

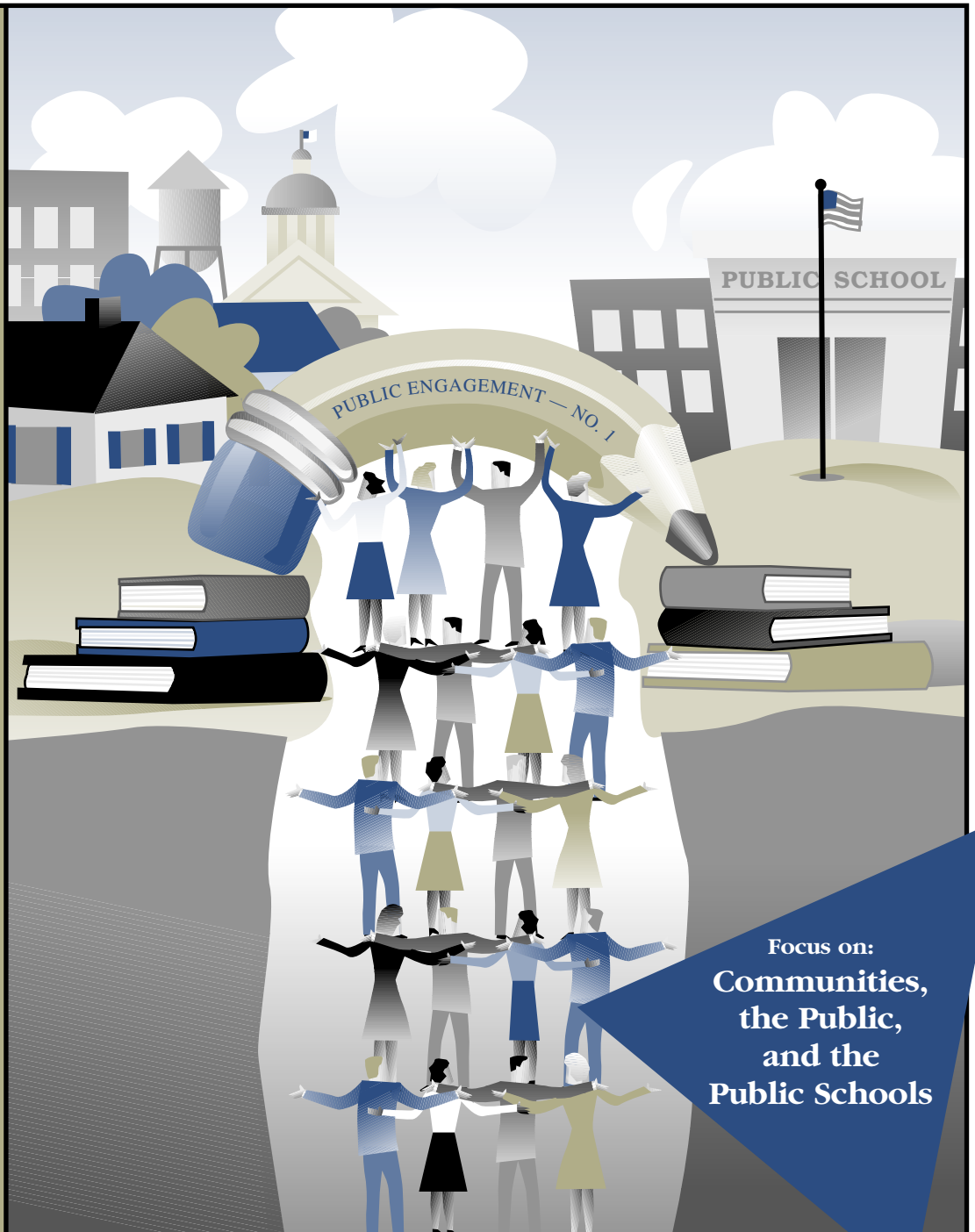
CONNECTIONS

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

Public Schools and the Practices of Engaged Communities

by Randall Nielsen

More educators have come to recognize ... that the success of their work requires active collaboration of parents and other community actors.

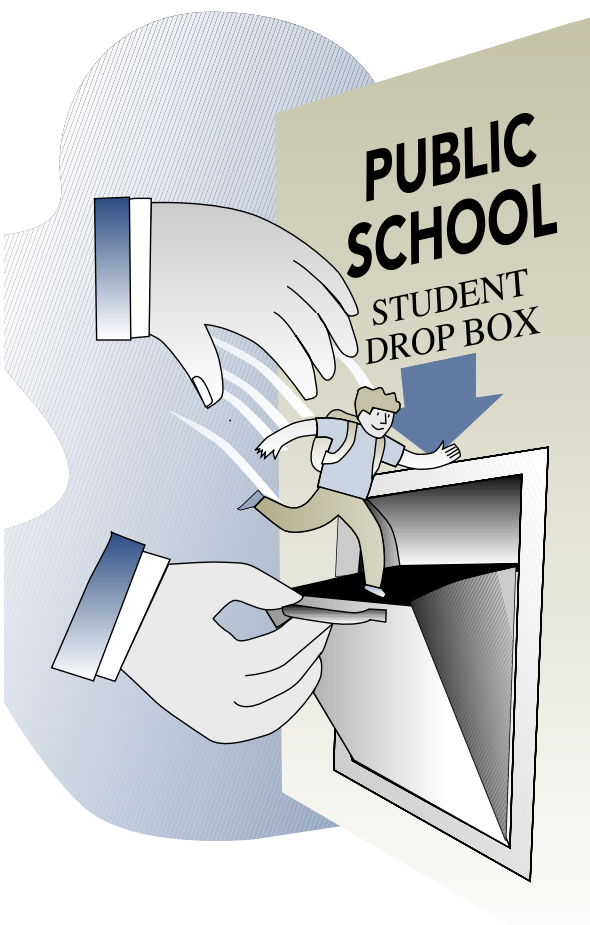
One unintended consequence of the standards movement in public education is the growing recognition that many critical challenges to more effective education exist not in the schools, but in the communities the schools are charged to serve. More educators have come to recognize — or have been forced to admit — that the success of their work requires active collaboration of parents and other community actors. A result has been a growing view that public schools need to be more deliberately *public*; that is, more closely connected to their communities. The last few years have seen a remarkable increase in the number of professional educators, scholars, and civic organizations exploring the theme of reconnecting schools and communities. However, these efforts expose widely varying meanings of *community*, and of the ways schools might better engage with them. For many, communities are, in effect, the customers. Engagement thus refers mostly to communication with parents as the main recipients of school services. Some see communities as

the locus of resources that need to be brought into the schools. Others see communities — especially those in low-income urban and rural regions — as problems to overcome rather than as resources to build upon. A result, as one analyst recently noted, is that while “partnership” has become a mantra, efforts to achieve partnership are “still too often seen as a sideshow.”

As David Mathews’ *Overview* notes, the Kettering Foundation’s research has developed an alternative insight into the problem. The challenge appears not to be as simple as how to engage communities, however they might be defined. In too many communities the problem appears to be a *lack of public capacity* to be engaged. One principal finding in the 1996 book by David Mathews, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* was that many citizens had become dangerously disconnected from any shared sense of responsibility for education. Those without children enrolled in public school often feel that the schools are the sole responsibility of parents of school-children. Many parents with school-age children, on the other hand, have come to see their public schools as distinct fee-for-service entities, delivering education the way a utility delivers heat and electricity. Parents in this frame of mind watch the school much like the way they might watch a cashier in a store counting change. “Accountability” takes a literal meaning.

Schools and communities are finding that consumer perspective problematic, on two levels. First, it leaves the schools with no legitimate way to reconcile the tensions among the variety of competing, often conflicting, demands on school resources. When there is no general recognition of the tradeoffs inherent in responding to the demands made on





public schools, improvements in distinct aspects of school performance may satisfy only particular groups. Second, the consumer perspective reinforces the view that the actors responsible for education exist solely in the schools. In consequence, parents, families, civic and business organizations, and even students themselves can come to see themselves and their communities as *recipients* of school services rather than *actors* working in concert. The schools are left to be held accountable for results they cannot achieve alone.

More communities are finding that the root of the challenge is the development of a sense of the public as more than just a set of people who live in a place, but as the interrelated networks of people that interact around shared concerns. Seen that way, the challenge is not in how the schools might engage citizens, but in how the people and institutions in communities can engage each other around the shared challenges of educating young people. How can all the community resources — government agencies, nonprofits, business firms, citizen-to-citizen action, and educational institutions such as public schools — be recognized and harnessed in complementary action?

A first step is to ask how citizens come to recognize their role as decision-making actors. How do the qualities of community interactions affect the capacity of people to develop a shared sense of responsibility for education, and thus a sense of partnership with the schools? One often unrecognized factor involves the practices through which issues either do or don't become recognized as shared concerns. Kettering research found long ago that citizens can be effectively closed out of discussions of issues that are identified in ways that fail to reflect what citizens hold valuable or that fail to implicate them as actors. Studies of the relationship between the public and the public schools have strongly reinforced the finding. When issues are framed as school-based policy choices, many citizens feel left out of the conversation. Such professional framings of issues tend to reinforce citizen views that they are consumers of a service, as opposed to political actors working in concert with others in a shared challenge. For examples of that professional practice, and its effects, one need only attend almost any traditional school board meeting.



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We have, therefore, been interested in experiments that pay deliberate attention to the framing of education-related issues. In one series of studies we asked researchers to document the reaction of the same group of people to alternative framings of the “accountability in education” issue. We asked the researchers to explore two general questions. First, given the conventional framing of accountability as a challenge for the schools, how do people see themselves implicated? Do they see themselves as left out of the conversation, out of the choice making, out of the acting? Second, does reframing the challenge as a public issue change people’s sense of themselves, and of their community collectively? Does the framing affect citizens’ sense of themselves as actors who are “accountable” for education results? The report by Kris Kurtenbach on page 22 provides support to the idea.

A variety of organizations have recognized the potential of the insight, and put it to practical test in their communities. The Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) documented an early effort involving its work with a school district in Pueblo, Colorado. The community was embroiled in a controversy following the district’s receipt of a grant to promote “health education.” The battle had been provoked by the implications of the grant for the sex education component of the school curriculum. The conflict around “sex education” was polarized and fragmented, with the schools caught in the middle. To add insult to injury, the grant — in excess of \$1 million — was eventually revoked due to the inability of the community to come to grips with how it should be used. That only added further fuel to the sex education battle.

Some school leaders, aware of CASB’s efforts in other districts to support communitywide engagement of issues, asked for its assistance. With guidance from CASB the community began a series of loosely framed dialogues intended to develop a sense of citizens’ concerns. One surprising early finding was how many people reported no strong interest in the sex education issue, seeing no direct links to their concerns. The dialogues did, however, begin to pick up a related underlying issue that was widely seen as a problem that implicated actors other than the schools: teen pregnancy. The CASB report describes how the community came to recognize the “public” issue that had effectively been hidden by

the narrow partisan debates about sex education. In so doing, the report notes, the community came to recognize that choices were to be made among things everyone held valuable, and that all community members had roles to play in acting on the challenge. The resulting interaction was in stark contrast to the tone of the debate prior to the reframing, when the challenge for citizens had appeared to be limited to telling the schools what to do.

A similar experiment took place in an Arkansas community after the public school district was placed in “academic distress” by the state after more than 50 percent of its students scored in the bottom quartile in statewide standardized tests. Further sanctions were threatened if test scores failed to improve, with a state take-over of the district a potential outcome. School-community reactions when the “academic distress” was announced were a mix of “rage and blame.” In the absence of a different way of working together the possibilities for effective response to the challenge appeared limited. As a result of its experience with public deliberation through National Issues Forums, a community-based organization called Walnut Street Works wondered how reframing the circumstance as a community rather than a school challenge would change the nature of the responses. They began by convening a series of community forums around the topic: “Our Children’s Education: Who Is Responsible?” As a consequence of these forums, the issue was renamed as “Community Involvement in Public Education.” A second series of forums was held to engage citizens on this issue.

The issue was framed in a way that revealed the distinct concerns implicit in what were seen as four conflicting views about what community involvement should entail. A report by Mary Olson and Naomi Cottoms of Walnut Street Works finds that the resulting deliberation seemed to turn “the energy of rage into energy of positive action,” as “blame is replaced by constructive solutions growing out of common ground.”

A project of the Center for School Study Councils at the University of Pennsylvania has for some time been experimenting with a similar approach. However, rather than starting with issues with which schools are struggling and

attempting to reframe them as community concerns, the center begins with education-related issues outside the schools. The center prepares educators to participate in local forums dealing with problems of interest to the whole community. By reaching out to the public and its concerns rather than attempting to attract the public to a predetermined set of school-based issues, these professionals have elicited the involvement of a broader band of citizens than those who typically attend traditional school meetings. Being community based, the forums are often sponsored by networks of local organizations. Educators and school board members participate as citizens.

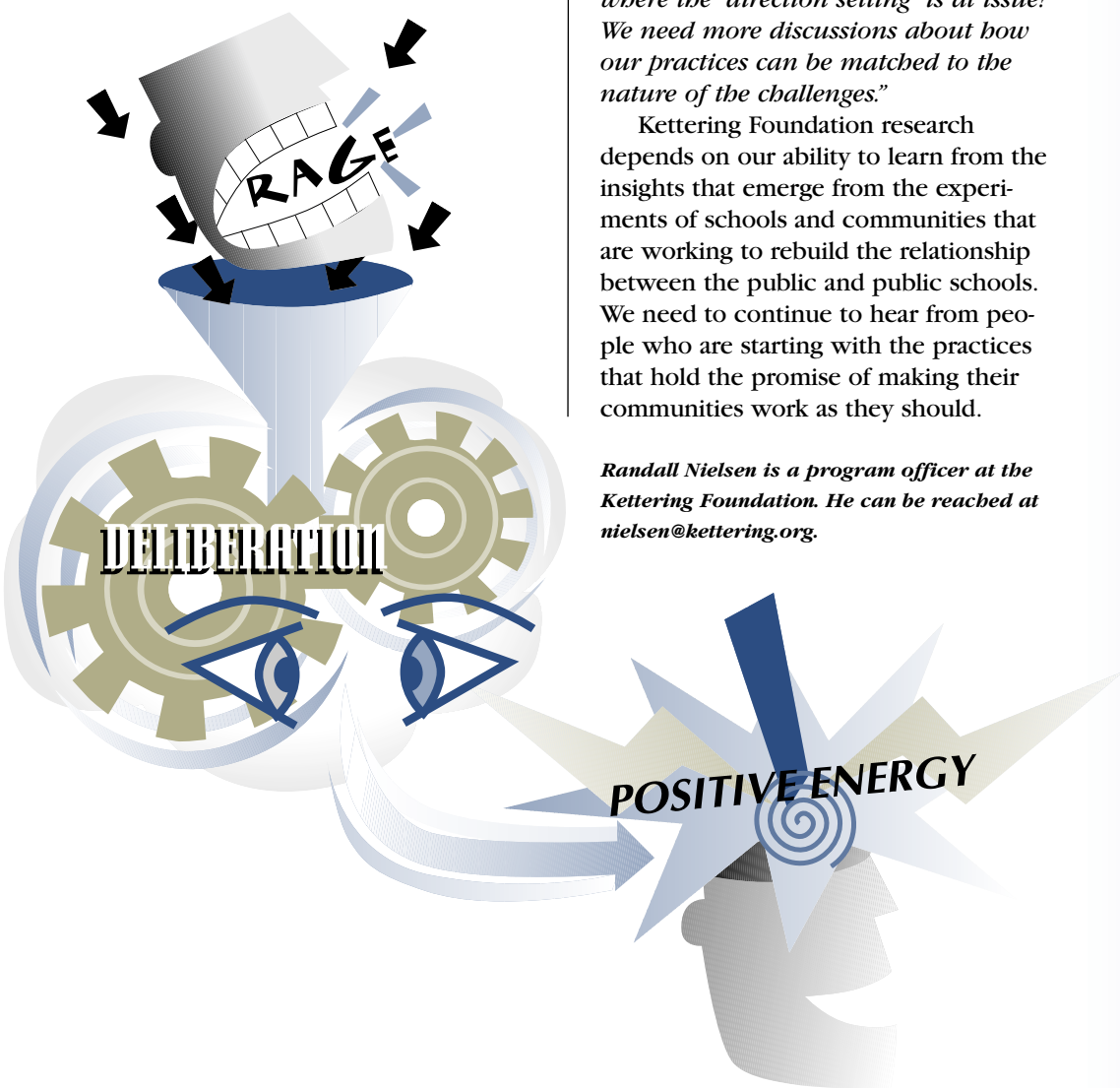
These and other reports have come to us through Kettering Foundation workshops that bring together people and organizations interested in learning with others who are attempting to bring these insights into their work. One of our recent workshops convened a group of school administrators together with

administrators in other public offices. Toward the end of the meeting, a superintendent presented an interesting summary of what the group saw as a shared sense of the challenge: *“There is a continuum of issue types. On one end are the types with an already clear sense of direction for acting, and thus the challenge for our office is how to move ahead given that understanding. That is not a situation for public conversation. On the other end of the continuum are issues with no shared sense in the community even about what the challenge is. In that situation the need for much wider deliberative engagement is clear. That implies some questions: 1. How do administrators know where on the continuum they are with a challenge they face? What are the “indicators”? 2. What are the “models” for how to deal with those distinct types of situations that we face? 3. How do we deal with the question of “what success would look like,” which is especially difficult at the end of the continuum where the “direction setting” is at issue? We need more discussions about how our practices can be matched to the nature of the challenges.”*

Kettering Foundation research depends on our ability to learn from the insights that emerge from the experiments of schools and communities that are working to rebuild the relationship between the public and public schools. We need to continue to hear from people who are starting with the practices that hold the promise of making their communities work as they should.

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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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