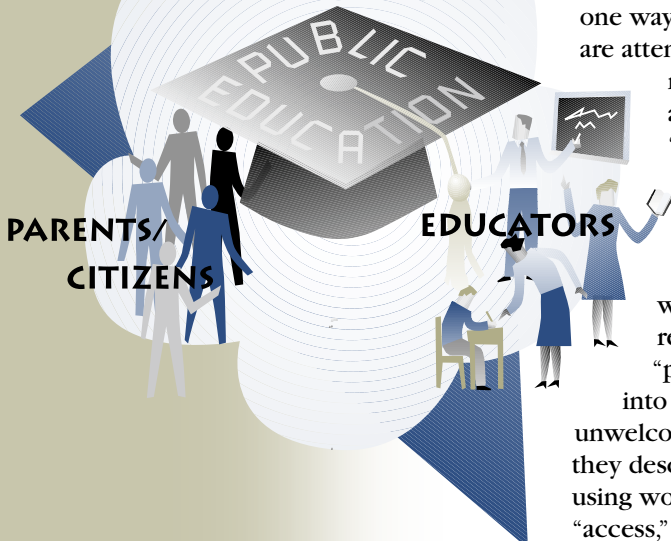
Some parents today are making it clear, however, that the role schools have traditionally afforded them no longer suffices for effective involvement. It's not enough to attend parent-teacher conferences, supervise homework, serve on committees, join the PTA, help out in the classroom, raise extra money for school activities, and so on. For these parents, effective involvement means letting parents come into the schools to see what the teachers do and how the school operates. As one parent remarked, education "works better if there is a partnership relationship where you can have input."

It's not just parents, moreover, who want the schools to welcome input from noneducators. Other community members believe they have a responsibility to work with the schools. As one community advocate put it, "schools [should] not be bureaucratic operations, but relational operations. The focus [should] be ... thinking about [the] school as a series of relationships working towards a common goal of helping children."

*"If we've got a school that's not doing well, let's ... get in there and diagnose the problem."* This sentiment, expressed by a man in Atlanta, captures the animating spirit of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed by Congress in 2001. Inspired by the laudable goal of enabling all children to meet high academic standards, the new law requires that states develop academic and performance standards and that most students undergo annual standardized testing; and schools be held accountable in various ways. Schools must make adequate progress toward academic performance goals, must ensure all teachers are highly qualified, and must empower parents by requiring school districts to report annual student test data and other important school information. If the first form of school partnership can be described as "relational," this form might be called "informational."

The NCLB assumes that the goal of educating all young people to high standards is the job chiefly of educators. But it places new emphasis on the role of parents, who have a right (though not an

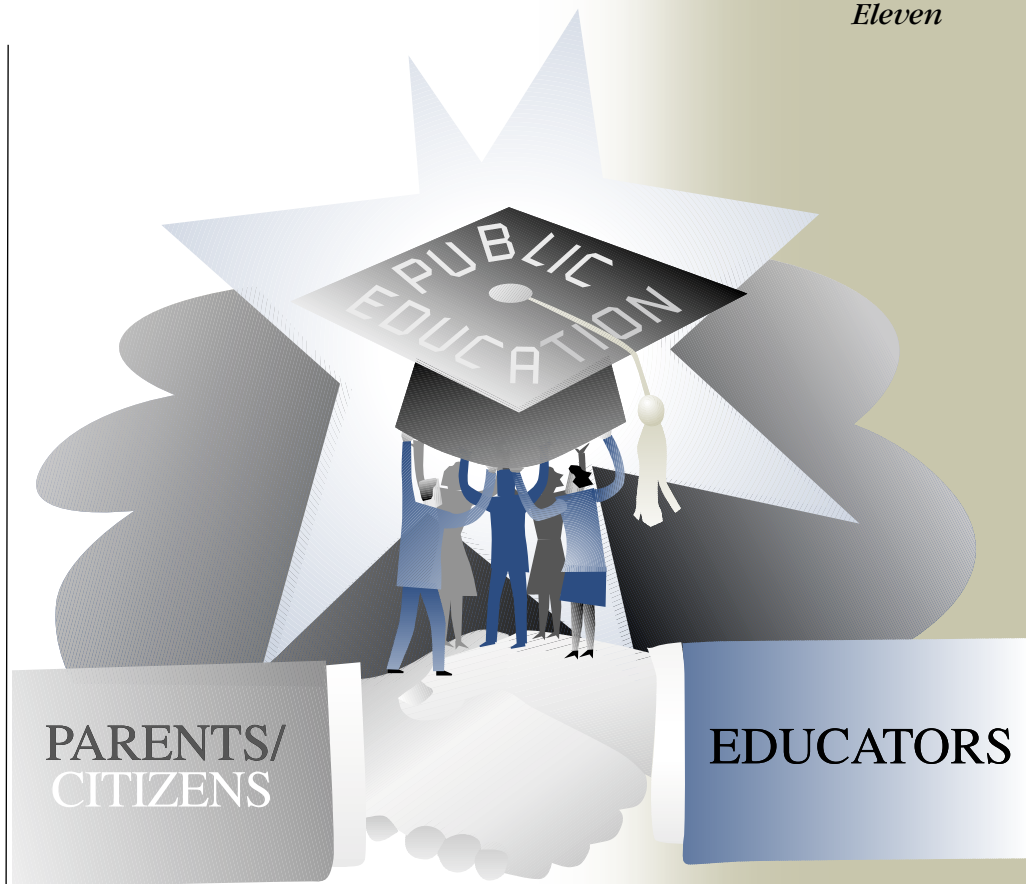
## THE RELATIONSHIP



obligation) to make sure their children's needs are being properly addressed. It stresses "parent involvement," defined as "the participation of parents in ... meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring that ... parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child." All schools receiving federal funds must "involve parents, in an organized, ongoing, and timely way" in the "joint development" of both schoolwide improvement and parental involvement policies. Specifically, every school must develop (with parental input) a "school-parent compact" explaining how parents, school staff, and students "will share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement...."

The NCLB aims at giving parents more leverage over the professionals who run their children's schools. In this respect, it makes common cause with parents and community members who believe that existing forms of involvement in school affairs don't enable noneducators to have a real impact on school policies and practices. Too often, this group argues, people get "co-opted by schools, being told what issues they should work on." In their view, this gets things the wrong way around — the schools should take their direction from the community. For these individuals, the paramount question is, Who possesses authority to establish school policies and practices? They want more than accountability — they want control.

*"The public schools need to be improved. Where would society be if we didn't have a good, strong public school system?" "We have to understand that our whole [community's] well-being depends, in the long run, on the schools."* These are quotes from two individuals whose relationship to the schools was, in a recent study, characterized as "partners." "Partners" are people who are active in the schools. Some undertake traditional tasks, like raising funds. Others act as "para-educators" assisting teachers in the classroom (for example, by helping children with their reading). Most are parents of school-age children; some aren't — for example, a retired police officer who uses the school gym



for a "midnight basketball" program to give teenagers something to do late on weekend nights. Partners establish connections, build relationships, and form networks throughout their community. They often see themselves as "bridge-builders" who are trying to link different groups in the community with the schools. They also describe themselves as communicators who deal in a constructive manner with both school officials and members of their community.

What distinguishes partners, however, is their grasp that the schools are part of the community. For partners, the well-being of the community and the well-being of the schools are inseparable. They see that, in striving to educate young people, the schools must solve problems and meet needs that are the community's as much as they are the school's. Consequently, they want to make sure the purposes and goals of the schools are in line with the community's interests. They believe it's the responsibility of the whole community, not just school professionals, to educate young people. And they're convinced that everyone has something to contribute to this task. They feel strongly that, when it comes to education, "we're all in this together."

*The place to begin deliberating is not in the schools but in the community. And deliberation should not be about the schools but about education. That is how public education was created, and it is how it must be reconceived and rebuilt.*

Which of these three types of school partnerships is likely to prove most effective in helping schools meet the challenges they face today? In particular, which has the most potential for solving what may be the knottiest problem of all: how to overcome the dissatisfaction that stems from the widespread sense that the schools no longer belong to ordinary people?

The first two approaches — the “relational” and the “informational” — have the merit of recognizing that parents play a unique and indispensable role in their children’s academic success, and hence ought to be involved deeply in decisions concerning their children’s education. But these forms of partnership also have weaknesses. The relational approach provides little leverage for parents who find that informal, personal relationships with their children’s teachers don’t yield the results they seek. Similarly, the informational approach, as embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act, acknowledges the right of parents to participate (at least nominally) in school decision making, but gives them no real authority or power. Worse, attempts by noneducators to join in decision making may prompt school officials to “circle the wagons” and to deflect or stonewall what they perceive as intrusions. If this happens, then noneducators may find themselves with even less influence than they enjoyed previously.

Neither of the first two approaches emphasizes the responsibilities of nonparents or the contributions they can make to the education of young people. The third form of partnership — what might be dubbed the “community responsibility” model — avoids this error. Like the relational and informational approaches, however, it does nothing to enhance the influence of noneducators with respect to determining school policies and practices. (“Partners” are disinclined to question or impinge upon the authority of education professionals; more commonly, they think it appropriate to offer support.

Perhaps more important, the community responsibility form shares a problem with the other two models. It does not consider that people may not want either a personal relationship with school personnel or the information policymakers think will enable them to reassert influence over the schools. Maybe what people really want is reassurance. Maybe what they’re looking for is some

way to understand what the schools do and why they do it, so they can judge for themselves whether the goals and methods of the schools are in line with their own needs, values, and priorities.

For this reason, one other form of relationship ought to be considered, though it is a form more clearly associated with the country’s past than with its present. In his study of the first community schools in southwestern Alabama, David Mathews offers examples of communities that didn’t have to figure out what kind of partnership they should have with their schools, for the simple reason that a school was part of the community, not something distinct from it. As Mathews observes,

People ... making choices that set the directions for long-term tasks like educating young people ... suggests a shared sense of responsibility or ownership.... Schools enjoyed broad support in communities because they were perceived as extensions of the communities; they were the public organized to make learning available.

In early nineteenth-century America, when the first public schools were being founded, there was no “disconnect” between communities and their schools. There was no question about who “owned” them. There was no broken relationship between the community and the schools — indeed, there was no “relationship” at all, in the sense we employ that word today. Schools were fully integrated with the communities they served. Education of the young was a community responsibility. Authority, too, rested with the community: schools were created, and subsequently directed, by members of the community working together. The partnership that existed was a partnership among citizens, among individual members of the community. As Mathews aptly puts it, schools were “the public organized to make learning available.”

If communities today do not approach public education in the manner of early American communities, how might they once again become “the public organized to make learning available”? Perhaps the way to begin bringing the schools back into the community is not by attempting to bring the community and the schools into partnership, but by members of the community forming a partnership with each other.

How might a partnership among the members of a community be forged? In brief, by people deliberating together. Citizen deliberation in community forums opens lines of communication, enabling citizens to share perceptions and concerns with others with whom they normally have little contact. Such forums build mutual understanding, respect, and trust, thereby establishing new connections or strengthening fragile ones. Through deliberation, the members of a community can build a partnership among themselves that will enable them to share responsibility and authority for the education of their young people.

The place to begin deliberating is not in the *schools* but in the *community*. And deliberation should not be about the *schools* but about *education*. That is how public education was created, and it is how it must be reconceived and rebuilt. If people can deliberate together, they will find that the schools have become *their* schools once again. And when the schools belong to the public once more, that public will find ways to solve the problems and meet the challenges confronting their schools today.

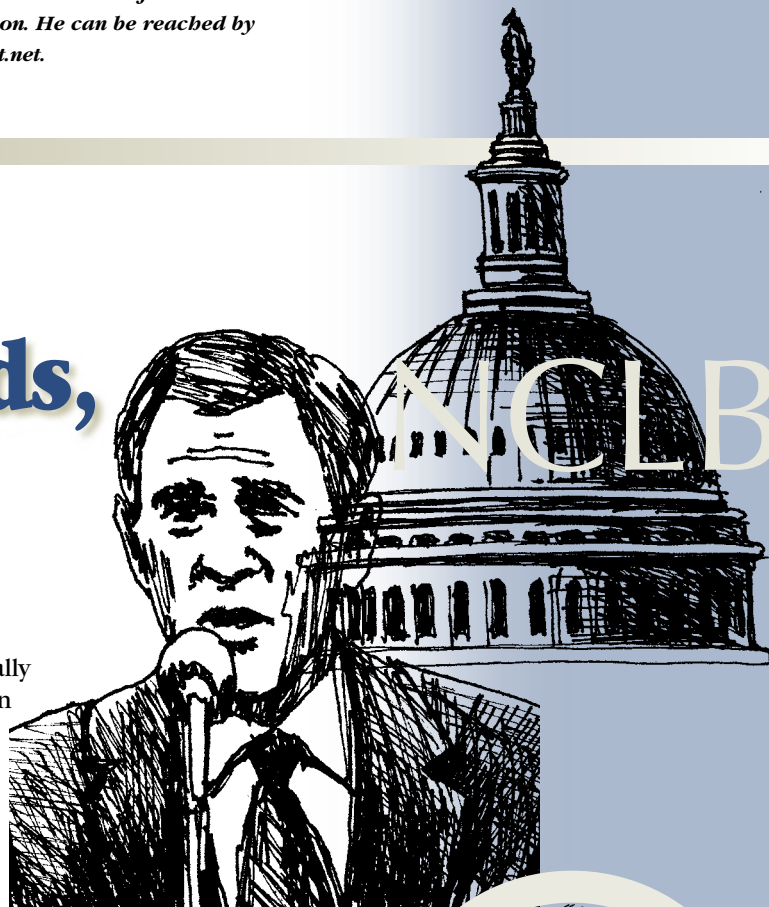
*Michael Briand is an associate of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached by E-mail at IDDD@att.net.*

# Accountability, National Standards, and the Public

by Phillip D. Lurie

One of the three central assumptions that frame Kettering Foundation research is that democracies *"need institutions that enjoy the confidence of citizens and serve to strengthen public life."* (Kettering Foundation Overview, July 2001, p. 4) Institutions support the practices that create publics around shared concerns, as they are supported by complementary public acting. Too often, the connection between the public and the institutions intended to serve it is weak. Thus, a focal point for Kettering Foundation research has been the political disconnect between citizens, their governments, and the nongovernmental institutions charged to serve the public. Indeed, all Kettering Foundation program areas give critical attention to the lack of alignment of citizen and institutional practice. While the analytical concept of "the public" and theories of "the disconnect" are not widely shared in popular discourse, one *symptom* — the widespread discontent with institu-

tions — is generally recognized. When discontented with institutions, Americans have often sought their reform. Commonly, reform efforts seek passage of legislation that will discipline the institution in question. Such reform movements have been rooted in the belief that if the operations of the institution in question could be made more efficient — if performance could be *demonstrably* enhanced — public support would follow. Such thinking has been behind calls for "reinventing government" and other administrative bodies, efforts that emphasize performance measurement and promise *accountability* as the cornerstone of the movement. Similar efforts have emerged recently in journalism, philanthropy, and higher education.



*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.*

## How to Order Kettering Foundation Publications

To request a *KF Publications Catalog*, call 1-800-600-4060, send a FAX to 1-937-435-7367, or write:

**Kettering Foundation  
Order Department  
P. O. Box 41626  
Dayton, OH 45441**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Phone ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_

**For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).**

*Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.*

*Unless expressly stated to the contrary, the articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.*

*Those who contributed to producing this issue include:*

*Editor...*

*Mark Bernstein*

*Program staff...*

*Randall Nielsen*

*Connie Gabagan*

*Phillip Lurie*

*Maxine Thomas*

*Graphic Design*

*& Desktop Publishing...*

*Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.*

*Copy Editor...*

*Betty Frecker*

*Assistant to the Publisher...*

*Valerie Breidenbach*

*Publisher...*

*Kenneth A. Brown*

LGD-0828-KF-15500-MP-04-04

*Kettering  
Foundation*

© Copyright 2004 by the Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016

**Kettering Foundation  
200 Commons Road  
Dayton, OH 45459-2799**

Nonprofit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Dayton, OH  
Permit No. 638