

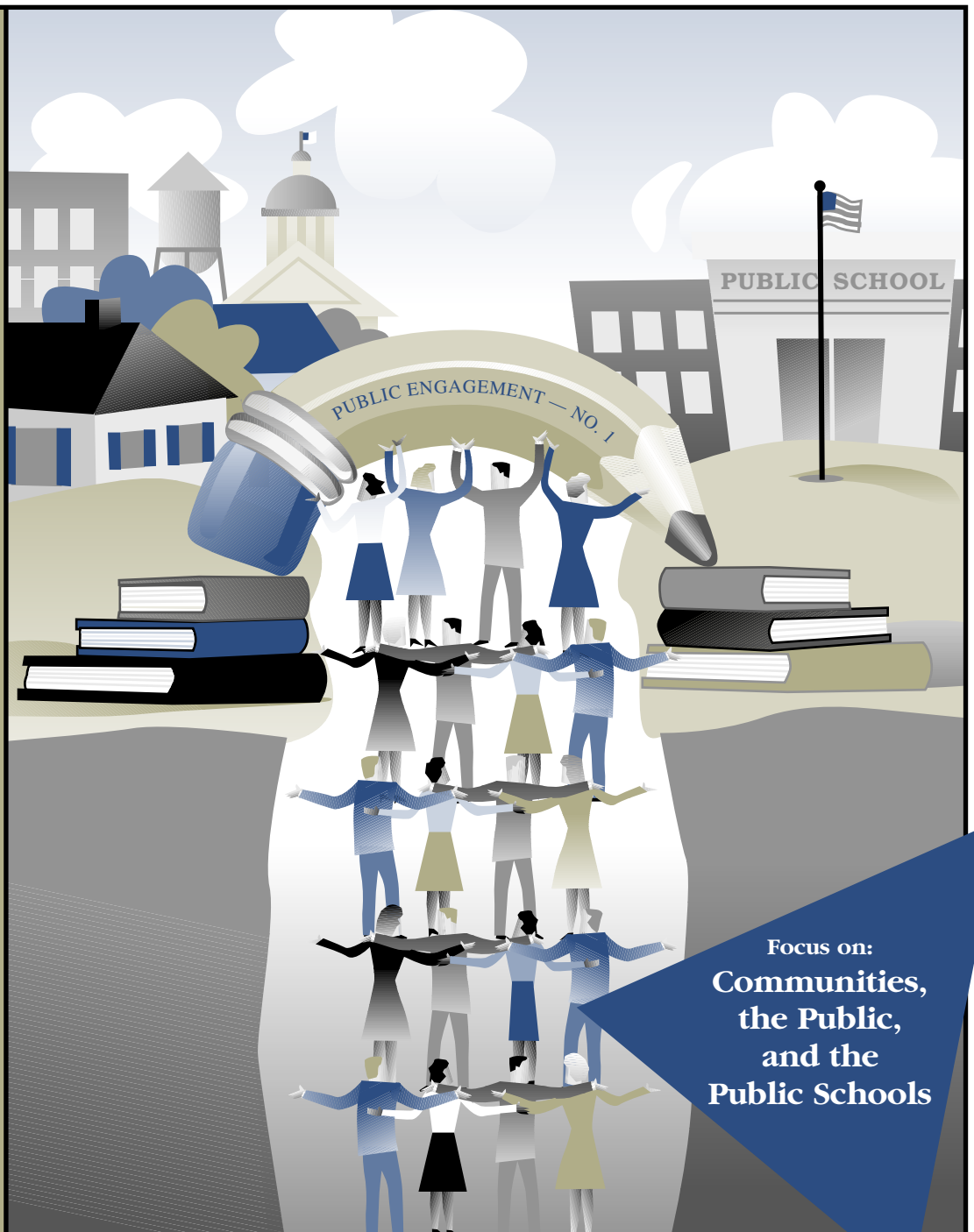
CONNECTIONS

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

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.

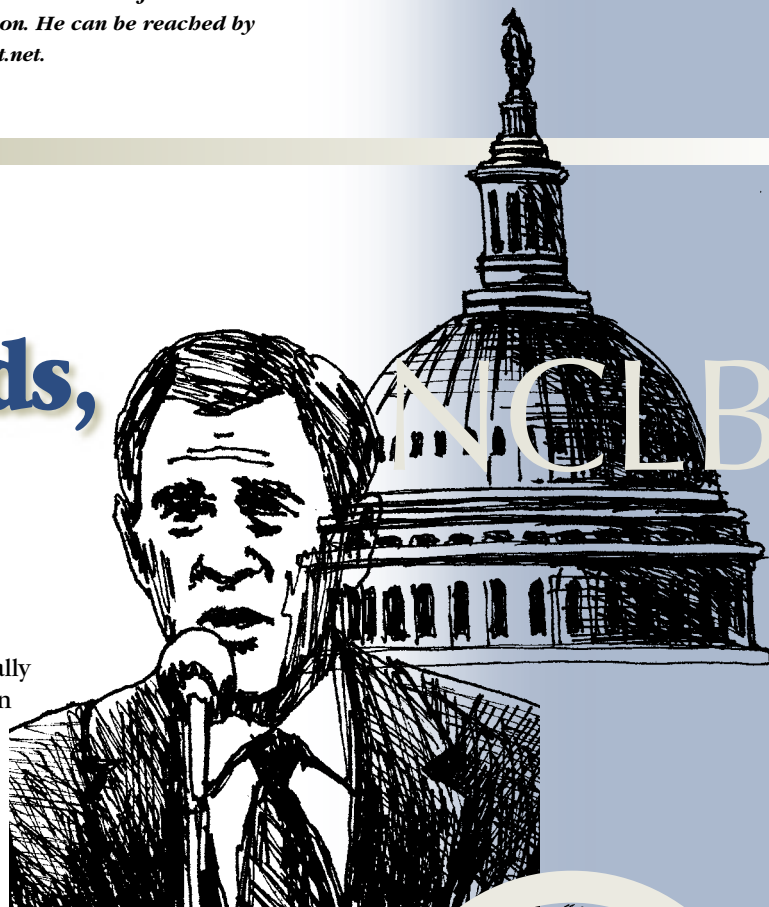
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Accountability, National Standards, and the Public

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.

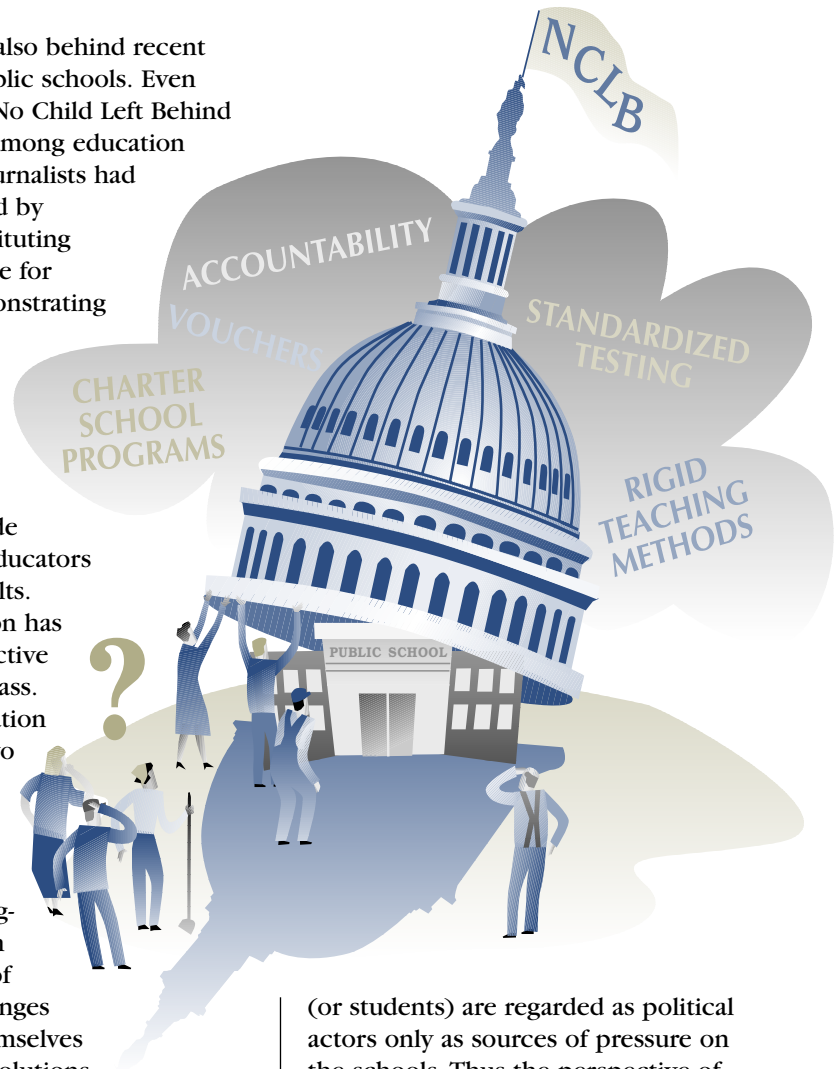


Kettering's research has shown "accountability" to have a different meaning to different citizens and audiences.

Such thinking is also behind recent efforts to reform public schools. Even prior to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the discussion among education professionals and journalists had long been dominated by the challenge of instituting *standards* as a device for promoting and demonstrating accountability. The challenge educators and others see is to develop objective, geographically comparable measures that provide the means to hold educators accountable for results. The federal legislation has brought that perspective to the head of the class.

Kettering Foundation research suggests two reasons for concern about framing the challenge in that manner. The first stems from the recognition that education is one of a number of deeply rooted challenges that do not lend themselves to purely technical solutions. As with other systemic political challenges, education is a field in which both the definition of the problem and the nature of the response are contestable and based on judgment. In the absence of a citizenry engaged around the challenge of education, public schools are left to grapple with the demands of distinct, competing interest groups. Accountability measures ignore the need for a shared sense of direction for education. When there is no coherent public, there is no meaningful way to be accountable to the public. In that case, the very practices that are intended to address the dissatisfaction may contribute to widening the disconnect.

The second reason for concern stems from the implications the standards have on the identity of the political actors to be held accountable. What are the implications for the ways of relating among citizens, various community organizations, and the public schools as they grapple with the challenge of education? As generally interpreted, the citizenry, communities, and even parents



(or students) are regarded as political actors only as sources of pressure on the schools. Thus the perspective of education as consumer good, singularly produced by the schools, is reinforced and further institutionalized. That may increase the difficulty for those who seek ways to restore a sense of democratic ownership of education.

It is important to note, however, that Kettering's research has shown "accountability" to have a different meaning to different citizens and audiences. As to this issue, David Mathews notes in his *Overview*, citizens often have a broader definition of accountability — one that is not only based on information, but on relationships as well. In fact, this distinction has been highlighted in three recent reports to the foundation.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), for example, reported in "No Community Left Behind?" that, "Community and parent advocates as well as parents themselves worried that schools' current focus on high-stakes testing and accountability may prevent the development of more effective parent and community engagement." In short, the heightened emphasis on standard-

ized testing leaves many parents feeling shut out of the education process. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002, set new guidelines for education reform based on four principles: increased accountability; choices for parents and students; flexibility for states, districts and schools; and advocacy of proven education methods. Much emphasis has, therefore, been placed on standardized testing, voucher and charter school programs, and professionalized, rigid teaching methods. Some critics of this law believe the changes will encourage parents and schools to engage in a consumer-based relationship, rather than one based on mutual reinforcement. While NCLB does contain provisions for parental involvement, findings from reports such as McREL's underscore these concerns. The reasoning behind this stems mostly from concerns about how the tests are produced, and how the testing process is far removed from the community.

This last concern was especially relevant in a report by Arlie Woodrum, "State-Mandated Testing and Cultural Resistance in Appalachian Schools: Competing Values and Expectations." There is a dichotomous relationship between working-class Appalachians and non-Appalachians with respect to the issue of standardized testing. Woodrum writes, "Current accountability measures, while embraced by middle-class, non-Appalachian families and teachers, are viewed by poor Appalachian families as yet another example of the state asserting its own values and power over them." This is a particularly poignant problem in rural areas, such as Appalachia, because the school is one of the few public spaces in which a community can gather. A second report furthers this concern. Doble Research Associates, in "Who Is Accountable for Education? Overview of Observations from Two Focus Groups in Rural Southeastern Ohio," also describes the feelings of Appalachians. The report underscores what was reported earlier; namely, that accountability is a local issue that should be engaged in a joint effort by educators and community members.

The Kettering Foundation has hypothesized that to move from the consumer-based viewpoint to one that focuses on the community (or the relational), strategies for public engagement should center on the community rather than

on the school. In *Making the Schools Public Again*, David Mathews wrote, "Reframing school-related issues to show their roots in the community so civic action can be directed at underlying problems is reinforcing." That is, an engaged citizenry, one that is based in and reflects the community, can move beyond mere public engagement (as specified by NCLB) toward public-building.

This suggests that research must continue in the following areas: The first is to continue to focus on the reaction of communities to the standards movement. This will involve examining citizens' notions of accountability, how the standards movement affects citizens' relationship with their schools, as well as how that relationship has been transformed now that NCLB is beginning to have local effects. This will be particularly poignant when large numbers of schools become classified as poor performers, triggering a series of federally proscribed actions.

The second is to recognize that the movement in education is simply a version of the generic challenge of institutional accountability in public life. Research into schools should, therefore, be brought together with research from the other Kettering Foundation areas that define the challenge as one of restoring a sense of institutional legitimacy through practices that build and serve the public interest. The goal is to change the way the dialogue is framed so as to bring public ownership/self-rule back into the story.

Collaborative Communications Group wrote in a September 2002 report, "The community is often cast as having an important role in holding schools accountable. Less evident are specific roles for parents and community members around shared decision making and leadership within these accountability systems ... the issue of accountability is most often framed as a policy — and not a public — issue." These sentiments, in fact each specific thought, provide a helpful outline for future research in this area. If the foundation can examine the role of community in accountability, accountability in relational terms, and the importance of public-building strategies, then the foundation will have a solid base with which to address these "wicked problems" regarding public schools.

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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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