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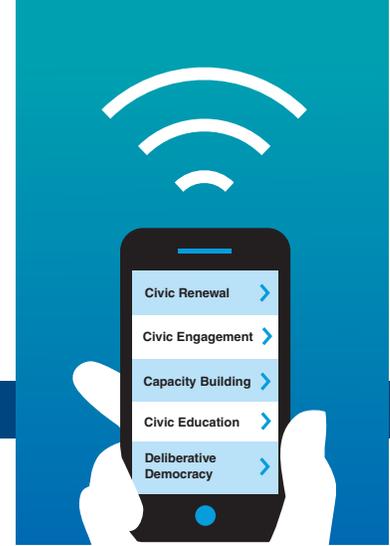
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LOST— and Seeking Directions

The gap between communities and public schools is wide and getting wider. A new KF/FDR Group report outlines the causes and implications for solutions.

Steve Farkas

How do administrators of schools interact with other organizations and residents in their districts? In 1993, the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda released a report titled *Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts*. The study generated an unusual amount of notice, perhaps because its attention to communities appeared refreshingly distinct from the conventional focus on the technical issues of school administration and funding. *Divided Within* reported on what people in communities said they were concerned with: the qualities of human relationships. And the relationships people described were troubled. Parents, teachers, and administrators spoke of mutual suspicion and distrust, which stifled the ability to make even simple improvements to administrative practices in schools. People also spoke of deep rifts between district officials and other community-based organizations, which increasingly isolated the schools from others.

The past 20 years have seen 3 powerful trends that might have been expected to improve things:

- Public engagement strategies should have helped bridge the distance between citizens and school districts—and among stakeholders.
- The digital revolution should have made communication between districts and parents, teachers, and community groups easier and better.
- The standards and accountability move-

ment should have fostered greater trust in the public schools by letting parents and communities know what their schools were doing—and how well they were doing it.

To understand the impact of these trends, the Kettering Foundation asked the FDR Group to look anew at the state of relationships around education in communities. The foundation was particularly interested in the following questions:

- How do today's district leaders see themselves and their schools' roles in their communities? What roles do they see for others in the community in educating youngsters?
- How do leaders of civic organizations and other district leaders recognize roles that their organizations play in educating youth?
- How do nonprofessionals describe their relationships with the schools? How has the accountability movement affected that perception?

The resulting new Kettering/FDR Group report, *Maze of Mistrust: How District Politics and Cross Talk Are Stalling Efforts to Improve Public Education*, relies on four school districts with different demographic profiles. They invited us in to interview staff, school leaders, parents, and community groups under the promise of confidentiality and anonymity.

We ran into trouble immediately. The first sign: it was difficult to find school districts that would agree to participate. Even district leaders who knew our work well and trusted us were begging off. Too much had been hitting their districts: they were under intense scrutiny, and they and other stakeholders were distracted by political turf wars.

We almost lost our first cooperating district before the interviewing even started. A local reporter had gotten wind about a "consultancy firm" coming in, and she called with questions: Who hired us? Were we preparing for an upcoming change in the superintendent? How much was the district paying us? An interview with a board member from this district illustrated how frayed nerves had become:

The threat of litigation hangs over so much of what we do. People don't want

Lost—and Seeking Directions

to talk without their lawyers present. It's much harder to negotiate, everything has to be cleared—will this be something they can sue us over? Is this going to hold up in court? It's hard to be a leader when you are constantly looking over your shoulder.

So what has been the impact of the three trends?

Public Engagement

Public engagement strategies were partly conceived as an antidote to the distrust and backlash greeting education reforms. The idea was to integrate the concerns of citizens and stakeholder groups early in the process.

We learned that district leaders use the term *public engagement* freely. But to them it meant adopting its *techniques*—not its *vision* or *purpose*. Leaders used town meetings, for example, to unveil their initiatives to community groups

and try to win them over. They used focus groups to anticipate resistance and develop ways to counter it. Virtually no one looked to citizens for useful input about the direction of the schools. Leaders longed for more community support, but they mainly regarded people outside the schools as constituencies they needed to coax, manage, or reassure.

What's more, leaders still instinctively looked to the last levy vote or school board meeting to gauge if they were in sync with the community. Their perspective of the public's role was still a narrow one:

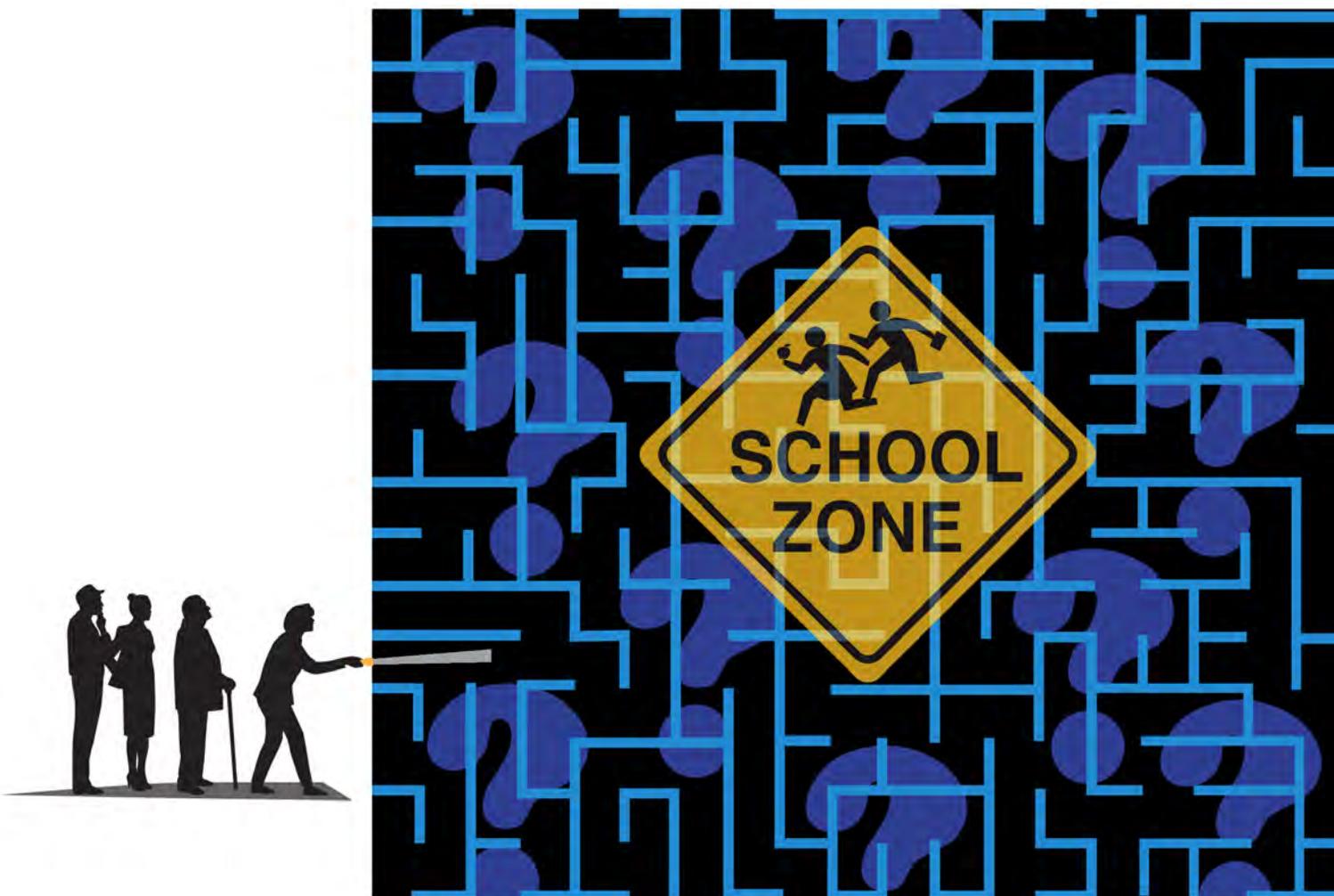
The less we hear from the public the better our relationship with our community is.

There's very low turnout to our meetings, unless there is a unique situation, like when we had to rezone students

to a newly built high school. There was squawking then. Otherwise, there's very low turnout and not too much competition in school board elections. A quiet public is a happy public. We can leave the work to the educators.

The past 20 years have seen 3 powerful trends that might have been expected to improve . . . the state of relationships around education in communities.

One district's effort to engage its teachers in its strategic planning process backfired, dramatically exposing the cen-



ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING AND FDR GROUP

Maze of Mistrust

How District Politics and Cross Talk Are Stalling Efforts to Improve Education

by Steve Farkas
and Ann Duffett

In 1993, the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda released *Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts*. For this new report, the Kettering Foundation asked the FDR Group to look anew at the state of relationships around education in communities. *Maze of Mistrust: How District Politics and Cross Talk Are Stalling Efforts to Improve Public Education* finds that, despite the advent of public engagement, the explosion in communication technology, and the standards and accountability movement, the distance between school districts and their communities shows no sign of diminishing.



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tral office-teacher divide. The teachers had been reluctant to participate in discussion groups, skeptical that they were anything but public relations. When pressed, they opened up with anger that had been pent-up for years. From complaints about the condition of the teachers' lounge, to accusations that a principal was incompetent, to grievances about out-of-touch district leaders, the conversations became nasty. The principal resigned within a year; the district superintendent left shortly afterward.

That district's experience was extreme. But in the four districts we studied, leaders routinely used the rhetoric of public engagement, raising citizens' expectations and then disappointing them, until skepticism became their default reaction.

New Technology

The technology boon should have enabled a leap in the effectiveness of communication for school districts—and in some ways it has. Districts now produce professional-looking newsletters, distribute updates quickly via e-mail and over their websites, and conduct auto-calls to students' homes. But new channels of communication have also heightened divisions, amplified scandals, and handed "megaphones" to those who are most strident.

Districts now pay more attention to limiting online access and behavior of staff and students, concerned over security and appropriate use. One of the districts we visited was dealing with fallout after a teacher added her own colorful commentary to a superintendent's e-mail message and distributed it to colleagues using her official e-mail address. A seemingly small matter absorbed much of the district's energy and attention.

But the worst story of technology gone wrong was when an ordinarily peaceful district was hijacked by a blogger who regularly wrote inflammatory posts relying on ostensibly private conversations among school board members. The quotes had the ring of truth about them, and stakeholders fell into squabbling, with flare-ups triggered every time a post went up. Relationships that

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had been civil deteriorated, and people stopped talking to each other. “Technology made things much harder,” recalled one administrator. “The blog made it possible for the most shrill people to have an impact. People are not obligated to talk responsibly, they say hurtful things, and they could make accusations without evidence.”

Sometimes, technology also gave district leaders false confidence about their relationship with citizens. When asked about public engagement, one superintendent was quick to point out that he had given out his personal cell number to all parents in the district. But the same superintendent launched an effort to replace all textbooks in middle school with e-readers without consulting parents or teachers. As visiting researchers, we picked up intense grouching: parents were attached to seeing their children with books, and teachers doubted youngsters would use the technology appropriately. The superintendent had assumed he was connected enough and was taken by surprise by the backlash. The initiative was scaled back substantially the next year.

Standards and Accountability

The standards and accountability movement also seems to have increased acrimony. Even as teachers expressed disdain for standardized testing and school ratings, they felt they were held responsible for them. Administrators often viewed those efforts as tools for managing and motivating teachers—and also felt the pressure. Meanwhile, publicized test scores and ratings have heightened a consumerist mentality toward the public schools.

One teacher said:

What does excellence mean anyway? They’re changing the ratings all the time. Are the assessments valid in what they’re assessing? The assessment that the state gives has no way of measuring how well my students are doing with critical thinking.

But her superintendent said:

What gets measured gets done. Until it gets measured, it doesn’t get done. I implemented assessments ahead of

state requirements for the shock value, and if we’re going to do right by kids, we gotta start working on it now. If I don’t measure it, it’s not going to be done with fidelity.

School leaders—whether at the district or building level—are also feeling the pressure. In one district, when a school slipped one grade from the previous year’s rating, the principal and the teachers could talk of nothing else. Said the principal:

I put the data in front and people are automatically on the defensive. I know you need to build trust with teachers, but there’s no course on how to do it right in graduate school. Some people were not happy being called out, and I wasn’t happy either. That was my school on the line, that’s my job on the line.

If education appears to go wrong, it’s the public schools—and teachers especially—that feel the blame even as they believe that forces outside the classroom determine so much of what their students learn. Conversations on how to improve education mostly focus on how to improve teaching in the schools, not at home or out in the community. In the words of one teacher:

People don’t want to talk about student motivation and parents. But the kids are not held responsible, the parents are not held responsible, we are the ones solely held responsible. All of this top-down data mumbo jumbo is all smoke and mirrors of political correctness, because it’s not PC to hold the kid accountable. And it’s not PC to hold the parent accountable.

Meanwhile, active parents are adopting a consumerist mind-set toward the schools, and educators know it. Suburban parents described their decision-making process: an Internet search for high-performing school districts within commuting distance of their company’s office, a comparison of property taxes to the cost of private school, and the size of the house they could get. Then they interview district educators:

I shopped. We moved out here, we could have lived anywhere. I looked

at test scores, I talked to the superintendent. I visited several of the elementary schools. I’m the consumer, I get to check.

Implications

Divisions among district stakeholders show no signs of abating since our 1993 study, despite the advent of public engagement. Rather than helping, administrators say that the explosion in communication technology has simply created more ways for people to say the wrong thing and say it loudly. For its part, the standards and accountability movement has strengthened the preexisting tendency to view the public schools as the central lever for educating youngsters. The distance between school districts and their communities shows no sign of diminishing. Citizens and community groups tend to see the schools as institutions standing apart from them, rather than as an integral part of their community.

There is a lot that’s good about technology, standards, and public engagement. That they’ve had negative consequences probably says something about how they’ve been implemented. But it also says something important about the condition of school districts and of democracy itself.

Advocates of school-reform initiatives should take heed. They need to plan ahead for destructive district dynamics—these will inevitably sabotage their most carefully designed reforms. Those interested in democratic governance should also pay attention. The estrangement between citizens and governing institutions is not just a problem to be overcome with the right tools. There are dispositions and habits of mind and behavior among leaders and citizens that will undermine efforts to bridge the gap between them, regardless of the techniques used. When leaders view citizens merely as a force to coax, co-opt, or bypass, they will use any tool to that purpose. And when citizens view government only as the provider of services that they pay for with their tax dollars, responsibility for what it does will not be theirs. The problem is a problem of democracy.

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