

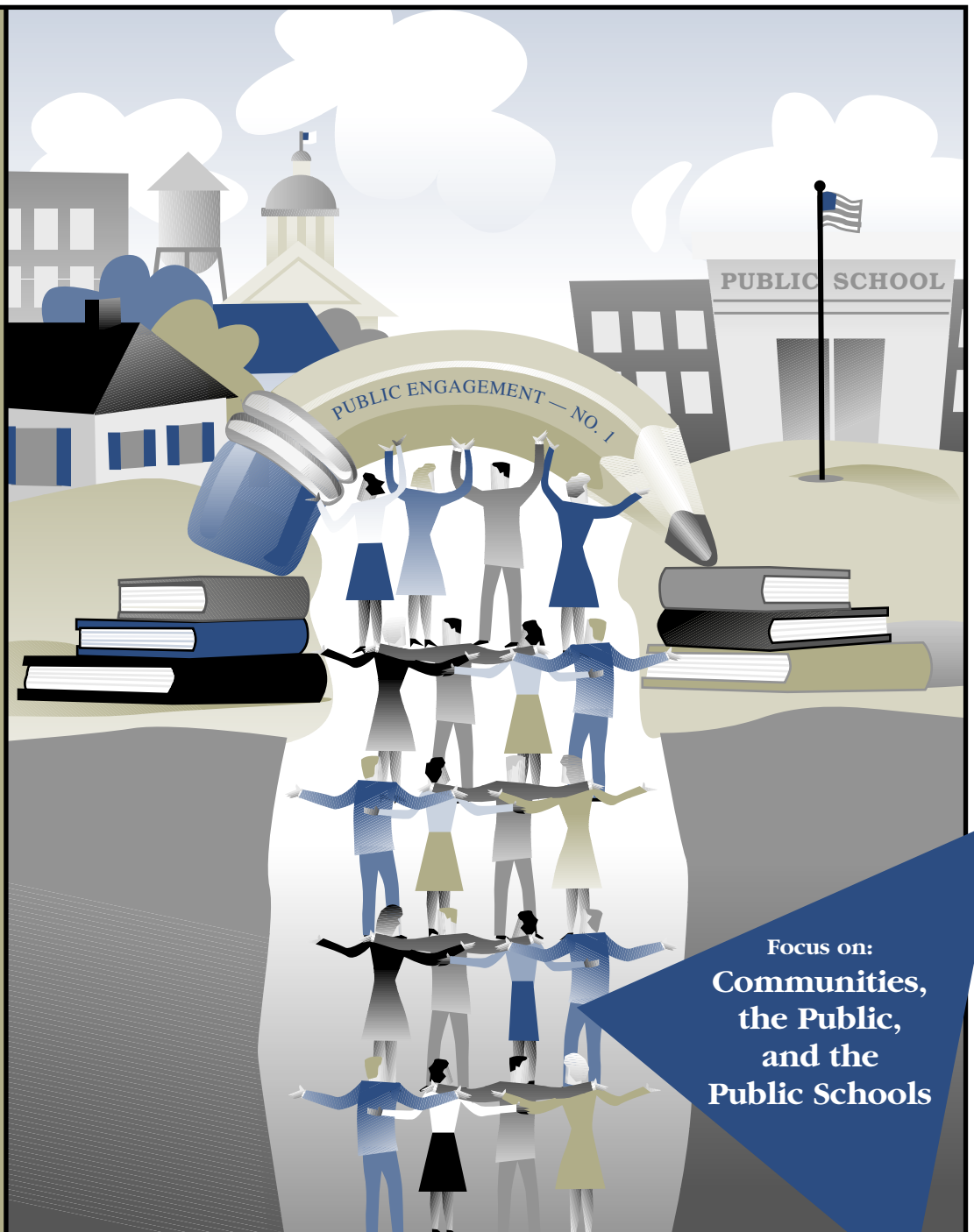
# CONNECTIONS

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

# Where the Public Stands on Standards-based Education

by *Bryan Goodwin*

*Although ... polls have shown that parents and the public are generally supportive of current standards-based education reform efforts, such polls only provide part of the picture....*

Amid the growing din of debate over the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), we seldom hear the public's voice. Indeed people generally remain largely unaware of the policy details and their implications for schools. Although public opinion polls have shown that parents and the public are generally supportive of current standards-based education reform efforts, such polls only provide part of the picture of what people think. Polls rarely let people finish their sentences or express why they believe what they do. Moreover, polls and surveys don't give people a chance to think deeply about the issues, deliberate them with their neighbors, and arrive at thoughtful opinions.

In light of the tremendous challenge posed by NCLB and the ongoing public support that will undoubtedly be needed to accomplish its goals, it only makes sense to bring the public into the conversation. To create opportunities for real public dialogue on the issues, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) a non-profit, nonpartisan research organization located in Aurora, Colorado, launched a "National Dialogue on Standards-based Education." As part of the effort, McREL sought to learn with the Kettering Foundation more about the qualities of effective deliberation on such issues. For Kettering researchers, this was an opportunity for a shared learning agreement that would further its understanding of the way the public sees the challenge and how citizens sort through the tensions among the things they hold dear.

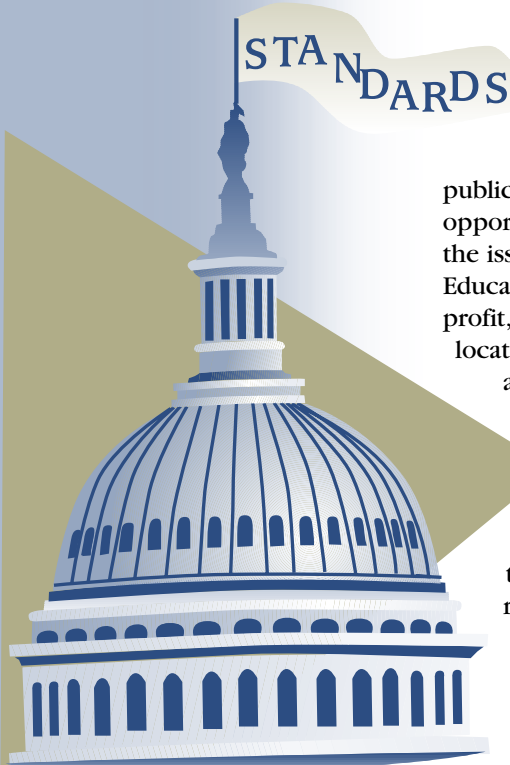
"Amid the largely technical discussion among educators and

policymakers about standards, high-stakes testing and accountability, we rarely hear the voice of the public," noted Dr. J. Timothy Waters, president and CEO of McREL. "McREL and the Kettering Foundation both felt it was important to listen to what the public has to say about its schools and current efforts underway to improve them." Participants in the deliberation have included students, public and private school parents, non-parent taxpayers, business owners, and policymakers.

McREL recently released a report on its initial research findings. In the dialogues, people initially expressed opinions regarding standards that were very much in line with recent public opinion polls that have revealed popular support for standards, assessments, and accountability. However, as people further discussed these issues, important nuances emerged as key themes:

- ◆ Tests are necessary, but accountability should be based on more than just test scores.
- ◆ Accountability should make schools more responsive to parents and communities, not outside officials.
- ◆ Parents and students are a crucial, yet often marginalized part of accountability systems.
- ◆ People's key concerns about schools are mostly social issues not addressed by standards, tests, or accountability.
- ◆ Parents would like to be more involved in their schools, but often feel shut out of them.

After conducting these focus groups and hearing people's responses, McREL researchers concluded that while people do appear to support using standards, testing, and accountability to improve schools, they appear to have a host of other concerns that standards-based reforms do not address. In short, it seems that when it



comes to education reform, parents and the public may be far more focused on improving social and personal aspects of schools — “soft” results that cannot be easily quantified. Educators and policy-makers, on the other hand, appear to be mainly focused on improving the technical aspects of schooling, namely test scores and other quantifiable results.

“We believe educators and policy-makers should take note of the possibility that the public may have a very different idea in mind about what needs to happen in their schools,” said Waters. “If school leaders fail to understand the public’s deeper concerns about education, it’s possible that even if public schools succeed in boosting test scores and avoiding sanctions, they may still fail to increase public satisfaction with them.”

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McREL’s community dialogue materials (participant and moderator guides and conversation-starter video), modeled after the National Issues Forums process, are available at no cost to interested communities. Training on how to organize and moderate community dialogues also is available. For more information, and for a copy of the full report *Digging Deeper: Where Does the Public Stand on Standards-based Education*, visit [www.nationaldialogue.org](http://www.nationaldialogue.org) online.



Participants in McREL’s national dialogue on standards-based education

Photos courtesy of McREL

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