

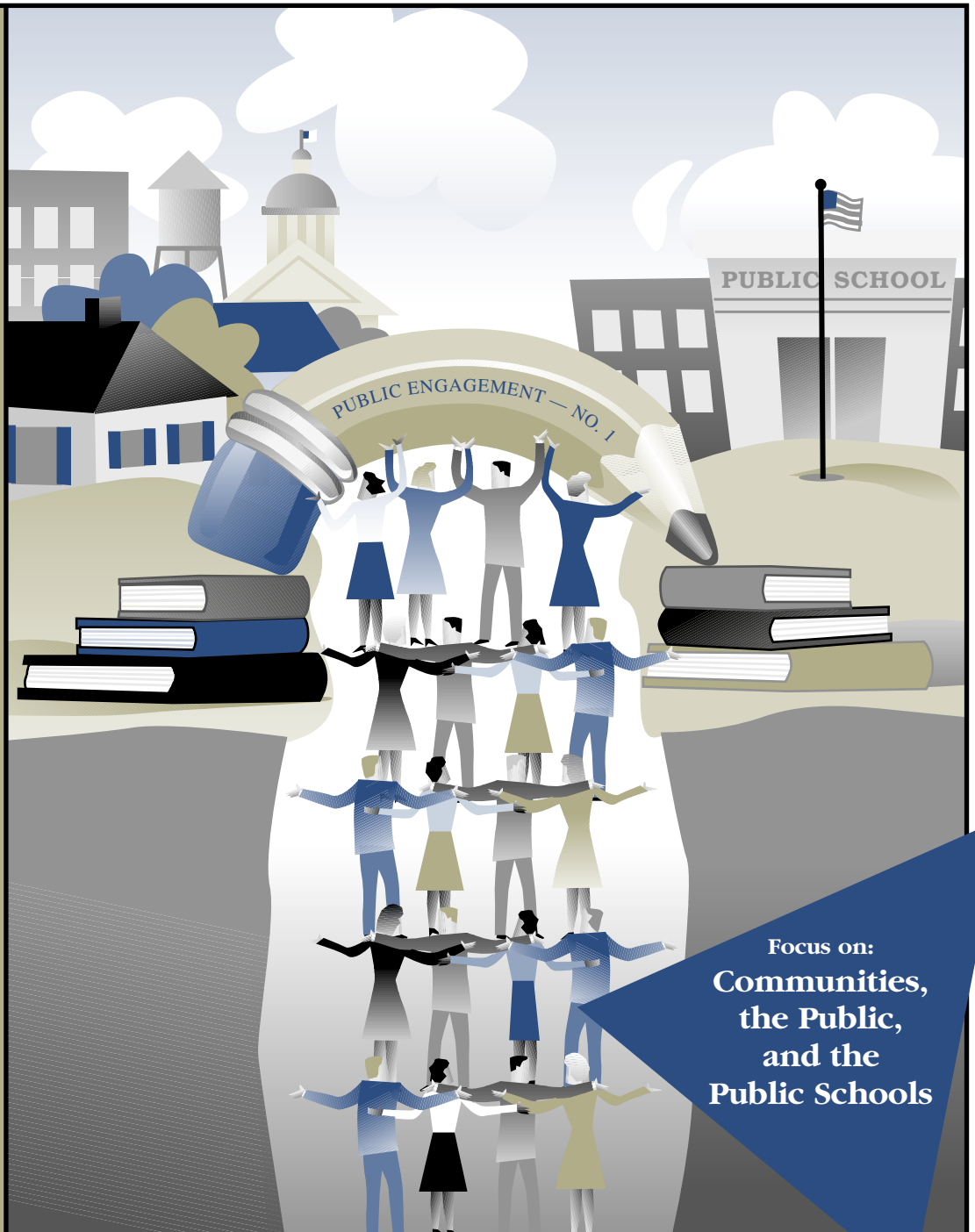
CONNECTIONS

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**

The Effects of How an Issue Is Framed: The Example of Accountability

by Kris Kurtenbach

Language that implied an “experts-only” role was more likely to lead participants to finger-pointing and frustration with the current state of public education.

Educators, administrators, and policymakers — these are the people most commonly seen as providing accountability in education. Such “experts” are often identified as accountable for boosting student achievement scores and achieving educational progress. With this in mind, Collaborative Communications Group tested a central hypothesis: Would the response or motivation of citizens change if we altered the way accountability issues are framed? More specifically, we wanted to see whether citizens would respond differently if accountability issues were presented as a citizen issue rather than as an educator issue.

The following observations are based on four focus groups in two very different cities — Meridian, Mississippi, and Portland, Oregon. The focus group discussions explored how parents and citizens who do not currently have children in school responded when accountability is presented as a schools issue versus a public, or citizen, issue. In addition, we tried to determine how a different “lens” on accountability changed the motiva-

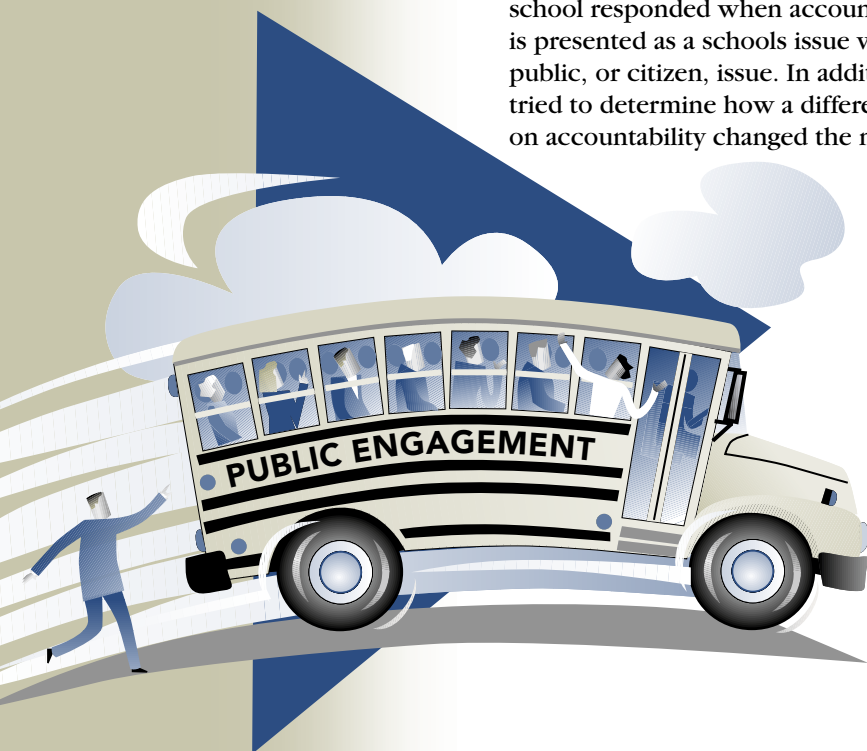
tions of citizens and the relationship that citizens see to these issues.

Our first intention was to look at education issues in the language that educators and policymakers use. By doing so, we hoped to see how citizens respond to language framed that way and to understand how citizens see themselves in their relationship to education when they hear this language.

Then, like shifting the lens at the optometrist’s office, we wanted to see whether these same citizens changed their views when they heard language about accountability framed as a community or citizen issue. We wanted to see whether citizens saw education as a community problem, to be addressed by citizens, rather than something to be addressed by educators or education policymakers. And, if citizens did see they had a role to address in education, we wanted to see what role they envisioned for themselves.

The report’s main conclusion is that language does matter to how people see themselves in relationship to the issue and language can affect their motivations to act. Focus groups framed to suggest there was a citizen role in education were much more likely to elicit people who felt they had a role in education and who started looking for ways to get engaged. Language that implied an “experts-only” role was more likely to lead participants to finger-pointing and frustration with the current state of public education.

Specific findings include: citizens believe that they, not solely educators or policymakers, are responsible for the quality of education in their communities. Participants in each focus group responded that citizens are responsible for the quality of education in their communities.



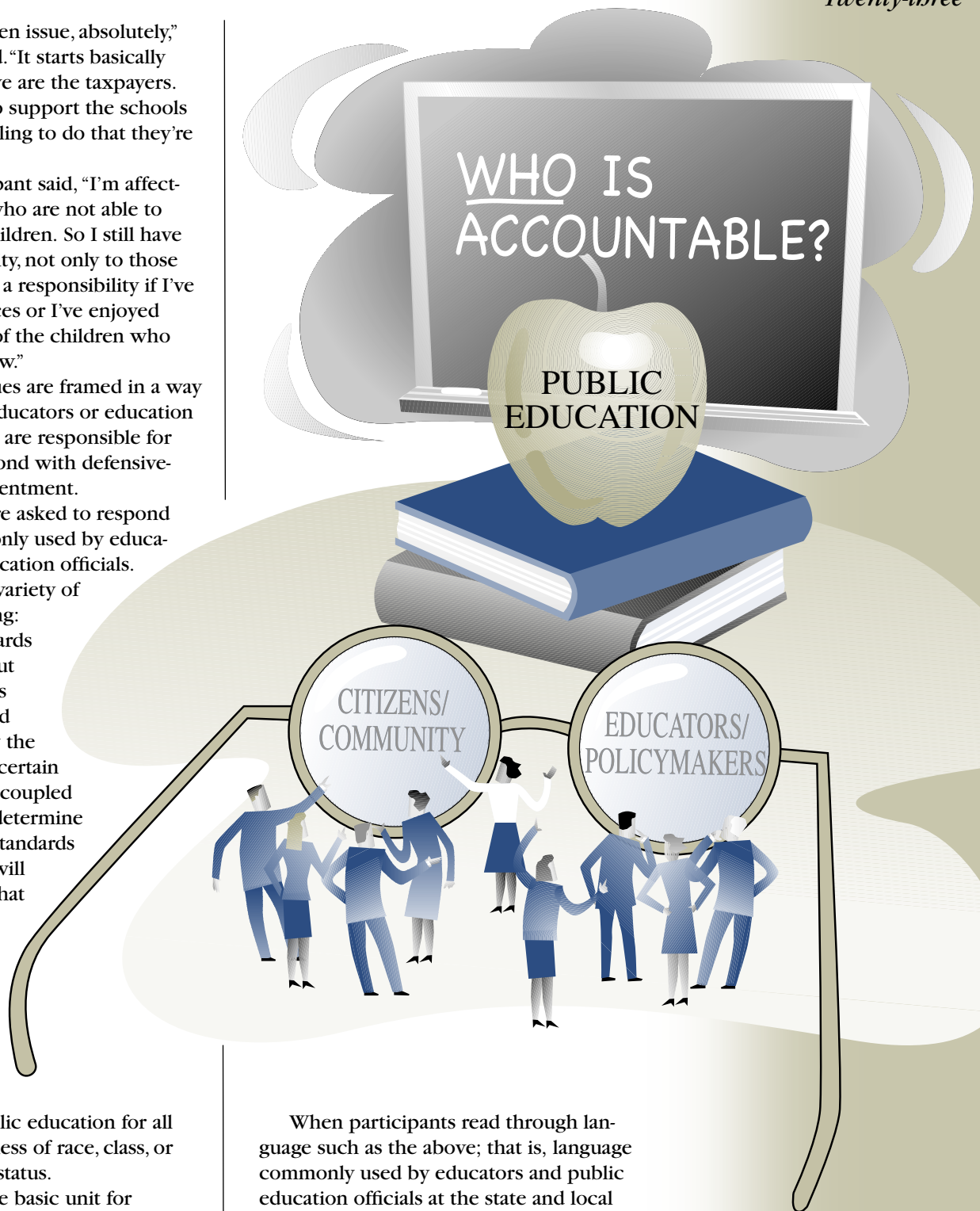
Education is “a citizen issue, absolutely,” one participant said. “It starts basically with the fact that we are the taxpayers. We’re the ones who support the schools and if we’re not willing to do that they’re going to fail.”

Another participant said, “I’m affected by the parents who are not able to provide for their children. So I still have a direct responsibility, not only to those children, but I have a responsibility if I’ve felt the consequences or I’ve enjoyed the consequences of the children who are our students now.”

If education issues are framed in a way that suggests that educators or education policymakers alone are responsible for them, citizens respond with defensiveness, anger, and resentment.

Participants were asked to respond to language commonly used by educators and public education officials. Participants read a variety of statements, including:

- ◆ Academic standards (statements about what all students should know and be able to do by the time they leave certain grade levels) — coupled with testing to determine whether those standards are reached — will help to ensure that all children are achieving.
- ◆ Leaders in government, business, and education play key roles in ensuring high-quality public education for all students, regardless of race, class, or socioeconomic status.
- ◆ The school is the basic unit for the delivery of education, and thus teachers and administrators should be the primary people held accountable.
- ◆ Educators and policymakers must give an account of their actions to parents and the community.
- ◆ If a district or school continually fails to make adequate progress toward improvement, then the district and school should be held accountable.
- ◆ The fate of public education in this country lies largely with policymakers, public officials, and educators.



When participants read through language such as the above; that is, language commonly used by educators and public education officials at the state and local levels, participants described the language as “arrogant” and “irritating.”

Beyond being frustrated with the tone, participants said this language implied that citizens had no role in public education. One Portland man said the statements suggested that “a clique of people is going to get things done, and they’ll ignore you.” In addition this language prompted participants to name problems with public education and to articulate things they believe needed to be addressed, but aren’t.

If education issues are framed in a way that suggests that the community is responsible, then citizens respond with a desire to learn and do more.

If education issues are framed in a way that suggests that the community is responsible, then citizens respond with a desire to learn and do more. Furthermore, their responses are sometimes emotional, expressing guilt for not having done more or not having participated in the past. A second set of language samples positioned education as a community or citizen issue. Participants read such statements as:

- ◆ The problems of communities cannot be left to policymakers and other education leaders alone.
- ◆ There is a need to change fundamentally the relationship and understanding between communities and schools on the role public schools play in the community.
- ◆ Healthy schools are essential to healthy communities.
- ◆ We must shift our frame of reference from, “What are you, the schools, going to do?” to “What are we, as a community, going to do?”
- ◆ Citizens not only have a right to demand high quality in schools; citizens also have a responsibility to improve and protect public education.
- ◆ Citizens, not just schools, are responsible for the success of public education in their communities.

There was a noticeable, and in some focus groups palpable, difference between how people responded to the citizen-focused language compared with how they responded to the language that implied education was the business of educators and policymakers.

People tended to agree more with the statements above, because the language called for having “everyone’s eyes on the program,” as one participant put it. The second set of language elicited less frustration, less blame, and less defensiveness. The language prompted many more calls for a team approach to education and community problems.

Instead of sparking anger and resentment, as the first set of statements did, participants said they felt that these statements “hit a home run.” One Portland man said, “they are inclusive of the people who need to be involved in education. It brought in the community, it brought in the idea that everybody should be at the table.”

This language led people to see education issues as connected to the community. As one parent in Meridian

said, “The quality of education in our area, regardless of whether we have children in it or not, at some point, is the quality of our community. The quality of our education system is going to reflect the quality of our community.”

Citizens want to consider and deliberate about these issues but do not see opportunities to do so or places they can go to discuss education issues publicly. As much as the citizen-oriented language might have resonated with most focus group participants, some said they believed that this approach has less chance of success than the more traditional, top-down approach. Citizens, parents, and nonparents alike express frustration that however strongly they perceive education to be a citizen issue, they still are shut out from fully participating. Community members might feel education is a collective responsibility, but still they are met with people in schools who consider themselves to be the experts.

Citizens, including parents, have limited ideas about what they can do to take responsibility for education in their communities. Citizens may make the case for more citizen input, but they are often stumped about how to participate more. Frequently, when citizens think of how they might engage with education and the school, they fall back to very basic interactions (volunteering, tutoring, attending sport or other school activities, and paying taxes).

Participants said they are looking for fresh ideas, but feel they are unable to come up with them by themselves. This insight has important applications. While participants in our study showed a willingness to become more engaged in their schools when approached with language that acknowledged the role of citizens in public schools, citizen-focused language alone is not enough. Language can incite interest, but it cannot ensure meaningful involvement on its own. Instead, it should be seen as an important first step to a larger process that requires the involvement of both citizens and educators alike.

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