

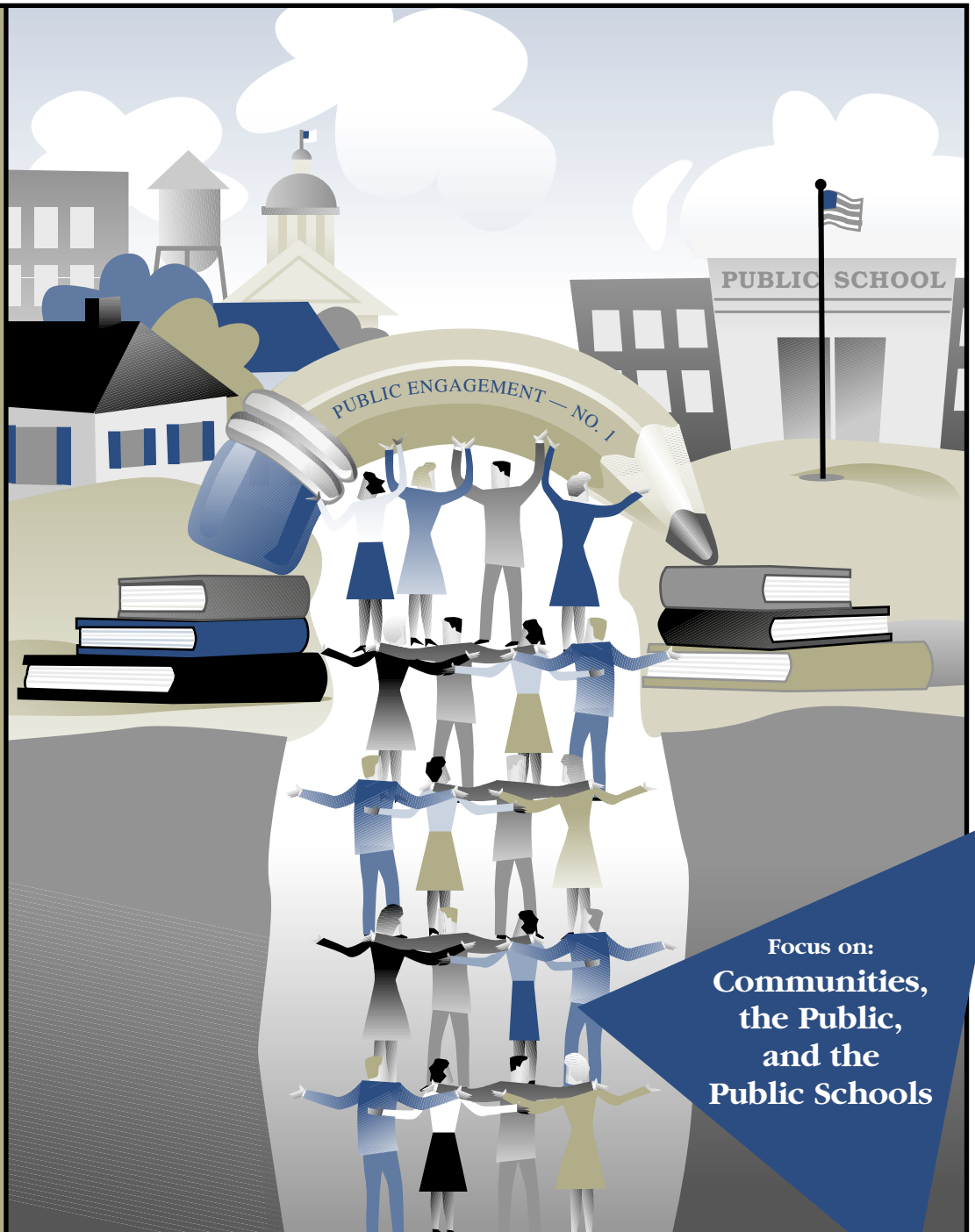
CONNECTIONS

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April 2004

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

Organizations Attempting New Ways of Working with the Public

by Maxine Thomas

Kettering understands that for a democracy to work as it should, there must be institutions that serve the public interest, are legitimate in the eyes of citizens, and support a democratic society. Public schools are one of a number of such institutions. Because Kettering is a research organization, it does not run programs, make grants or charitable contributions, or in any way inject itself into communities or try to create these kinds of institutions. In order to do its research then, Kettering relies on others who are conducting experiments in communities. We seek to learn “over their shoulders” and to add what we learn from the various communities to our analytical consideration of key Kettering questions. We have recently begun to apply this approach with regard to research on public education.

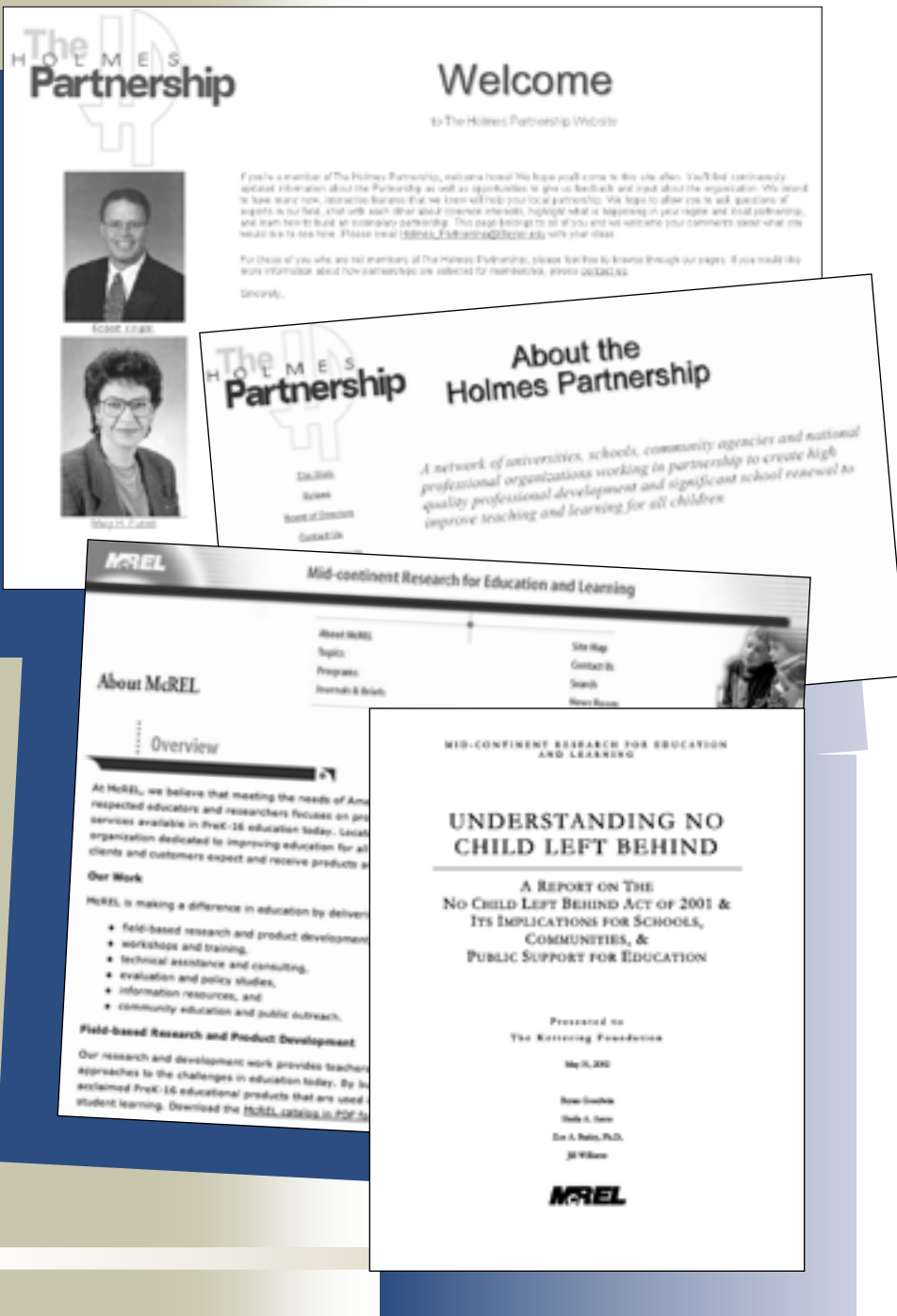
In April 2003, the Kettering Foundation responded to a question by Kettering board chair, Dr. Mary Futrell. Long an advocate for children and education, Dr. Futrell wondered whether the education community could become a more significant participant in our democracy. To that end, Dr. Futrell introduced us to the Holmes Partnership. According to their Web site, the Holmes Partnership is “a network of universities, schools, community agencies, and national professional organizations working in partnership to create quality professional development and significant school renewal to improve teaching and learning for all children.” The network consists of 7 national organizations and close to 100 “local partnerships” each of which is affiliated with a university. (See Web site at <http://www.holmespartnership.org>.) The Partnership Board met at our offices last April to discuss how their

network might come to better understand how to work with the public to reinvent education. That visit opened a new arena for Kettering’s education research. Board members shared Dr. Futrell’s concern about the public’s role in education and her interest in making it easier for the public to participate in education and community issues. With that in mind, Holmes has just set out to infuse their organization with skills to encourage deliberation. These efforts offer Kettering an objectively documented experience of how our research works within organizations and communities. (See Holmes story on page 27.)

But even before Holmes, Kettering was approached by another group. The Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) “believes that meeting the needs of America’s educators and their

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students is paramount” and provides quality, field-tested, researched-based products and services to pre-K through university. McREL had just begun a national dialogue on what communities think about accountability in education. In doing their homework for these conversations, they encountered some of Kettering’s work and visited us to find out more. It was readily apparent that McREL had not only the interest but also the capacity to explore new ways of working on public education. We agreed to learn from each other. Since that beginning, McREL has been very productive.

They have provided us with in-depth findings from their experimentation. They have done an analysis of the new No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and held a series of focus groups and interviews with school administrators, parents, and community members to learn how those groups understand NCLB. They published their findings in a work called *Digging Deeper*. On their own they decided to create an issue book and video on standards and accountability, which they are using in a number of communities. At the same time, they have continued to investigate understandings of NCLB; their latest report examines the meaning of accountability. McREL has proven to be fertile ground for Kettering research.

In our recent research we have found that the concept of “public engagement,” which Kettering helped to introduce into the professional conversation, has largely been assimilated into conventional practice. Unless we reenter the conversation now, the potential KF might derive from this movement will be lost. The publication of *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* and other reports since have generated a great deal of interest. Many community-based actors as well as professionals and professional organizations have begun experimenting with the explicit application of the ideas. We no longer lack partners in this research. Indeed, the opportunity to work with and study the effects of experiments has never been greater.

Holmes and McREL are but two examples of organizations that are truly able to experiment with some of the ideas Kettering cares about. We have engaged with them through contracts and “shared learning agreements” because of their own interest in learning more about practices that promise to reestablish public responsibility for education and about how those practices can be implemented in communities. Both Holmes and McREL have decided to explore how to do what they do differently, in part for their own reasons, but also in part, because of their acquaintance with Kettering’s research into the nature of effective political practice. We are interested in learning from their efforts and sharing their discoveries in a systematic way.

Maxine S. Thomas is secretary and general counsel of the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached by E-mail at Thomas@kettering.org.

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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